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**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN  
THE BUYER-SELLER  
RELATIONSHIP: AN EXPLORATIVE  
STUDY**

Relatore:

Prof. Sara Bartoloni

Tesi di Laurea di:

Claudia Cinti

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## **ABSTRACT**

Today, in the digital world, B2B buyers carry out 57% of their purchase decision before they have contact with the sales team. It is even possible for the sale to be concluded without ever having met the seller in person, which was unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago. Recent technological developments have led to profound changes in the B2B market, so a process of adaptation is needed both on the part of the company organization and on the part of the employees and in particular the sales function. Concepts such as digital marketing, content marketing, social media strategy, social selling emerge with great resonance, testifying to the impact of technology on the commercial area. The B2B context has shown greater difficulties in implementing these concepts than the B2C context. Interest in these opportunities is growing rapidly, even if the phenomenon in the Italian B2B context is in an embryonic phase. The customer's buying journey has undergone enormous changes and the relationship with the seller has changed its nature, from a transactional approach to one aimed at building a relationship of trust and co-creation. This exploratory-qualitative research highlights how the social selling techniques implemented by sellers are sometimes at odds with the opinion and perception of their customers. This highlights the critical points that need to be adapted to reality, from the introduction of guidelines and company policies to the creation of specific and highly personalized content and offers.

## **ABATRACT in italiano**

Oggi nel mondo digitale, l'acquirente B2B è al 57% della sua decisione di acquisto ancora prima di aver contattato il team di vendita. È addirittura possibile che la vendita venga conclusa senza neppur aver mai incontrato il venditore di persona; dieci o quindici anni fa questo era impensabile. La recente evoluzione tecnologica ha portato profondi cambiamenti nel mercato B2B. Risulta necessario quindi un processo di adattamento sia da parte dell'organizzazione aziendale che da parte degli impiegati e in particolare della funzione vendite. Emergono con grande risonanza concetti come digital marketing, content marketing, social media strategy, social selling a testimonianza dell'impatto della tecnologia sull'area commerciale. Il contesto B2B ha mostrato maggiori difficoltà nell'implementazione di questi concetti rispetto al contesto B2C. Cresce rapidamente l'interesse verso queste opportunità, anche se il fenomeno nel contesto B2B italiano si trova in una fase embrionale. Il viaggio di acquisto del cliente ha subito enormi cambiamenti e la relazione con il venditore ha mutato la sua natura, tanto che si passa da un approccio di tipo transazionale ad un approccio più mirato alla costruzione di un rapporto di fiducia e co-creazione. La presente ricerca di natura esplorativo-qualitativa evidenzia come le tecniche di social selling attuate dai venditori talvolta siano discordanti con l'opinione e la percezione dei propri clienti. Si mettono in evidenza quindi i punti critici che necessitano di essere adattati

alla realtà dei fatti, dall'introduzione di linee guida e policy aziendali alla creazione di contenuti e offerte specifici ed altamente personalizzati.

## INTRODUCTION

The digital innovation, that began with the advent of social media, have profoundly altered social relations as well as every aspect of daily life have necessarily affected the business market as well. Social media are in fact a complex evolving tool that have radically changed the way people interact, thus altering the balance in the relationship between suppliers and sellers. In fact, this relationship now sees an empowered customer able to find all the information he/she needs without the help of the seller, who thus loses the power of the relationship. The pervasiveness of this phenomenon, which for now is much more developed in the B2C context, has caused scholars to grow their interest in the subject and business investments in these technologies are increasing. This is an expanding and evolving phenomenon that continues to escalate in importance. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is more developed in the foreign market than in the Italian market where it is still in an embryonic phase, further studies will in fact be necessary when the development is in a more advanced state. The present study aims to fill the research gap by integrating the existing studies on social selling activities that focus on seller side, introducing as a key element the perspective customers have on these activities. Through targeted interviews on both the sellers' and the buyers' side and their comparison, the aim was to answer questions about customers' perceptions of the activities carried out via the seller's personal social profiles, what content they find

most useful and interesting, in what extent this content influences customers' perceptions of professionalism of sellers, how sales managers can improve their relationship management with their customers.

