

All that glitters is not gold: exploring social selling through the eyes of B2B customers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of the B2B customers' perspective regarding salespeople's social media use.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with 26 key informants performing their job in customer role in various industries.

Findings – The authors inductively identify five themes regarding the B2B customers' perspective of social media use in B2B selling. These themes allow for valuable implications for social selling activities and expected outcomes.

Originality/value – Against a growing body of literature on drivers, best practices and outcomes of social media use by B2B salespeople, less attention has been paid to the customer's side. The authors extend current research by providing a more complete picture of social selling activities and expected outcomes.

Keywords Social media, Social selling, Sales transformation, B2B customer, Buyer-seller relationship, Purchasing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Digitalization represents one of the most significant and discussed trends profoundly affecting the salesperson's role (Corsaro and Maggioni, 2022; Wengler *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, social media has been considered a game changer in B2B selling, thus influencing the buyer-seller relationship in various stages of the sales process (Cheng *et al.*, 2023; Diba *et al.*, 2019; Gustafson *et al.*, 2021). Social media comprises an array of internet-based applications such as professional and personal social networks (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) (Bill *et al.*, 2020; Franck and Damperat, 2023) as well as instant messaging (IM) apps (e.g. WhatsApp, WeChat, etc.) (Guenzi and Nijssen, 2020).

On top of B2B buyers' sustained reliance on digital channels (such as supplier websites, third-party websites and social media), Gartner's (2022) research identified a steady shift of customer preferences from in-person sales interactions toward these channels.

Thus, social media has increasingly drawn the interest of sales and marketing scholars who have begun studying their role and effectiveness in selling (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021; Guenzi and Nijssen, 2020). Prior research has extensively tackled the salesperson's perspective by shedding light on the drivers of salespeople's social media use (Bill *et al.*, 2020; Kumar and Srivastava, 2022), activities (i.e. social selling) (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Terho *et al.*, 2022) and sales-related outcomes (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017; Franck and Damperat, 2023; Itani *et al.*, 2017). These contributions have greatly enhanced our knowledge of how social media is affecting the sales force.

Surprisingly, despite the important role the literature recognizes in customers' perceptions of salespeople and their

strategies (Paesbrugge *et al.*, 2020; Williams and Plouffe, 2007), only a few attempts have been made to include the B2B customers' perspective in studying social media use in sales (see Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017; Bill *et al.*, 2020; Itani *et al.*, 2020).

Notably, scholars are questioning if the potential social media can bring to selling is really all gold (Agnihotri, 2020; Bowen *et al.*, 2021) or if this lack of attention on the "customer side" may be detrimental to the effectiveness of personal selling (Bill *et al.*, 2020).

This study aims to fill this research gap by shedding light on the customers' perspective on social selling. Given the scant empirical evidence, we adopted a qualitative approach and interviewed 26 key informants performing their jobs in customer roles in various industries. We studied the customers' use of social media and the role of such platforms in buyer-seller relationships and inductively identified five themes that were linked to the extant literature on social media use in B2B sales.

Hence, study findings contribute to the lively debate on social media's importance for sales by offering a rich and more detailed picture of social selling activities and outcomes that consider the customer's perspective.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media in B2B sales

Academics and practitioners alike have shown a consistent interest in investigating how social media is transforming B2B sales processes and salespeople tasks (i.e. social selling)

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(Corsaro and Maggioni, 2022; Rangarajan *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, social selling is defined as a selling approach that leverages social and digital channels to identify and enhance the understanding of customers and relevant actors, to build and maintain a network of personal and professional contacts for nurturing the relationship through continued dialogue and to engage customers by systematically sharing valuable content that fits their interests and problems, beyond sales-focused communications (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012; Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Lacoste, 2016).

Extant research is focused on the salesperson, who is considered the “ground zero” of social media activities (Moncrief, 2017). While some studies have addressed the organizational and individual drivers of salespeople’s social media usage (e.g. Guesalaga, 2016; Hansen and Levin, 2016; Schmitt *et al.*, 2021), others have investigated its effectiveness in selling. In this regard, the use of social media in B2B sales has been found to help salespeople’s behaviors (e.g. information communication, adaptive selling, prospecting) (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Bowen *et al.*, 2021; Itani *et al.*, 2020), organizational brand performance (Rapp *et al.*, 2013) and individual sales performance (Guenzi and Nijssen, 2020; Kalra *et al.*, 2023; Ogilvie *et al.*, 2018). Thought leadership is also considered a central performance outcome of social selling that can ultimately influence their performance (Itani *et al.*, 2023; Terho *et al.*, 2022).

Interestingly, whilst the literature emphasizes that business customers increasingly use social media and that social selling practices might positively influence customer-related outcomes such as customer acquisition performance (Schendzielarz *et al.*, 2022; Terho *et al.*, 2022), customer relationship performance (Ogilvie *et al.*, 2018; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012; Trainor *et al.*, 2014), customer trust and customer satisfaction (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Ancillai *et al.*, 2019), these contributions relied on salespeople’s assessment of performance outcomes. Only a few articles include key informants in customer firms to evaluate the effectiveness of social selling in B2B. Preliminary findings on the customer side show that salespeople’s use of social media positively influences customer-reported post-sales service behaviors, such as inducements, empathy and sportsmanship (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017) and customer loyalty (Zhang and Li, 2019). Yet, the effect on customer loyalty is likely to occur if the buying center is small and the customer is of high importance for the supplier (Bill *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, a thorough understanding of the customer’s perspective regarding social selling is still missing (Agnihotri, 2020; Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Bill *et al.*, 2020). This is surprising as the sales literature emphasizes the important role of customers’ perceptions of salespeople and sales strategies (Paesbrugge *et al.*, 2020), and the ever-evolving nature of modern buyers’ makes their understanding a leading research priority (Lilien, 2016; Mohan *et al.*, 2022).

2.2 B2B customers’ use of social media

Early evidence shows that the use of social media was not very common among B2B customers due to a low perception of its usability, mainly driven by their private social media use (Diba *et al.*, 2019), colleagues’ support and age (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). Yet, contributions keep claiming an enduring shift in customers’ buying behaviors from in-person

interactions toward an increasing reliance on digital tools (Marvasti *et al.*, 2021; Rangarajan *et al.*, 2021) and referring to a “social buyer” (Grewal *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, Diba *et al.* (2019) suggest that social media’s building blocks have the potential to influence the buying process from needs identification up to supplier selection. Customers conduct more online research about their suppliers and their offerings, which includes website visits, social media interactions and attendance at webinars hosted by competing suppliers (Rangarajan *et al.*, 2021). Social media-related information may lead to shorter transaction times, risk reduction in the buying process, management of information overload and increased confidence in decision-making (Gustafson *et al.*, 2021), thus making the buyer less dependent on salespeople in prepurchase activities (Marvasti *et al.*, 2021). However, preference for digital content seems to be greater for buyers of noncritical products or services, while the more strategic the purchase, the more buyers value personal selling and want to assess trustworthiness from the sales side (Grewal *et al.*, 2015; Paesbrugge *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, the use of social media is not limited to information research, suppliers’ comparison, assessment and selection, but it is deemed to reinforce existing supplier-to-customer relationships. B2B buyers’ trust is influenced by suppliers’ communications on social media, and this effect fully mediates the relationship with customer loyalty (Rose *et al.*, 2021). B2B supplier’s posts on social media also trigger customers’ engagement behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing and so forth (Cortez and Dastidar, 2022). Yet, tensions may exist: while suppliers praise the benefits of social media in increasing customer engagement and transparency, B2B customers show a passive attitude toward social media and an overall intention to remain “invisible” (Luo *et al.*, 2021).

