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# Guest editorial: Social media in business-to-business interaction, engagement, co-creation, and communication

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## 1. Introduction to the special issue

This special issue provides new insights into social media's (SM) use and integration into business-to-business (B2B) relationships and networks, particularly the areas of B2B marketing communications, engagement, interaction and co-creation. Many of the papers in this special issue are extended studies which were presented at the 37th Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group Conference, held virtually in Ireland and co-hosted by the business schools in University College Cork and Southeast Technology University. For the most part, the papers use the IMP Group's (see [IMPgroup.org](http://IMPgroup.org); Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group) core paradigmatic assumptions of interaction and interdependence to understand the use of SM in business markets.

It is clear that SM is changing the industrial marketing landscape (Cortez and Johnston, 2017; Tiwary *et al.*, 2021). Prior research has suggested that industrial marketing researchers have been slow to study SM's impacts on business relationships and networks in comparison to their consumer marketing counterparts (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020; Quinton and Wilson, 2016). This is no longer the case. Rather, we have witnessed an explosion of research on implementing SM in the B2B domain, with both conceptual and empirical studies emerging from recent literature calls (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021a; Salo, 2017). This research has evolved from SM being viewed and analysed as a media tool within marketing communications (Swani *et al.*, 2014) to a tool for enhancing sales and customer engagement processes (Agnihotri, 2020; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017), information sharing and problem-solving (Leek *et al.*, 2016), and collaboration across business relationships (Wang *et al.*, 2016; Drummond *et al.*, 2022).

Whilst there are many SM platforms and each has its own characteristics, the inability of any one particular firm to control the media and its inherent network interactions makes their study potentially unique when compared to more traditional single actor led communications. SM can add richness to information exchange and be part of the interactive resource structure of actors at both a relationship and network

level. It can play a role and theoretically alter the balance in important relationship dynamics such as power and trust. For many entrepreneurial firms, it helps them in their initial reach out to new customers beyond their formative base of social contacts (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021a). SM is also providing new opportunities for business marketing engagement and co-creation as it shifts marketing boundaries from the focal actor to between the actors involved in the network (Drummond *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, SM may offer opportunities beyond its classification as another media within marketing communications, but it is only starting to be researched within this space, for example, as a strategic and tactical tool (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021b; Drummond *et al.*, 2020; Iankova *et al.*, 2018; Felix *et al.*, 2017), and in the sales process (Agnihotri and John-Mariadoss, 2022; Agnihotri, 2020).

## 2. Social media interaction, communication, engagement and co-creation

While the SM B2B literature has expanded rapidly, this special issue will focus on four key areas of interest, namely, interaction, communication, engagement and co-creation. It has long been recognised that SM has the capacity for both facilitating and enhancing interactions and connections between network actors (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Shih, 2009), creating unique value in interaction for business customers and for maintaining organisational relationships (Huotari *et al.*, 2015; Schultz *et al.*, 2012; Järvinen *et al.*, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2013). Characterised as a rich media, when mobilised in interaction with their web of network actors, SM can create unique value for focal firms (Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2015), giving the organisation a competitive advantage in, for example, managing supply chains (Chae *et al.*, 2020).

SM can help to connect to prospective network actors with ease (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016). SM is an effective initiation tool for social relationships (Quinton and Wilson, 2016) and useful to organisations for lead generation, prospecting of new business partners and opportunity development (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021b; Andzulis *et al.*, 2013; Schultz *et al.*, 2012). Barriers associated with physical distance are mitigated using the technology (Georgescu and Popescu, 2015; Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013). Firms can use SM for the recruitment of partners on a global scale with ease (Tiwary *et al.*, 2021) and for the internationalisation of their firms through developing international networks (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021a). Whilst beneficial to all firms, this is particularly useful for entrepreneurial ventures in search of rapid expansion (Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013).

The extant literature has largely defined SM as a means for communication, as a technology platform for marketing communications or a communications tool (Iankova *et al.*, 2018; Leek *et al.*, 2016; Lacoste, 2016; Swani *et al.*, 2014; Andzulis *et al.*, 2013). SM enables two-way and multi-directional communication (Lacka and Chong, 2016; Singaraju *et al.*, 2016; Järvinen *et al.*, 2012;) in a more immediate manner than compared with traditional communication channels or methods (Jussila *et al.*, 2012; Valos *et al.*, 2014). This enhancement of communication via SM (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021a) has transformed B2B communication methods (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016; Ancillai *et al.*, 2019). Conceptualised as a modern communication medium for business purposes, SM can be used