This dissertation is structured in three chapters.

The first chapter illustrates the major changes the market has undergone and how the customer and his journey has changed, moving from a linear model to a non-linear one in which decisions result more complex due to the multitude of information available. The digital evolution has brought great changes within business markets, now the seller assumes the role of a sales consultant and needs to be extremely prepared in his field to support the complex customer acquisition process as the more demanding and informed customer requires increasingly ad hoc and customised services and solutions. Social media have made the sales environment much more competitive, allowing even small and medium-sized companies to emerge and compete with larger ones, changing suppliers is now much easier and simpler than it was before.

Social media is a multifaceted phenomenon that offers both opportunities and challenges and if exploited to the full can be the source of competitive advantage. Scholars also sought to understand the barriers the factors that drive social media integration into daily work routines, as well as the goals and strategies that companies pursue through these technological tools.

The second chapter of this dissertation aims to fully explain the social selling concept, in the new context this approach appears as a new force able to capture emerging opportunities and to face new challenges. Social content influences buyers' purchasing decisions. In particular social selling has changed the way in which customers are engaged. By reviewing the existing literature, the chapter explains how social selling is conducted and how it is defined. The studies in particular fall into two categories, the first on social selling in sales processes (how social media are used in the various stages of sales). The second on activity-based social selling, however, while the conceptualization arising from the first category of studies is abstract and impractical, the second is an operative definition that is more practical for the study of social selling. The chapter ends with an analysis of the drivers, barriers and outcomes of social media use in sales. However, social selling is not a tool but a methodology, it is about being present at the right time and in the right place along the customer journey, this goes beyond just creating brand awareness and affinity as in the Social Media Marketing and has prompted practitioners to shed light on the use of social media at the selling level.

The third chapter presents the results of an empirical study on how the advent of social media has been modifying the buyer-seller relationship by comparing seller's social media use and customers' perception of this use in B2B context. The aim of the study is not only to understand whether and how salespeople use social media in their work but also to understand if this use is properly perceived by customers.

In particular, the study compares interviews conducted among sellers with those conducted on the buyers' side, bringing out the main similarities and differences. The interviews conducted on a sample of eighteen Italian companies operating in the B2B sector (eleven interviews conducted on the buyers' side and seven on the sellers' side) brought to light interesting results on this topic. The results show that while on the seller side the use of social media is spreading, buyers are still reluctant to use these channels for work; the reasons are related to the lack of time, the fear of reputational repercussions due to the risk of using digital channels and the lack of familiarity and knowledge about how to properly use social media. The introduction of a clear company policy and the introduction of training courses could be a solution to these problems. On the vendor side, on the other hand, the greatest concern is the difficulty in measuring the actual economic return and performance improvement resulting from such activities. The introduction of effective metrics to measure the results obtained is therefore necessary. A further important result for sales managers is that they should develop highly customised social selling strategies by conveying on social media tailor-made messages rather than standardized ones. As a matter of fact, customers are constantly bombarded with offers from many different sellers and they usually reply only to customised messages while discarding all the others one a priori.

## **CHAPTER 1: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN B2B CONTEXT**

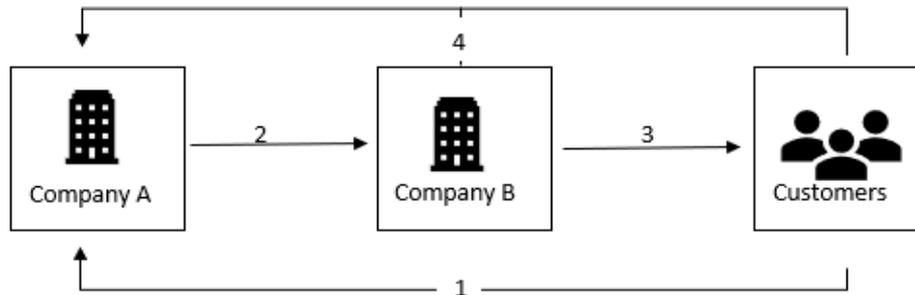
### **1.1 THE EVOLUTION OF B2B MARKETS**

The B2B context entails the selling of product and services to other organizations or businesses that either resell them or use as a support in their work. In few words the business markets consist in all the organizations that sell and buy goods, products and/or services used in other production processes that are sold, rented or supplied to institutions, governments, producers or resellers (Jhames Chen, 2020). Conversely, the B2C model refers to companies selling directly to consumers bypassing any third part or retailers or wholesalers.