Despite these few studies providing some insights about the use of social media by B2B customers, there are no attempts in the literature to explore its implications in social selling.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study design and data collection approach

To the best of our knowledge, only a few articles dealing with social media use in selling have considered B2B customers as the unit of analysis. Therefore, in line with B2B marketing research (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2021), we applied a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews to understand the B2B customers’ perspective regarding social selling practices and outcomes.

We selected key informants with relevant knowledge and expertise (Fready *et al.*, 2022) and relied on a purposeful sampling procedure (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) by asking the researchers’ personal network of salespeople to identify individual customer employees holding key decision-making roles and responsibilities in purchasing activities (Rose *et al.*, 2021). We used a further snowballing technique to reach an adequate number of participants (Johnson, 2015). This approach is in line with qualitative research examining the customers’ perspective to draw implications for personal selling and sales management (Guenzi *et al.*, 2016; Paesbrugge *et al.*, 2017).

The sample of knowledgeable company members was carefully elaborated to obtain as much variety as possible in terms of job role, industry and company size (see Table 1). Moreover, we also aimed at selecting participants who possess significant experience in their job and oversee both direct and indirect purchasing (Paesbrughe *et al.*, 2017).

We contacted key informants, explained the aim of the research and offered managerial summaries of the study findings to encourage participation. We guaranteed anonymity to all participants; hence, no individual responses can be identified from the findings. The sampling process ceased at saturation, as indicated by information redundancy (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). Hence, we conducted 26 in-depth interviews with key informants in B2B customer firms between March 2022 and December 2022.

A semi-structured approach was deemed appropriate for deepening concepts as it allows participants to provide rich answers, both retrospectively and in real-time (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Interviews lasted 45 min on average and were conducted in Italian, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview track was based on open-ended questions within a standardized protocol. A common set of questions, carefully designed to be unobtrusive and nondirective (McCracken, 1988), were used; yet, the interviewees could elaborate and expand on their answers, which allowed us to ask additional probing questions when needed (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

Interviews began by giving informants an overview of the study and its purpose. Once informed consent was obtained, participants were first probed into their company background and their role, then specifically into how they use social media for work-related activities. Next, informants were asked to reflect on their use of social media in the seller–customer relationship (e.g. how social media affects such relationships, if they use social media to search for information on suppliers and sellers, etc.). Interviews ended with questions about their perceptions, preferences and behaviors regarding contacts through social media and digital content and salespeople’s use of social media.

During the interview, we constantly asked participants to refer to concrete situations and provide real-life examples to

Table 1 Profiles of study participants

Participant	Job title	Responsibility*	Industry	Gender	Company size
1	Entrepreneur	Indirect purchasing	Healthcare	Female	Small
2	CEO	Indirect purchasing	Construction	Female	Small
3	Administrative manager	Indirect purchasing	Environmental services	Female	Small
4	Entrepreneur	Indirect purchasing	Tourism	Male	Small
5	Buyer	Direct purchasing	Healthcare	Male	Medium
6	Buyer	Direct purchasing	Furniture	Female	
7	Buyer	Direct purchasing	Healthcare	Male	Medium
8	Executive committee and partner	Indirect purchasing	Manufacturing (home appliances)	Female	
9	Procurement senior manager	Direct purchasing	Thermal comfort	Female	Large
10	Technology and infrastructure manager	Indirect purchasing	Pharmaceutical	Male	Large
11	Category and IT buyer	Direct and indirect	Wellness	Male	Large
12	Category purchasing manager	Direct purchasing	Apparel	Male	Medium
13	Category purchasing manager	Direct purchasing	Apparel	Female	Medium
14	Category purchasing manager	Direct purchasing	Apparel	Female	Medium
15	Tax manager	Indirect purchasing	Food	Male	Large
16	Purchasing manager	Indirect purchasing	Food	Female	Large
17	Brand manager	Indirect purchasing	Food	Male	Large
18	Buyer	Indirect purchasing	Food	Female	Large
19	Innovation project manager (logistic competence center)	Indirect purchasing	Food	Male	Large
20	Logistic senior manager (international and oversea transportation)	Indirect purchasing	Food	Male	Large
21	Head of indirect purchasing	Indirect purchasing	Consumer goods	Male	Large
22	Project engineering professional	Indirect purchasing	Food	Male	Large
23	Tax manager	Indirect purchasing	Apparel	Female	Large
24	Senior buyer	Direct purchasing	Food	Female	Large
25	Country procurement leader	Indirect purchasing	Pharmaceutical	Female	Large
26	Head of ethical trade and environmental sustainability	Indirect purchasing	Apparel	Female	Large

Note: *Direct purchasing refers to acquiring the necessary materials that directly influence the manufacturing workflow, whereas indirect procurement is critical in supporting the overall operational efficiency by ensuring the availability of essential resources such as office supplies, utilities and other non-production-related items

Source: Authors’ own work

illustrate and describe how social media influences their work and the buyer–seller relationship.

Furthermore, we gathered empirical data from social media to triangulate the qualitative findings regarding customer's social media activity and engagement behaviors.

3.2 Data analysis

Interview transcripts were entered into NVivo software for manual coding. Data analysis was conducted through inductive coding, which is recommended when the overall research context has not been studied sufficiently (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). We followed Gioia *et al.*'s (2013) approach from the empirical to the conceptual, which aims at the identification of emergent themes that match the literature to facilitate theory building.

Accordingly, data were coded via open coding to identify first-order categories that adhere to the saying and doing of interviewees for maintaining the integrity of informant-centric concepts. Then, first-order codes were analyzed, looking for similarities and differences, and merged into second-order categories through axial coding. Finally, the second-order categories were gathered into higher-order aggregate dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Through several rounds of iterative coding of the interview transcripts and constant comparison within the coding team, five main themes were identified (Appendix 1 provides an example for the first aggregate theme). In this regard, inter-coder differences were addressed via multiple discussions in the coauthorship team. Finally, the five themes identified were discussed in view of existing knowledge on social selling to draw research implications and provide a more complete picture of its activities and expected outcomes.

The following section presents the themes (Appendix 2 provides illustrative quotes).

4. Findings

4.1 Cold social media messages

This theme looks at how B2B customers perceive and deal with cold message strategies delivered by salespeople on social media accounts. Buyers are constantly reached on social media (mainly LinkedIn) by a significant number of messages and requests from sellers' profiles that are difficult to handle during office hours. This approach has been often referred to as "spam" and "bombarding". Many buyers also stressed that the number of requests from unknown sellers often prevents them from actually seizing interesting opportunities (I17).

Overall, the interviewees complain about the lack of personalization in first-contact messages from salespeople whose products and services are sometimes not even linked to their business. The perception they have about sellers' social media use is that they are "doing it randomly or maybe they look for the name of the company and maybe they find me" (I11).

Finally, the analysis of this theme sheds light on customers' attitude toward social media messages. They generally feel annoyed, and sometimes this approach prevents customers from following up on sellers' contacts, even when the offered product or solution could fit their needs (I26). On the contrary, when the message and the seller who made the first contact via

social media appear to be interesting and nonintrusive, most of the buyers shift the conversation toward more institutional channels, such as email or eventually phone calls, to explore further the possibility of getting a new supplier.

4.2 Lurking behind the curtains

Analysis reveals that B2B customers display a basic activity on social media. Some interviewees consider social media not helpful for their work and feel to waste time on such platforms, while others point out their utility as tools to search for new job positions. Sometimes, the limited social media usage for work-related purposes mirrors a seldom use for private purposes due to lack of time and low consideration of these platforms (I13).

Interviewees are used to reveal basic information about their professional profile, such as the job role, the organization they work for, as well as previous job positions and educational background. Moreover, posting first-hand content on social media is uncommon among B2B customers. They usually re-share content published by their organization's social media accounts to give visibility to the company content.