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to maintain and develop B2B relationships, both in national and international contexts (Drummond *et al.*, 2018; Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021a). The instant nature of SM communication affords constant and immediate responses (Jussila *et al.*, 2014), useful for building personal B2B relationships between actors across organisations (Sood and Pattinson, 2012). As a customer relationship management tool (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012), SM can enhance the exchange of information between network actors in a relationship (Itani *et al.*, 2020; Enyinda *et al.*, 2021; Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021b). Exchanging and sharing information using SM is commonplace (Rose *et al.*, 2021; Itani *et al.*, 2020) and can positively influence B2B selling (Itani *et al.*, 2020; Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016) and supply chain management (O'Leary, 2011), while also working to combat misinformation being spread in networks (Sivarajah *et al.*, 2020). SM has also enhanced B2B relationships by permitting knowledge sharing and transfer between network actors (Georgescu and Popescu, 2015; Jussila *et al.*, 2012).

SM also holds value for B2B in the form of engagement. With message content created and exchanged in interaction, SM makes engagement more interactive and meaningful for network actors where a deeper relationship can then form (Cortez and Dastidar, 2022; Cartwright *et al.*, 2021b; Harrigan *et al.*, 2015). SM is described as a tool for immediate engagement (Leek *et al.*, 2019), particularly with targeted groups of network actors (Panagiotopoulos *et al.*, 2015). While recent research cautions engagement due to negative aspects associated with some digital mediums (Gligor *et al.*, 2021), customer engagement has been greatly affected in a selling context (Agnihotri, 2020). For example, as a tool for B2B selling (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021b; Ancillai *et al.*, 2019), salespeople can use SM for developing B2B sales relationships (Enyinda, *et al.*, 2021; Bill *et al.*, 2020; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017), as part of and for automation of the sales process (Diba *et al.*, 2019; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016), and for key selling activities such as key account management (Lacoste, 2016). SM has also led to enhanced problem solving among network actors (Leek *et al.*, 2016) particularly when used along with data analytics technology to inform B2B sustainability actions (Sivarajah *et al.*, 2020).

A final element of SM, which has garnered comparatively less attention in the extant literature thus far, is co-creation within business relationships and networks. Despite early research indicating that practitioners may find value co-creation activities more successful in the inherently interactive digital world (Singaraju *et al.*, 2016), a limited number of interesting studies have thus far explored this topic. For example, SM's potential as a collaborative tool has been illustrated (Georgescu and Popescu, 2015) particularly for value co-creation within a sales context (Andzulis *et al.*, 2013) and to enable complex, collaborative co-created activities (Lipiäinen, 2015). Studies focusing on SM as a collaborative medium among B2B network actors (Wang *et al.*, 2016; Jussila *et al.*, 2014) indicate SMs ability to facilitate cooperative activities central to innovative research and development and open innovation processes (Shaltoni, 2017; Georgescu and Popescu, 2015). Particularly in a smaller firm context, the collaborative nature of SM permits interfirm collaboration across business relationships and between groups of network actors which strengthens the focal

organisations' performance (Wang *et al.*, 2016). Recent studies reveal that SM positively impacts entrepreneurial firms, who are typically limited in collaborative network activity given their peripheral status and inherent liabilities of newness and smallness, to enable collaboration with a large pool of B2B partners on, for example, joint promotions, co-creation of new products or new service development (Drummond *et al.*, 2018, 2022).

### 3. An overview of the papers in this special issue

The call for this special issue of the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* was focused on these core themes in SM industrial marketing research. Each of the ten papers have identified areas where new knowledge is uncovered regarding SM interaction, communication, engagement and co-creation. For example, Hu *et al.* (2023) address how SM was integrated into Italian SMEs business models and marketing strategies during COVID-19 outbreaks as a means to create new relationships with customers and stakeholders, strengthen existing relationships and, in some industries, sell their products or services. Catalysing these small-sized firms to rethink previous activities, organisation-wide dynamic capabilities (i.e. sensing capabilities, seizing capabilities and reconfiguration capabilities) played a fundamental role in making the SM adoption process smoother and more effective. Through the findings, it was evident that several objectives related to awareness, communication, engagement and sales were facilitated as SM was integrated with the overall marketing strategies of the SMEs in this study, with implications determining SM should be integrated in SMEs for similar results.

Similarly, SM marketing (SMM) and performance is addressed in another paper of this special issue. Corral de Zubielqui and Jones (2022) draw on the resource-based view to develop a conceptual model to understand how and when SMM matters to firm performance in the B2B SME context. Drawing on a large Australian data set, the authors found that SMM constitutes a double-edged sword with the potential to both benefit and hamper B2B SME performance based on the level of new marketing methods or practices and product innovation. On the topic of negative aspects of SM, Kaur and Gupta (2022) provide a comprehensive review of the literature to advance understanding of misinformation on SM platforms. Misinformation, where false information is shared by someone who is unaware that the information is incorrect or misleading, is a growing concern, given the rapid increase in the use of SM for B2B marketing. Recognising that misinformation can harm businesses, individuals and society, the authors review identified 13 factors which lead to the dissemination of misinformation on SM (e.g. lack of experience, trust in the source, lack of content authentication skills, trust in the source), 11 ways to detect misinformation on SM (education level, domain knowledge, verification behaviour) and also 10 ways to combat misinformation on SM (awareness campaigns, correction strategies, fact-checking operations).