However, (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011) suggests that nowadays the dichotomy of markets into b2b and b2c is reductive and that two other models, namely the mixed model and the b2b2c model, exist. The mixed model is intuitive, it refers to businesses which trade both with business customers and consumers. One famous example is Amazon that has many business customers and also individuals (Iankova at al. 2019).

The latter is B2B2C model, it combines the first two models, whereby two companies through and integrated supply chain manage the customer experience and deliver products and services together. The first company allows the second one the access to its service in order to increase the revenue or increase efficiency.

Figure 1. What is a B2B2C business model



Source: <https://www.garyfox.co/b2b2c/>

The company A has brand exposure with the clients and sells a product or a service to company B. Company B uses this service with its customers, but its brand is the first seen by the customers. The two organizations partner to offer an innovative or unique product or service. This model is different from the mixed as the individual transaction requires all the three parties. It is different from the B2B model as in this model the company selling the service or the product to another company it is not involved in the transaction with customers.

The present paper, in particular, focuses on the study of the B2B sector. Business markets have witnessed a significant transformation due to the increasingly global marketplace, growing pressures from customers and competitors and the advent of new digital technologies (Moncrief, 2017; Wiersema, 2013). Specifically, the digital transformation challenges companies in combining traditional practices together with modern ones to increase sales performance and profits. Digital transformation is different from a mere adoption of a new technology, being defined

as: “the process of using digital technologies to create new or modify existing business processes, culture and customer experiences to meet changing business and market requirements” (Salesforce 202, see also Guenzi and Habel 2020) or “the application of digitization and AI technologies to company assets as a means to improve competencies and rethink the value proposition of the firm” (Singh et al. 2019, pag.5).

The business market is evolving and the chase for sales and marketing integration has passed, the most innovative B2B commercial companies focus on the reconfiguration of commercial operations to align the seller sales procedures with the buyer purchasing process (Adamson B. 2022).

Some authors (Adamson, 2022; Mattila et al. 2021) evidence how in the last two decades business markets has dramatically changed and approached to a far more technological purchasing method, making the traditional B2B linear buying model outdated. Thus, the traditional model risk to become a barrier to change if it not selectively discarded. From a Gartner pre-pandemic research (2019) emerged that business purchasing team involved in complex transaction spent only 17% of their total buying directly interacting with the supplier sales force. The rest of the purchasing time is spent in independent learning online, independent learning offline and building internal consensus with partners and stakeholders. This small amount of time is divided by the number of suppliers with which the B2B customer engages. This division leaves the sales force with the major challenge for sales team

to face, influence the customer decision towards the company unique offer in a small window of time. (Adamson, 2022).

Consequently, companies in business market need to constantly be connected to their stakeholders, in order to discover new ways to interact and new touch-points, digital relationships have become crucial in creating value for B2B firms (Steinhoff et al., 2019; Mahlamäki et al., 2020)

While technology has introduced new challenges for salespeople, there are studies (Ahearne and Rapp 2010, Rodriguez et al. 2016) that demonstrate how the new digital work environment and digital tools in B2B sales can increase profitability, effectiveness and understanding of customer needs.

Thaichon et al.2018 argue that the market transformation allows customers to perform simple transactions without the intermediation of the sale representant, his figure still remains important in complex transitions shifting to a consultant and supporting role. The new sale rep. helps selling firms and other actors in better understanding problems and potential solutions for mutual benefits (Sheth and Sharma 2008; Verbeke, et al. 2011). Liu and Leach (2001) studies explain how salespeople are now perceived from customers as value advisors, experts in their field.