B2B customers use social media mainly to stay up-to-date with industry-related events and latest news. Social media is often compared to industry newspapers and magazines, and interviewees are more interested in following industry leaders' official social media accounts than suppliers' pages. Therefore, social media represents an information source and a personal training channel.

Study findings show that social media content can inspire thoughts and considerations, but it hardly fosters conversations on work-related topics. Accordingly, the levels of interaction within such platforms are also quite low and at the most limited to likes, while comments and shares are much less frequent. Commenting or sharing is most often used with friends or colleagues rather than suppliers or their salespeople.

Discussion groups within social media are neither interesting nor helpful for B2B customers job-related activities. If they joined these groups, they emphasize that the conversation within these "places" is very disorganized and chaotic, and, at the most, they state to follow the updates passively without interacting or commenting. Moreover, B2B customers struggle to assess the average reliability of unknown group members and the resulting level of authenticity of such conversations, with a subsequent unwillingness to show their opinions and interests.

A second dimension of this theme concerns a fear of information disclosure on social media. This is mainly related to two factors. On the one hand, participants highlight the need to maintain a certain degree of privacy in their work. A risk exists in making the company's potential or existing supply relationships public and visible to all, especially when it comes to product purchases, and, in general, the interviewees recommend being neutral toward suppliers. On the other hand, data analysis shows a general lack of organizational policies or guidelines about the use of social media for work-related purposes, which prevents the active use of such tools due to high uncertainty on how to behave.

4.3 The relevance of social media in B2B customer networks

Data analysis indicates that B2B customers are aware of salespeople's interest in social media to reach out to new leads,

gain visibility and showcase their activity. However, participants emphasize little or no interest in the salesperson's social media profile and activity. For instance, when receiving contact requests on social media, B2B customers do not check the sellers' professional profiles. They are more interested in the selling firm's social media page and are influenced by the corporate brand reputation. Some interviewees even state that they do not follow salespeople on social media, while others point out not to trust social media profiles as they can be built *ad hoc* to show certain skills and provide a certain professional image. Rather, they believe other channels, such as Teams, are more valuable for learning more about the sellers and the companies they represent.

Consequently, they also emphasize not being interested in the person or profile sharing the content they find in the newsfeed. Moreover, they also note that salespeople tend to re-share the suppliers' company page content regarding new product launches, certifications, acquisitions or investments in general.

Interviewees use social media for scouting and evaluating supplier firms. They emphasize a significant advantage in terms of reducing the time to search for information, comparing suppliers' and products' alternatives, as well as understanding the business of potential suppliers, how they deal with specific issues (e.g. sustainability) and what types of references they may have. In this regard, some participants also stated they directly reach out to potential suppliers through the official social media page or by looking for key company roles that better fit the buyer's needs. However, buyers still prefer existing and long-lasting relationships rather than social media when selecting suppliers. Even when suppliers are not able to carry out a new project, B2B customers ask current suppliers for names of other companies with which to start a collaboration. Participants underline how turning to existing suppliers – alongside with colleagues, competitors and partners – and industry-specific trade fairs is faster and more trustworthy than searching for potential suppliers online.

Hence, instead of acknowledging the value of social media to network with suppliers and salespeople, interviewees suggest rethinking their role in an even more professional way since they can often be the venue for trivial conversations with no value. Interestingly, buyers foresee a future social media scenario where such platforms become more sort of “inventories” of suppliers by integrating functionalities that allow gathering company-related information, making comparisons among suppliers' alternatives and even accessing reviews and ratings of the suppliers' customers. Therefore, they hope for platforms that move away from the logic of marketing and sales to become closer to the needs of people in charge of purchasing products or services. This would improve the quality of conversations around topics and issues that are focused on purchasing.

4.4 The role of social media content in buyer–seller relationship

Data analysis shows that customers are generally not very interested in and reluctant to interact with social media content unless it is truly relevant to their job. Such interactions range from simple likes, sharing and downloading content to requests for additional information via private contact and word of mouth with other colleagues, while comments in public social

networks are still seen as risky exposure, especially for products versus service providers (I26). By and large, the discussion is limited to one-to-one interactions, for instance, via IM apps, emails or face-to-face contacts.

Regarding content types and formats drawing B2B customers' attention on social media, interviewees highlight avoiding “salesy” content while being more responsive to content focused on general industry-relevant topics and customers' specific needs (I25). Participants prefer content that is not simply focused on selling products and services but possibly links the company's offer to broader themes that may be interesting for buyers. This content can also contribute to fine-tuning the idea of reliability and knowledge of a salesperson developed outside of social media. Case histories describing partnerships and projects with other customer companies are particularly attractive, especially when they regard collaborations with renowned industry firms or competitors.

This underlines the importance of customer referrals in B2B contexts. Yet, some criticalities exist. First, case histories tend to emphasize only the positive aspects and it can be difficult to match them to what the customer company or the single buyer experiences daily (I20). Second, case histories share collaboration details which may worry buyers regarding the management of confidentiality.

B2B customers also appreciate content describing the company's production process and products which help customers in solving their pain points, as well as major investments, organizational competencies and awards. Interestingly, some participants emphasize how such content is especially valuable in one-to-one interaction through social media such as WhatsApp or WeChat, because it can be specifically tailored to the customer's needs (I5).

As far as post formats are concerned, participants prefer content such as texts or images (e.g. charts, infographics, business data, etc.). Attitude toward videos changes according to different social media channels and the customer journey's phase. Videos are perceived as highly explanatory when sellers use them in one-to-one interactions during the post-sales phase (I5). However, when it comes to gathering relevant information about the purchase, videos are more demanding to enjoy because the audio makes them less usable during working hours.

Despite the importance of relevant social media content in cultivating relationships, especially in one-to-one touchpoints, customers appear to craft their opinions about the salesperson mostly outside of social media. In this regard, participants highlighted several salespeople's personal traits, such as clarity and transparency in communication, reliability in keeping the promises made, empathy, responsiveness and proactive behavior.

Besides personal traits, participants highlighted the importance of salespeople's specific skills and abilities, such as showing a professional approach in negotiation, technical knowledge of the product or service offered and the ability to provide critical information to listen to customer needs and support them in solving problems.

4.5 Use of social media and digital channels in one-to-one daily interaction

Although public social media still seems to play a limited role in B2B customers' job, digital channels are increasingly affecting

everyday purchasing-related activities. Notably, data analysis shows significant use of IM apps and video conferencing tools (es. Microsoft Teams and Skype).

These tools allow to convey immediate information, speed up urgent communications by leveraging the back and forth of conversations and even share documents (e.g. commercial documents, product certifications or documents relating to goods shipments), with the advantage, compared to other social media, of keeping the conversation private (I17) and building human relationships (I12).

Hence, e-mails are still, by far, the most preferred channel to be used in the buyer–seller relationship (I7). Also, despite the benefits of managing existing business relationships, IM apps increase the number of channels they need to check, even risking losing important information. Furthermore, official communications may affect other colleagues in the company or future employees with no access to IM apps. Therefore, if emails are a less suitable channel for back-and-forth communications, they are better for storing information, data and official attachments.

5. Discussion

The five inductively identified themes focused on the customers' view allow us to draw valuable implications for social selling research. Henceforth, the themes' content is discussed and linked to the social selling activities (i.e. understanding, connecting with and engaging) and expected outcomes (e.g. thought leadership customer trust, customer satisfaction, etc.) (see [Table 2](#)).