Understanding processes of SM use is another area addressed in this special issue, with Badran *et al.* (2023) using an embedded case study design to explore how entrepreneurs use SM to develop their organisational identity within

business networks. The authors identify four common network processes through which entrepreneurs can leverage SM to develop their organisational identity within networks. For instance, “Network relating” is the open and publicly visible initiation of new, and the further development of existing relationships based principally upon similar and mutual values to become known in the network. “Collaborating within networks” refers to how entrepreneurs use SM to engage in collaborative activities with network members. “Interacting with trends” is the process of entrepreneurial firm adaptation of SMM content to clearly align their brand and identity-related messaging to key trends. “Connecting with community” considers the firms embeddedness in the local socio-economic environment, developing identity through communicating their relationships with local businesses, creating a sense of place and social closeness.

B2B selling has been central to much of the emergent SM B2B literature and within this special issue, two papers take a quantitative approach to exploring interesting aspects of this key area. Kalra *et al.* (2023) use task-technology fit theory to analyse the relationships between salespeople’s SM use, brand awareness, creativity, manager empowerment and company performance. Their findings indicate that salesperson SM use positively affects brand awareness and is magnified with the increase in salesperson creativity, positively affecting company performance. Taking a relationship marketing approach, the paper by Franck and Damperat (2023) also highlights that the use of SM has a positive and direct and indirect influence on salesperson performance. The study findings suggest direct influences include the provision of accurate and relevant information regarding customers’ needs and profiles, while indirect influences suggest that SM use improves social proximity to customers’ requirements, the quality of relationships with customers and consequentially, augmenting their own performance. The authors interestingly introduce emotional management as a moderating variable between the salesperson’s SM use and the quality of the buyer–seller relationship. They found that for salespeople with low to moderate emotional management abilities, increasing their use of SM improves the quality of their relationship with buyers. However, for salespeople with higher-than-average emotional management abilities, SM use does not influence their relationship quality with buyers and do not need SM to create a high-quality relationship with their customers.

As SM becomes more prominent within B2B contexts, new network actors and new digital technologies become integrated with SM for business practices. Cowan *et al.* (2022) focus on industry analysts in information technology markets who influence customer buying decisions through sharing their expertise and recommendations of technology solutions via word-of-mouth (WOM). The authors identify that many actors are responsible for spreading WOM in B2B including the clients, the influencers and even the vendors, legitimising and amplifying messages. The study findings indicate that SM B2B influencers continually produce authoritative content based on knowledge and innovation but also withhold information to maintain trust, for example, sponsored content and information provided by firms with the expectation that

they will share it. The authors suggest that influencers can be powerful within B2B on professional SM networks, taking the form of white papers, webinars and informal communications to generate discussion, inform market players and exert thought leadership and build connections. Prior research emphasises the role of influencers from a demand perspective, that is, to legitimise offerings, generate and grow demand and reduce buyer risk. The authors of this paper recognise their role in the supply side to create, transform and shape markets, meaning WOM on SM can take a broader role in B2B than previously conceptualised.

With technology being adopted rapidly in industries such as farming and healthcare, SM has a role to play in their use and implementation. For example, the paper by Dilleen *et al.* (2023) investigates how actors in a farmer’s network influence the adoption of smart farming technology (SFT) and how SM affects the adoption process. While SFT helps to both increase agricultural productivity and sustainability, as well as enabling farm-to-fork traceability and lowering environmental footprints associated with food production that consumers have become increasingly concerned with, little is known about this emerging phenomenon. The authors use the concept of social capital to unearth findings that indicate peers and other farmers are important network actors because of the level of trust in information, perceived competency and integrity, and the degree of reciprocity. However, the level of SFT information shared via SM in this network is relatively limited and therefore diversifying the farmer’s online network to include, for example, vendors, advisory services and agrimedia publications could result in an increased understanding of SFT amongst farmers. Findings also outline that while farmers are generally trusting of technology, they are sceptical of SFT vendors and their SM content due to the perception of being “over sold” to or “over-promising”.