In this scenario many firms feel a sense of urgency in performing this transformation, at the same time they experience a certain disorientation, lacking the knowledge of how to enter into the evolved context and on how to integrate the

human and digital technology (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022). The implementation of digital technologies in industrial business relationships carries both positive and negative effects for the relationship, which need to be further explored (Hadjikhani and Lindh, 2020), also given that these changes are likely to be permanent (Rangarajan et al., 2021).

#### 1.1.1 Changes in buyer's behaviours pattern: the customer journey

According to Jack Flynn (2022) today B2B buyers before engaging with the sales force are at 57% toward they buying decision; this is an evident index of how the customer behaviour is changed and is different than ten or twenty years ago.

The covid-19 pandemic speeded up the process and changed the preferred way to make purchases, about 70/80% of buyers prefer remote method today (Mattila at al. 2021).

In particular in B2B context, there have been a shift of the buying function from a transactional and administrative role, toward a strategic role as Paesbrugge at al. 2017, 2018 noted in their research. By collecting data in 32 different companies this study identifies four stages in the purchasing pattern: passive (price oriented), independent (cost oriented), supportive (solution/innovation oriented) and integrative (strategy oriented). In the first stage the purchasing function as no strategic direction and primarily reacts to the request of other functions. The purchasing departments are concerned about the price, and tend to buy from more

than one supplier per category in order to reduce the risk of delivery interruptions, decrease dependence on suppliers and negotiate more favourable conditions. The supplier selection is based on price and availability.

The second stage is where the purchasing department focuses on reducing operating costs for the entire company. It is here that the buyer adopts the latest procurement techniques and processes. The strategic direction is independent of the company's competitive strategy.

In the third phase buyers adopt purchasing techniques and products that strengthen the firm's competitive position. In the last stage the purchasing department strategy is fully integrated into firm's competitive strategy.

The authors identify the need for a specific strategy linked to the individual phases of the sales process. A mismatch between the sales strategy and the customer's buying phase could be detrimental for the relationship between supplier and buyer, and sales in general could be negatively affected.

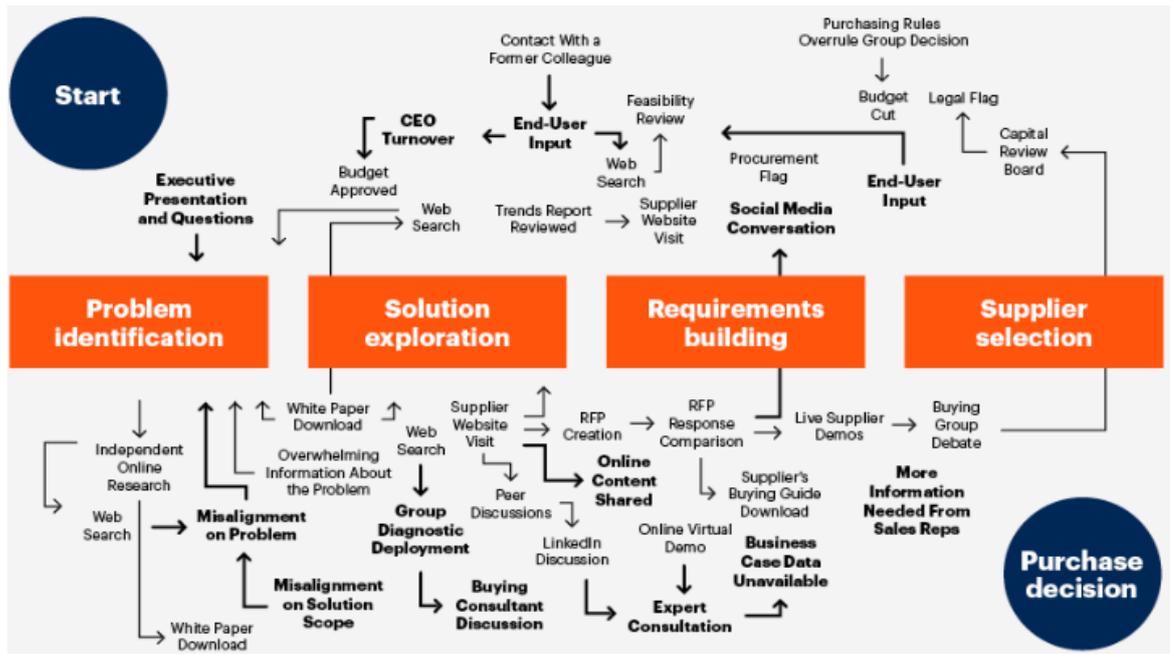
It is interesting and necessary to consider the B2B customer and the buying process change in the examination of the selling evolution. Compared to consumers, buyers in business context are considered more predictable in the methodology they use to relate with suppliers and take decisions (Ernst&Young,2017). The crucial difference is in the number of resources invested by the buyer in the acquisition of goods and services, which lead the business consumer to a deeper analysis in its acquisition practices (Corsaro, 2018).