5.1 Social selling understanding facet

The first social selling facet relates to the deep understanding of prospects, existing customers and influencers through social and digital channels ([Ancillai et al., 2019](#); [Lacoste, 2016](#); [Rodriguez et al., 2012](#)). Specifically, it means to effectively identify potential customer companies and key decision makers by abandoning less effective hard-selling techniques in favor of carefully targeted initiatives ([Andzulis et al., 2012](#)). However, study findings show that B2B customers complain about receiving a huge number of cold and non-personalized social media messages. This reveals an oversimplistic use of these channels by sellers which seems to still lean toward a one-size-fits-all approach without seizing the benefits of social selling yet. In line with the literature on salespeople perspective ([Lacoste, 2016](#)), to effectively address B2B customers through social media sellers should select the right customer and invest effort in message personalization.

Moreover, the social selling understanding facet refers to acquiring deep insights into customers' requirements and pain points in a nonintrusive way ([Ancillai et al., 2019](#)). Nonetheless, study findings on customer perspective seems to scale down the importance of this part of the social selling construct. Especially, B2B customers' attitude toward using social media by lurking behind the curtains lower the potential of such platforms for effectively knowing customers' needs and problems, thus making it difficult for salespeople to get a thorough understanding of the customers' activities based on social media.

5.2 Social selling connecting facet

The second social selling dimension regards connecting with prospects, customers and influencers through networking and consistent dialogue ([Ancillai et al., 2019](#); [Lacoste, 2016](#)). The thematic analysis highlights buyers' unwillingness to follow salespeople on social media either for privacy reasons or for an overall lack of interest in their social media profile and activity. Hence, salespeople, when using social media to build a network of valuable contacts among potential and existing customers, should carefully monitor the effectiveness of their efforts. Interestingly, B2B customers' reluctance to comment, chat, ask questions and participate in open dialogue in social media groups may prevent salespeople from being able to exploit public social networks to develop valuable conversations ([Lacoste, 2016](#)). Rather, B2B customers acknowledge that private social media and other digital channels (e.g. video conferencing tools) are more trustworthy in their daily work. Thus, salespeople can leverage such channels to nurture a constructive dialogue with customers and build human bonds and trust, even beyond the professional relationship.

5.3 Social selling engaging facet

The third social selling facet relates to engaging customers and other relevant actors through valuable content, thus influencing their disposition to invest resources in their interactions with the seller ([Ancillai et al., 2019](#); [Brodie et al., 2019](#)). Yet, salespeople's efforts in crafting valuable content can be undermined by customers' limited attention to their social media activity. In this regard, we add to the current sales literature the customers' view on which content is indeed perceived as compelling and relevant (cf. [Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016](#)). Specifically, when sharing content on public social networks, sales professionals should focus on timely industry-relevant topics, as well as on companies' major investments, organizational competencies and awards. Differently, as B2B customers feel more confident in private social media, salespeople can effectively leverage such channels to share content that effectively addresses the specific buyer's needs and pain points.

Moreover, we also shed light on B2B customers' behavioral engagement toward salespeople's content. Notably, salespeople should be aware that buyers' behaviors on public social networks may display a lower level of engagement, through liking and sharing ([Malthouse et al., 2013](#)), while commenting is perceived as an overexposure. Instead, they can expect higher levels of engagement on private platforms.

5.4 Social selling expected outcomes

The literature pinpoints that social media is effectively useful for lead generation, thereby positively affecting customer acquisition performance ([Schendzielarz et al., 2022](#); [Terho et al., 2022](#)). Our study corroborates, through data from the customer's side, the perception of salespeople on the effectiveness of social media in lead generation activities and provides a more nuanced understanding of such a relationship. First, a non-personalized approach prevents customers from developing the buyer–seller relationship even if the product or solution may be of interest to the company, and effective customer acquisition requires shifting the conversation to more institutional channels such as emails and calls. Second, B2B customers use social media for supplier scouting and

Table 2 Implications of the customers' view on social selling activities and outcomes

Theme	Customers' view	Implications for social selling	Social selling facet
Cold social media messages	B2B customers complain receiving a huge number of non-personalized social media messages by salespeople	Salespeople can be tempted to use social media to effectively identify the ideal customer, but rather they employ an oversimplistic approach	<i>Understanding prospects, existing customers and influencers (Ancillai et al., 2019; Lacoste, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2012)</i>
Lurking behind the curtains	B2B customers emphasize the low social media usefulness for purchasing-related activities. They have a professional profile briefly describing their job role, usually repost corporate content and generally fear disclosing additional information on social media	Salespeople struggle to get a thorough understanding of the customers' needs and pain points based on their social media activity	
The relevance of social media in B2B customer networks	B2B customers do not follow salespeople on social media	Salespeople should carefully consider the effectiveness of social media to build a network of valuable contacts	<i>Connecting with prospects, customers and influencers through networking and consistent dialogue (Ancillai et al., 2019; Barney-McNamara et al., 2021; Lacoste, 2016)</i>
Lurking behind the curtains	B2B customers are reluctant to comment, chat and ask questions on social networks (e.g. LinkedIn) as well as to participate in open dialogue in social media groups	Salespeople may struggle to develop valuable conversations on social networks	
Use of social media and digital channels in one-to-one daily interaction	B2B customers increasingly use IM apps and video conferencing tools to manage their daily conversation with salespeople	Salespeople can leverage IM apps and other digital tools to dialogue with customers and build human bonds and trust beyond the professional relationships	
The role of social media content in the buyer–seller relationship	B2B customers pay limited attention to salespeople's and sales organizations' social media content unless it fits their interests and needs	Salespeople's efforts in crafting content on social networks (e.g. LinkedIn) should be focused on industry-relevant topics, companies' major investments, organizational competencies, and awards.	<i>Engaging customers and other relevant actors through valuable content (Ancillai et al., 2019)</i>
Cold social media messages	B2B customers feel more confident in receiving salespeople's content in one-to-one interactions (i.e. via IM apps)	Salespeople should use case histories thoughtfully to avoid undermining buyers' trust.	
	B2B customers feel more confident in liking and sharing content instead of overexposing themselves by commenting	Salespeople can adapt content focused on the suppliers' production process and product to the customer's specific needs and pain points in one-to-one interactions	
	B2B customers only follow up on personalized contact requests and shift the conversation to more institutional channels. Non-personalized requests are discarded even if the product or solution can be of interest	Salespeople should acknowledge that buyers' behaviors in social networks (e.g. LinkedIn) may display a lower level of engagement. Higher levels of engagement may be observed in one-to-one interactions through IM apps	
	B2B customers proactively use social media for supplier scouting and evaluation to speed up the information search process	Salespeople's use of social media enhances lead generation if salespeople employ a customized approach	<i>Customer acquisition performance (Schendzielarz et al., 2022; Terho et al., 2022)</i>
The relevance of social media in B2B customer networks	B2B customers proactively use social media for supplier scouting and evaluation to speed up the information search process	Salespeople's use of social media may positively influence inbound lead generation	

(continued)