The paper by Dóra *et al.* (2022) also examines technology change (telemedicine), albeit in the health-care industry. Telemedicine in this context is compared with SM in terms of its ability to enrich information, accelerate information exchanges and improve access, as well as have an impact on mobilising resources in business relationships and networks of actors. In this study, the ARA model is used to determine how telemedicine engenders change and influences the actors, activities and resources in the examined health-care protocols. Cases in this study revealed that new resources mobilised with telemedicine technology changed both the number and substance of activities, as well as the set and role of actors involved. This impact on interaction processes was information driven and led to an increase in the quantity and/or availability of output information in all cases. Andersen *et al.* (2023) highlight that digital technologies and network connectivity lower the costs of connecting and collaborating with loosely related external parties. The authors, using a case study involving Bang & Olufsen and Google, examine the colliding logic of business ecosystems and conventional purchasing and supply management (PSM) practice. They note that as positions, relations and roles within networks are becoming increasingly opaque, the notions of complementarity and connectivity have become key competitive factors.

#### 4. Future research directions: a call for continued research on social media in business-to-business relationships and networks

The papers comprising this special issue underpin how pervasive SM is within the B2B space and how complex the investigations into the various facets of SM industrial marketing have become. Together with extant literature, the special issue indicates several key areas of focus for future studies. For example, while Andersen *et al.* (2023) explore how SM challenges conventional PSM practice, there is a dearth of research that currently addresses how SM is being utilised in supply chain management processes, such as logistics. Calls for research in this space (Chae *et al.*, 2020) are echoed in this article, while further research into processes of how firms integrate SM into wider business activities are also relevant. Badran *et al.* (2023) identify processes of how entrepreneurs use SM to develop their organisational identity within business networks. Yet delving deeper into, for example, processes of how SM resources interact (Drummond *et al.*, 2022) or the resource interfaces that are required and emerge when mobilising SM resources with others (Prekert *et al.*, 2019) are pertinent areas for SM B2B scholars to address and germane to the IMP literature.

Kaur and Guptas' (2022) literature review explores some of the more negative aspects of SM advancing our understanding of misinformation on SM platforms. Yet, there is room for future studies exploring other aspects of the darker side of SM in B2B interaction (Luo *et al.*, 2021) in, for example, value co-creation (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2016). As Web 3.0 technologies are being increasingly adopted by B2B practitioners, understanding how SM interacts with these novel digital platforms in industrial marketing is pertinent. For example, recent studies on the use of AI-enabled chatbots on SM (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2021) indicate the pervasive nature of this growing plethora of digital technologies. Studies into SM integration alongside more immersive technologies such as virtual reality (Boyd and Koles, 2019), or those where machine-to-machine communication is omnipresent, that is, the Internet of things (Soltani, 2022), are timely. The seamless integration between SM and other Web 3.0 technologies can allow for use of novel organisational functions such as big data analytics to better inform decision-making (Sivarajah *et al.*, 2020).

This also raises the issues of SM adoption for B2B introducing new and at times autonomous or non-human actors, the latter a pressing matter within the entrepreneurship (Baraldi *et al.*, 2019) and the IMP literature given the importance of actors in examining the complex nature of contemporary networks. With increased SM use in B2B contexts, the growth of influencer marketing finds its way permeating into the industrial marketing domain (Cartwright *et al.*, 2022), where SM influencers become new and potentially critical network actors in B2B marketing for organisations. This is evident in the paper by Cowan *et al.* (2022) focusing on the on role of influencers in spreading WOM in professional B2B networks.

Given the rich mix of methodological approaches used in the papers within this special issue, it may be timely to conduct an analysis of methodological approaches used in SM B2B research. Studies exploring the range of methodological

options applied to various contexts would greatly enhance the awareness of suitable methods of research design, data collection and analysis for SM B2B research or how best to capture, for example, the nuanced interactions of different SM platforms. This concept also applies to the country contexts of much of the current SM literature – while some studies do explore SM for internationalisation (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021a), given SMs ability to mitigate traditionally limiting barriers of some organisations such as peripheral status or being geographically disparate from network actors, there is a paucity of studies investigating SM in B2B internationalisation and across different cultural contexts. Cross-cultural studies of SM in industrial marketing could provide further interesting insights for both theory and practice.

The editors of this special issue are grateful for all the help they received preparing for this volume on SM in business-to-business interaction, engagement, co-creation and communication. We believe that the articles comprising this special issue will make a valuable contribution to SM B2B research agenda, existing literature and body of knowledge. We would like to thank all those who contributed to this *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* special issue, including the reviewers who provided timely and detailed feedback to authors to help improve manuscripts, the journal editors and supporting team. As a parting note, we recently lost one of our own, Professor Ivan Snehota, who was a founding member of the IMP and an editor for this journal. May he rest in peace.

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