Table 2

Theme	Customers' view	Implications for social selling	Social selling facet
The role of social media content in the buyer–seller relationship	B2B customers largely base the suppliers' selection on existing relationships and word-of-mouth via current suppliers, colleagues, partners and even competitors B2B customers make up their opinion about the salesperson's trustworthiness by cultivating the relationship over time, mostly outside of social media	Salespeople's efforts in lead generation should combine social and traditional channels Social selling alone hardly affects customer trust	<i>Customer trust</i> (Rose et al., 2021; Zhang and Li, 2019)
Use of social media and digital channels in one-to-one daily interaction	B2B customers increasingly use IM apps and video conferencing tools to manage their daily conversations with salespeople	Salespeople's use of one-to-one social and digital channels can be helpful to build trust	
The relevance of social media in B2B customer networks	B2B customers consider social media not essential to build a long-standing relationship with salespeople and advocate an evolution of such platforms as inventories of suppliers B2B customers increasingly use IM apps and video conferencing tools to manage their daily conversations with salespeople	Salespeople should consider that differences may exist between social media platforms, as activities in social networks (e.g. LinkedIn) can be less effective to cultivate buyer–seller relationships, while one-to-one social and digital channels can be more helpful	<i>Customer relationships performance</i> (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Ogilvie et al., 2018; Trainor et al., 2014)
Use of social media and digital channels in one-to-one daily interaction	B2B customers show little interest in the salesperson's social media profile and activity and hardly link the social media content to the person or profile behind	Salespeople find social media useful to build their thought leadership, yet the customers' assessment regarding their expertise and trustworthiness is primarily based on their activity outside of social media	<i>Thought leadership and reputation</i> (Itani et al., 2023; Tettho et al., 2022)
The role of social media content in the buyer–seller relationship	B2B customers make up their opinion about the salesperson's trustworthiness by cultivating the relationship over time mostly outside social media		
The relevance of social media in B2B customer networks	B2B customers show little interest in the salesperson's social media profile and activity; rather, they are more interested in the selling firms' page, information and content B2B customers proactively use social media for supplier scouting and evaluation to speed up the information search process	Salespeople's social media activity has a limited positive effect on the organizational brand performance; rather, the supplier company page and social media presence is more likely to have a positive influence	<i>Organizational brand performance</i> (Ancillai et al., 2019)

Source: Authors' own work

assessment to accelerate the information search process, thus spontaneously reaching out to potential suppliers and their sales professionals. Hence, social selling may positively affect inbound lead generation. More importantly, since B2B customers largely leverage their existing relationships with existing suppliers, colleagues, partners and competitors in supplying decisions, the effect on customer acquisition performance should take the interplay between these channels into consideration. Moreover, researchers have also suggested that social selling may enhance customer trust (Rose *et al.*, 2021; Zhang and Li, 2019) and customer relationship performance by successfully satisfying and retaining loyal customers (Ogilvie *et al.*, 2018; Trainor *et al.*, 2014). Yet, our study shows that B2B customers craft their opinion about the salesperson by cultivating the relationship over time, mostly outside social media, where they can thoroughly assess salespeople's personal traits (e.g. clarity, reliability, empathy, etc.) and skills and abilities (e.g. professional approach, knowledge of critical information, technical competence, etc.). In addition, the customers' view highlights that buyers consider public social networks not essential to building relationships with sellers, but rather that such platforms would be more useful as inventories of suppliers to compare alternatives. Thus, it seems unlikely that social selling alone affects customer trust and overall customer relationship performance. In addition, we show that differences may exist among platforms as private social media helps in strengthening human bonds and trust. Hence, the immediacy of social networks can be worthwhile to establish a first contact and emergent connections, but the ongoing relationship is then moved beyond such channels to private communication both online and offline (cf. Quinton and Wilson, 2016).

Extant results emphasize thought leadership and reputation as central performance outcomes (Itani *et al.*, 2023; Terho *et al.*, 2022). Although salespeople are important touchpoints in B2B supplier–customer relationships, buyers show little interest in their social media profiles and activities that do not influence the customer's assessment regarding their expertise and trustworthiness. Importantly, the more buyers perceive their purchasing activity as strategic, the more they rely on their professional expertise and personal relationships to assess salespeople and companies, rather than digital content (Paesbrugghe *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, salespeople find social media to positively affect the organizational brand performance (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019). However, we find that B2B customers are more interested in the selling firms' social media page and information and less interested in the salespeople's activity. Thus, the supplier's social media presence is more likely to have a positive influence on organizational brand performance than the salespeople's social media use.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes contributions to and extends current knowledge on the social selling research.

Importantly, rather than focusing on the salesperson's or sales organization's standpoint, we offer a complementary view of the B2B customers, which is largely missing in the extant literature. Specifically, we investigate B2B customers' use of

social media and the role of these platforms in the buyer–seller relationship. To draw valuable implications for research, we discuss and link study findings to the social selling activities (i.e. understanding, connecting with and engaging) and expected outcomes (e.g. thought leadership, customer trust, customer satisfaction, etc.).

This allows for richer and more nuanced insights into social selling. By doing so, we respond to recent calls for additional research on the customer side of social selling (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Agnihotri, 2020), which may offer “a more realistic discussion of social media's importance for sales” (Bill *et al.*, 2020, p. 747). More research on the purchasing side is certainly beneficial, as the lack of research and understanding of the needs of the purchasing function can undermine the efficiency and effectiveness of sales teams (Paesbrugghe *et al.*, 2017).

Existing studies largely use constructs that appear rather broad and focus on general salesperson's use and integration of social media technology to perform the sales job (e.g. Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Ogilvie *et al.*, 2018). Yet, complementing the social selling phenomenon with the customer's perspective shows that different activities and tools may not have the same value. Some social selling activities, such as prospecting, may have a greater impact, whereas others, such as understanding customers' needs and pain points, appear less feasible. Likewise, differences may exist between platforms as social networks (e.g. LinkedIn) appear more useful for prospecting, while IM apps seem more valuable to develop consistent dialogue and engage customers. Future studies should take such differences into account. Furthermore, we provide additional empirical evidence on how B2B customers use social media. More specifically, B2B customers having little regard for social media display a lower use for both private and work-related purposes (Diba *et al.*, 2019; Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). In addition, while the extant literature suggests that social media have the potential to influence the entire buying process (Diba *et al.*, 2019), their role seems to be limited to the early phases of information search on potential suppliers and alternative evaluation (Marvasti *et al.*, 2021; Paesbrugghe *et al.*, 2022). Buyers even advocate a more business-oriented evolution of social media into search engines for supplier companies. This finding supports the notion of social media being characterized by a transactional, rather than relational, approach, usually based on a specific, focused need of members (Quinton and Wilson, 2016). Instead, they seem less helpful in the identification of needs, establishment of specifications and actual selection of suppliers. The network of relationships with existing suppliers, company colleagues and even competitors is still fundamental to the purchasing process.

Importantly, we answer previous calls to conduct more research in the engagement-social media domain (Cortez and Dastidar, 2022). Consistent with recent studies (Luo *et al.*, 2021), buyers display monitoring behaviors instead of active engagement, particularly on public social networks, due to privacy reasons and a lack of organizational guidelines.

6.2 Managerial implications

The study bears insights for salespeople, B2B customers as well as social media platform providers.

First, salespeople should not thoughtlessly embrace the social media trend by using these platforms to randomly reach out to

potential customers with cold messages. Not only does this approach not entail any positive results for building business relationships, but it may even spoil the social media space and discourage buyers. Instead, they should stick to best practices, which require them to strive for carefully identifying the right key decision makers in customer firms and personalizing the contact message. Accordingly, sales managers should acknowledge the need to provide salespeople with adequate training and organizational-level strategy for knowing when and how to use social media for job-related tasks. Leaving the use of social media to the mere individual initiative may not lead to the desired results or even damage the organizational brand. Importantly, salespeople should bear in mind that it might be difficult to assess buyers' needs and pain points from his/her social media activity as they tend to passively monitor these platforms. An in-depth study of the ideal customer profile and design of buyer personas can be of help in understanding how to properly reach out to potential customers.

The study also offers valuable insights on how organizations and salespeople should evaluate the effectiveness of social selling. First, if used properly, these platforms appear valuable for first contact and lead generation purposes. Specifically, customers are open to personalized contact messages but may tend to display low levels of engagement. Thus, performance metrics may include the social media-driven number of new leads, number of video calls and number of face-to-face meetings. While engagement metrics should be focused on the number of likes, shares and buyers' spontaneous requests for further information. Second, salespeople should be careful in being over-optimistic regarding personal branding and thought leadership implications since buyers appear to bear little interest in salespeople's social media profiles and activity. Likewise, although customers may appreciate the content shared by salespeople if it is relevant, salespeople's traits and skills as well as the supplier company's brand are the keys to building valuable business relationships. Moreover, we offer concrete guidance to salespeople regarding content topics and formats, which can provide additional value to customers.

Furthermore, we show that context matters. Social selling might be more effective in service vs. product industries. Buyers in charge of purchasing products seem to be more sensitive toward confidentiality and privacy issues, which makes them more skeptical about using social media in supplier–customer relationships.

Customer organizations should acknowledge that buyers would benefit from a social media policy on how to use social media. While they appreciate freedom in deciding whether or not to use social media, those who are willing to do so would benefit from proper, commonly agreed-upon guidelines on how to behave to exploit its fullest potential.

Lastly, the study offers valuable implications for providers of social media platforms. B2B customers advocate an evolution of the existing social media – or even the rise of new ones – to integrate more functions that transform them into business-oriented networks to find real lists of supplier companies alongside all the relevant information. In this scenario, customers will be eager to interact more within the platform, leaving ratings and comments and ultimately increasing engagement levels.

6.3 Limitations and future research

As with any other research, this study is subject to some limitations that open avenues for future research. We purposefully interviewed key informants in B2B customer firms

by carefully selecting people with different job roles and from different industries. However, for generalization purposes, it could be appropriate to randomly select respondents and conduct more interviews outside the Italian context. Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct additional studies by using a dyadic approach for data collection. In this regard, both activities and outcomes that emerge from salespeople can be confirmed by the counterpart (i.e. buyer).

Moreover, scholars can expand upon our research findings. For instance, we show that B2B customers appreciate certain content typologies (e.g. industry-related news, case histories, etc.) and formats (e.g. images, text, etc.). Future studies may quantitatively assess such preferences on larger samples of customers. We also suggest conducting additional research on the effectiveness of suppliers' and salespeople's communication via social media on B2B customer engagement, customer trust and loyalty. Although extant literature relying on salespeople's self-reported performance outcomes indicates that social selling may increase salespeople's thought leadership and enhance customer satisfaction and trust, our findings from the customers' perspective show a more nuanced picture.

Moreover, our insights suggest that some boundary conditions may influence social selling activities and outcomes. Future research may explore the role of industry (i.e. product vs. service) or differences across countries.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1

Table A1 Sample of the coding process

First order	Second order	Aggregate dimension
High number of contact requests via LinkedIn	Bombing/spamming	Cold social media messages
Salespeople send contact requests randomly		
Sellers contact different people within the same company for the same product/service		
Persistent attitude of sellers when the customer does not answer		
Perceived pushing behavior of salespeople		
Other departments share contacts requests from salespeople		
Contact from unreliable organizations via social media		
Contact requests do not fit purchasing needs	Non-personalized contact message	
Contact requests fit the customer's job role		
Contact requests fit the company's business		
Salespeople from Asia adopt a non-personalized approach to contact request		
Differences between countries in contact approach		
Being reached by the right contact at the right time is difficult		
Contacts requests via social media resemble cold emails and cold calls		
Negative reaction to aggressive contact requests	Customers' attitude toward social media messages	
Negative reaction to persistent contact requests		
Negative reaction to non-personalized messages		
Follow-up on personalized contacts from social media		
Use of email after social media contact		

Source: Authors' own work

Appendix 2

Table A2 Illustrative quotes from interviews

Illustrative quotes	Aggregate dimension
<p>Bombing/spamming</p> <p>I5: "I use the term "spam" since we could be reached by any type of message. I mean. . .we are literally bombarded daily by multiple requests, so it is not always easy to keep up your job assignments if you have to reply to fifteen requests from new suppliers instead of two per week like it was in the past"</p> <p>I2: "It will take too much time to go through all the messages. I don't have the time to do so"</p> <p>I21: "We can say that I get bombarded a lot with different approaches, of course. Some sellers just ask for your connection without sending any type of message attached to it, while others, most of them actually, write something in attachment. Someone is very pressing"</p> <p>I17: "It is difficult to really harness the power of these social media in finding new opportunities since we are swamped with a lot of requests regarding the same service. Then, in the end, they get all mixed up, and even the ones that could be interesting, get lost in the mass"</p>	Cold social media messages
<p>Non-personalized contact message</p> <p>I7: "They send you standard messages because by carrying out a first search, they understand which products they can offer to you. However, it often happens that they also offer products we do not deal with. It's not just about products I do not deal with, it's that the company itself has not these products in the catalog"</p> <p>I11: "They are doing it randomly or maybe they look for the name of the company and maybe they find me . . . It often happens to receive contact requests for electronic components I do not deal with. This is weird as it is clearly written on LinkedIn what I deal with and what I do not deal with. These requests are not personalized"</p> <p>I22: "I perceive they send it randomly without studying your profile or even your company since I am not clearly the right recipient for their requests. It isn't relevant content for me, it is not useful"</p> <p>I25: "70% of salespeople from abroad, especially from Asia, insist in chasing the one-to-one relationship at all costs, even if you are not the right person. If you don't answer or you tell them they're not your target, and they still keep asking for a talk or showing the tool, they are stalker"</p> <p>Customers' attitude toward social media messages</p> <p>I11: "I don't even answer them [standardized messages], because it's not interesting for our business"</p> <p>I10: "Being personalized messages, I understand that someone has spent time to craft them and studied my profile. Therefore, it feels right to be respectful and answer them back properly"</p> <p>I18: "Standardized messages are less valuable. I'm sorry. Shooting randomly and hoping someone answers you. . . just does not feel right. As I said, they're simply not valuable to me"</p> <p>I5: "If I usually buy personal security devices and you are sending me a purchase proposal for. . . I don't know. . . the sheet metal we already make, we easily understand that it is not in our interest. Consequently, that message is discarded as well as the contact who send you that"</p> <p>I26: "There is a seller from a specific service provider that keeps pressuring me daily with his spamming requests. Honestly, even if their offer is quite interesting for me, I don't want anything to do with that company"</p> <p>I11: "Then I usually ask for a full company presentation to send me via email, but a lot of them don't even reply to me. And that's it"</p>	
<p>Basic activity on social media</p> <p>I13: "Anyone can have a social media profile and write anything by spoiling a space that could instead have been a professional one. LinkedIn was born as a professional social network, now it is full of people who talk nonsense, jokes, and even rudeness. I have a lack of confidence, that's my feeling"</p> <p>I11: "95 times out of 100 social media is not interesting. It's a waste of time. Perhaps, it is the product category I buy, which is really specific and complex. It's very unlikely that a seller who sells exactly what I need in a given moment would reach me on social media"</p> <p>I18: "I have a LinkedIn profile, but I do not use it this much and therefore my network is also quite limited. I believe it is perhaps useful to look for new jobs. . . . I don't have many followers, so I know who can see my profile, but I think we do not need to communicate everything. It's okay to do it to a certain extent"</p>	Lurking behind the curtains

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Table A2

Illustrative quotes	Aggregate dimension
I12: "The use of social media is quite limited as the product category and the company's needs I deal with are very specific. I believe that the more specific the product, the fewer the opportunities these social media can provide"	
I15: "I mostly share content that my company posts on its social media profiles. I am the first advocate of the company's charitable activities, useful initiatives, interesting commercials, or past emotional advertising campaigns. My company's brand is well-known, so it happens that such content triggers empathy"	
I24: "Most of the content I post is linked to the association of professional buyers I belong to, or I tend to post content of the company I work for, whether I'm involved in that specific activity, especially when it comes to my company's content, or not. Regarding the content published on the association's profile, I re-share almost everything"	
I21: "I very much share my company's content because I firmly believe in what we do. Especially the one I like the most, but almost everything in general: open job positions, some initiatives, product launches, new commercials, and so on. It's helpful for both the company and for anyone possibly interested in such content"	
I23: "I use social media to be up to date with seminars I may be interested in, activities I can do, and the latest news, and hot topics. . . . I'm focused on a branch of international taxation, but there are many other aspects to keep up with. LinkedIn eventually becomes a sort of source of laws. Because there are all these consultants informing about latest news, activities, articles, and use cases"	
I17: "Using social media is more keeping up with what's happening in your professional field, whether it's other brands, agencies, new media, new tools, or new ideas, rather than following what a specific person is doing unless you also have a direct relationship with this person. Honestly, I do not see social media as a to feasibly close deals"	
I19: "Maybe a like? Sharing or commenting is much rarer unless I want to congratulate a friend or a person I know for career advancements or job changes. If I see an interesting project I can comment 'nice job' to a person who is close to me, not a supplier"	
I14: "I give low importance to comments on social media. I believe comments are drops in the ocean and require more effort than it is worth it. It doesn't help much. In short, I struggle to find the reason to comment"	
I17: "I don't like following certain pages or discussion groups. I try to avoid that. It's my mindset because that's where I see more spam. I don't want to accept such invitations as it really seems like I'm trawling and including discussions that 90% are not interesting and makes the newsfeed dirty"	
I25: "I am a member of many groups linked to my job. Honestly, I don't find originality in there, but rather other buyers who are somehow waiting for something to happen"	
I24: "I joined social media groups about procurement leaders, unfortunately, I found them very chaotic. There is a problem with membership as many buyers oversee indirect purchasing, whereas I've always worked with direct purchasing and there is also little discussion on hard and soft skills which are more cross-sectional across job roles. After the early excitement, there has been no value in such groups"	
I10: "I joined social media groups related to IT, and, lately to HR because I'm personally interested in such topics. I read a lot, but I do not participate in the debate because certain topics are very complex, and it would take too much time to discuss and measure up to more knowledgeable people"	
<i>Fear of information disclosure on social media</i>	
I5: "Preferably, a buyer should not follow the supplier's social media page. Otherwise, if people see that I liked its social media page, they know by default that my company buys from that supplier. This is why I don't use social media very much. Relationships are the most important thing in our work and should be kept more private"	
I14: "I don't like comments and I don't think it's appropriate, especially with suppliers. The buyer-supplier relationship is very delicate, and you must be careful. We must be present, but at the same time detached from our suppliers. Making everything visible on social media, either approaches or ideas, doesn't always pay off"	
I24: "Every post or presentation I make, I get it approved by the company. Even if it is content for the buyer association because if you type my name, the company's name pops up everywhere. No one has ever told me officially to do so, but I believe it's a good practice . . . The lack of a written policy gets me in trouble sometimes because it becomes difficult to know how far I can go. It would be very helpful to have approved guidelines"	

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Table A2

Illustrative quotes	Aggregate dimension
<p><i>Little interest in the salesperson's social media profile and activity</i></p> <p>I7: "They are doing their job. I know it's not easy, especially in the last years, when international travel is very limited, and trade fairs are limited. Social media is a tool they can use to expand their business, it's not annoying as long as you just send a message to me"</p> <p>I22: "There are few salespeople in my LinkedIn network. There are some salespeople in my network that write, others are not interesting at all. Anyhow, this has never changed my mind about a person, certainly not in a positive way"</p> <p>I12: "Beyond seeing structured professional profiles on LinkedIn, I like telephone calls, Teams video calls, WhatsApp. When you can talk to someone, understanding his or her skills and abilities takes five, or ten minutes. Then, if the supplier company handles products that match my needs, we can start a business relationship. It's all about my experience. I trust talking to people and my gut feeling rather than social media profiles which can be easily sweetened. In your professional profile, you can write anything you want. I don't trust it"</p> <p>I5: "I'm almost zero interested in the salesperson's profile. Of course, it's a salesperson who reaches out to me but bear in mind that a Chinese changes his or her name once a month on average. Moreover, they are often false names because they use European names to be closer to our culture. The seller's profile is actually what interests me the least"</p> <p>I17: "I hardly ever check salespeople's profiles and I certainly don't do it on purpose. They may appear in the news feed, but, honestly, I rarely pay attention, unless they communicate an activity carried out by one of my competitors or by a distributor or a retailer I work with. It's always the news that may catch my attention, not so much how it is crafted or even who posted it. I don't even notice who posts and find it difficult to link content to a salesperson, a supplier, or another page"</p> <p>I10: "Except for a few salespeople, the trend is to re-share what the company has published. This is more or less the trend: salespeople simply reposting what the company provides"</p> <p><i>Existing relationships exceed social media in suppliers' selection</i></p> <p>I16: "Sometimes it happens that I see things, products, for instance on Instagram, and then start a search on Google and ask for a financial analysis of the company. For example, we wanted to realize photo puzzles and we started with a search on Facebook and Instagram"</p> <p>I21: "I used to oversee scouting new suppliers, and even more so, I used LinkedIn to get in touch with new suppliers. Especially with international suppliers, whereas with national ones was less frequent. I can use LinkedIn either to sift through incoming contact requests or to actively look for companies"</p> <p>I20: "In general, we mostly have a strategic relationship with suppliers who have been working with us for more than twenty years. So, we organize tenders for contracting and price negotiation in which we include current suppliers and potential new ones. Then, we decide with whom to proceed based on the quotations, knowledge of the supplier, and other criteria. Yet, we tend to be quite conservative, hence 90% of the volumes generally go to existing suppliers, 10% to new suppliers"</p> <p>I13: "We rely more on word of mouth. I'm currently looking for new suppliers with certain characteristics for our next beachwear collection and my first search channel is asking for company names to our fabric suppliers . . . Even though the final assessment is up to us, we mostly rely on the long list of names they provide"</p> <p>I22: "A colleague of mine told me: 'Try to reach out to [company Alpha] if you want to buy this type of equipment, I know a guy who works for them, maybe they can be right for you.' It was indeed an interesting recommendation, so we reached out to that company and started a business relationship"</p> <p>I15: "We turn to our market peers. If we need to buy a tool that we are not familiar with, perhaps we first ask similar companies in terms of size and characteristics. Or, if we have good relationships, we can also ask our competitors"</p> <p>I5: "We have a Chinese partner of ours who can help us when searching for suppliers. She keeps abreast of the situation in China and has a clear idea of the current scenario, because she knows the industry, she is in touch with local chambers of commerce, and can seize the ongoing situation of a company or another, if a company is reliable or not, better than us who are thousands of kilometers away. It's one thing to look at the website, and talk via email, WeChat, and Skype, another thing to be physically there and understand the reality. This partner in China is pivotal"</p> <p><i>Future social media scenario: inventory of suppliers</i></p>	<p>The relevance of social media in B2B customer networks</p>

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Table A2

Illustrative quotes	Aggregate dimension
<p>I25: "I hope that these social media will also become a sort of container to compare offers faster and speed up the search process. They should be cleaned up of all the fake to be able to go directly to what interests me. It may be sad to say, but they can be used even trivially how it is used an Amazon-type catalog and say 'look, I worked very well with this supplier, I'll give you my star'. Social media turning into a catalog of suppliers of different categories can be a business and a very, very near future"</p> <p>I21: "What's missing is something user-friendly and standardized to exchange basic information between suppliers and customers. Customers and suppliers need to register on twenty different websites. How nice it would be if LinkedIn had a portal to collect basic company-related information like VAT number, International Bank Account Number, address, certifications, company profile, and so forth. How nice it would be if LinkedIn hosted all this information to be directly downloaded from there"</p> <p>I14: "We need a platform specifically designed for the buying world, which is significantly different from everything that is marketing and sales and much more specific on purchasing. This kind of social media that we have doesn't work for the buying side unless you turn it into something specific where we can talk about issues that matter to us. Just then you'd raise the level of conversations"</p>	
<p><i>Engagement with valuable content</i></p> <p>I25: "However, the salesperson who comments on a study by KPMG does not speak directly about his work, but it is something interesting for both of us, so I can like this content or share it"</p> <p>I10: "When someone is good at both writing and explaining, I'm willing to follow his activity and nowadays, compared to the past, I'm starting to interact a lot more. Mainly likes or reposts. I'm a little bit shy when it comes to comments because conveying emotions in writing it's harder than in speech. It can turn out to be quite the opposite. So, I'm very careful in this because I don't want to raise chaos. When the topic is particularly interesting to me and I have a relationship with that person, I can contact him directly and maybe ask for some additional information"</p> <p>I26: "I'm not used to liking and commenting on LinkedIn posts of suppliers that are factories producing t-shirts or shoes, but if it comes to consultancy services and other types of service providers, yes"</p>	The role of social media content in the buyer–seller relationship
<p><i>Valuable content types and format</i></p> <p>I8: "In this fast-changing world, I value content related to major shifts in the realm of digital marketing. I want my team to deal with such kind of news. So, I appreciate partners who are always up to date with all these changes and whom I can rely on to keep abreast with recent trends"</p> <p>I10: "I may be slightly more interested if a salesperson writes an article on an industry-related topic and this is a hook to his or her company's services. At least it makes me think he or she is passionate about the work, and I appreciate this commitment because it means that person is well-informed on what he or she is talking about"</p> <p>I25: "If a personal profile must talk about or offer something, I'd prefer something very close to my needs. I mean not crafting a post for everyone but being more specific. Choosing a topic and then elaborate more on that topic with specific examples from his or her company"</p> <p>I20: "What we know from LinkedIn is always puppies and rainbows. We also experience it with our projects. When they publish the case history it always looks like a success. Maybe it was, but there were also some struggles. It would be helpful to actually talk to the customer to understand more deeply"</p> <p>I14: "I value suppliers which can show a customer base specialized in sport or customer brands that require a particular level of social responsibility because it means that supplier is in the know on specific issues. Knowing the brands they work with is a good business card to me . . . Yet, inside of me, I wish they wouldn't show me the items in the competitor's collections. This is a problem for me because it tells me that they could do the same with my company"</p> <p>I24: "Above all, I believe it's interesting if salespeople share a view of new products and underline the competencies of the company they work for, even if the organization is part of a particular industry association, or has received awards. In that way, one can reach out to them when they need to develop something that fits their expertise"</p> <p>I5 "I value, and I think it's good when they share content personally on my WeChat. I'm happy to hear from them. For instance, I was purchasing a high-cost machinery, it was very useful that the salesperson shared a video on each production step, showing how they worked on the various components, the set-up phase, and the final start-up test. This also represents a guarantee that his company worked hard and has done everything possible to succeed in the purchasing process. The opposite happens with suppliers who never write to me and maybe they are also late with production or can't deliver the goods, but I don't even get an update from them"</p>	

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Table A2

Illustrative quotes	Aggregate dimension
I8: "Perhaps due to the ever-increasing lack of time in viewing content, I prefer more immediate content, such as infographics or short videos able to sum up the main themes in thirty seconds, together with written content able to better address certain topics"	
I2: "When the topic is interesting, I like written content, which I can explore further in detail when I have a little more time, especially when it comes to very long texts. I also happen to see photos or videos. In this case, it's much more immediate and you can dwell on it even by quickly scrolling through the feed"	
I24: "I prefer articles or images. I'm doubtful about e-books due to intellectual property. You cannot take it for granted that a document on LinkedIn is a free document. So, I tend to avoid reposting e-books. The video is an x, I don't fancy video, it's a too-long format for LinkedIn, or they have to be very short videos. You use the LinkedIn app while you're waiting for a meeting or five minutes into your coffee break. You use LinkedIn for work and at work. Anything that can trigger audio while you're working is difficult to use"	
<i>Opinion about the salesperson mostly outside of social media</i>	
I26: "A professional approach in sales means clarity of the communication, clarity, and simplicity of the offer"	
I5: "Obviously my relationship with salespeople develops over time based on facts. If he and his company can keep the promises. Be honest and the relationship works better. You tell me that your company can make and guarantee this quantity in a month, at a given price and if there are problems, then we sort them out together. A relationship with a salesperson and a company that does not keep promises cannot work. You can assess this only over time"	
I7: "I prefer salespeople who are fast. If I can buy a product from two companies that have the same level of quality and price, I choose whoever is more reactive, and more immediate, so I don't waste time waiting for an order confirmation, a document, or a certification. I prefer the responsiveness and quick communications"	
I16: "The salesperson must know how to talk about technical things. I ask very technical questions because I delve into each new product to understand what the critical issues may be. So, they must give me some technical answers. When they just tell me 'no problem', there I start to worry a lot"	
I21: "A professional approach is important in negotiations. Let's say I don't like an open-air market-like negotiation, that's a bit bygone. Of course, there is always a bit of it in negotiations"	
I14: "It may happen that over the years you develop together increasingly complex products, or the supplier's salesperson helps you when you are in trouble. This creates a stronger relationship. We had troubles during the pandemic and our suppliers supported us as we did with our Chinese suppliers the year before. For example, they supported us by giving payments deferments or by not applying source charges"	
<i>Use of instant messaging apps and video conference tools</i>	
I5: "WeChat, Skype, or Teams for making video calls are essential for everyday activities, also for having an exchange of views and understanding what the situation is. Although Chinese salespeople I work with prefer to use WeChat or WhatsApp rather than making video calls because they struggle a bit in speaking English, so they much prefer writing"	Use of social media and digital channels in one-to-one daily interaction
I26: "WhatsApp is beneficial for various reasons. I use it only with Italians and, in general, only with people I have a long-standing relationship with. I use it for important and even sensitive reminders, to get faster answers. They don't reply to your e-mail, you send the WhatsApp and they know it's urgent stuff because I'm writing to them rather than another person with whom they have less contact"	
I17: "WhatsApp replaced the telephone. It is social media, but it cannot be compared to LinkedIn to manage the well-established one-to-one business relationships. On WhatsApp, a relationship is a real personal one, your phone number is even more personal than email"	
I12: "I use WhatsApp in a social way, meaning that it's useful to build human relationships, as it is not always easy to connect with people from different cultures. So, using WhatsApp and its features, such as using emoticons, has certainly helped to strengthen relationships and increase trust, not only professionally but personally"	
I16: "WhatsApp can be a nightmare. Nowadays real-time response is increasingly demanded, and WhatsApp is the way to have it. I can't find you on the phone or I don't have time, I'll send you a WhatsApp. As long as they are written messages it can be fine, but vocals 24/7 can be annoying"	

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Table A2

Illustrative quotes	Aggregate dimension
<i>Use of emails</i>	
I8: "There is a request for a phone call or video call to which I generally answer saying I'm busy. Then, I'll leave my email to just get some content, to better understand what it's about. Of course, they would prefer to have direct contact, but they accept to send presentations by email"	
I7: "I prefer email for more important communications because the information is archived in a more correct way . . . first attachments are archived on my computer and the e-mail is available to other colleagues, while WeChat is a personal profile. If I'll quit the company in the future, I leave the computer to a replacement who will have all the suppliers' emails, instead, communications on WeChat would be lost because it is my channel"	
I18: "I like emails to keep a little more formal conversation. You send me the offer via email, you don't write it on WhatsApp. . . . I prefer to hold commercial negotiations via email, which is indeed the official corporate communication channel with the address @azienda.com. Also, if there are problems, I'll get back to the email. It is more convenient than going back to the WhatsApp conversation"	
Source: Authors' own work	

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