Specifically, the B2B customer thanks to the new tools is now more aware, informed, interactive and sophisticated. The customer abilities are supported by the introduction of social media channels, that have triggered the customer transformation.

Some authors (Maggioni, 2021; Corsaro, 2018) claim that the massive amount of information available online has significantly reduced buyer-seller's information asymmetry. Recently the concept of **empowered customer** has been introduced. Although there is not academic consensus or accepted definition of this notion, this term refers to consumer ability, capacity and competency (Su-Jung Nam, 2021). The competency concerns the general competence a consumer should have, ability and capacity are related to consumer cognition, information searching and information understanding skills as stated in the KCA (Korea Consumer Agency) report, 2014. The digitalization changed the business customer's role that from a passive receiver became an active user (Wiersema, 2013) and as mentioned above, before contacting the seller the decision is yet half taken. This evidence is supported by Adamson's (2022) survey on over one thousand B2B buyers where emerged that the use of digital channel for information searching was at the same level of the contact with sellers.

The buying routine of the business buyer undergoes a transformation in view of all these market changes. The traditional buying funnel characterised by five stages (awareness, interest, consideration, preference, purchase) was linear, in the digital

era it has become a non-linear, fragmented and more often 'looped' journey. The decision maker arrives at the final transaction through a series of 'jobs' to complete the purchase (Adamson B. 2019).



Source: Gartner Report, 2019

The figure illustrates the complexity of the evolved B2B customer journey. In this new pattern the buying group involves different figures: buyers, users, decision makers. Each one of them contributes with its own gathered information and this make the process complex and difficult. The same Gartner Report states that the buying jobs (a series of tasks that customers must complete to their satisfaction in order to successfully finalize a purchase: Problem identification, solution

exploration, requirements building, supplier selection, validation, consensus creation) happens simultaneously and not in sequence.

The digitalization, with the advent of social media and other online channels, increased the number of touchpoints in which the customer can experience the brand thus resulting in the development of a much more complex B2B customer journey.

The digitalization and the consequent need to manage the omni-channel, give a growing importance to the concept of touchpoints (Barann et al. 2022). Meyer and Schwager (2007) define touchpoints as *“instances of direct or indirect contact either with the product or service itself or with representations of it by the company or some third party.”*

The interaction between B2B customer and firms are though characterized by different channel and the customer experience has a more social nature, in this new scenario is necessary a collaboration between the different business functions in order to meet the empowered customer expectation and convey a positive customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). In this article the authors analyse the customer experience and the customer journey under the new aspect influenced by the web evolution and the digital transformation. Lemon & Verhoef identify the customer experience as a customer's journey with a firm over time during the purchase cycle across multiple touchpoints. They identify three phases in which these touchpoints are relevant: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase. These

phases include the contact with the brand from the identification of the need to the utilization of the product and the word-of-mouth. Meyer & Schwager (2007) define the customer experience as “*the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company*”. Today the customer experience is no longer limited to B2C sphere, B2B buyers expect a deeper commitment in the buyer seller-relationship and 82% of B2B buyers think sales representatives are underprepared (Jack Flynn, 2022). Furthermore Becker & Jaakkola (2016) understand the customer experience as “*non-deliberate and spontaneous responses and reactions to particular stimuli along the customer journey*”. However, all the definition proposed agree on the subjective aspect that characterize the experience. In this scenario, Toman et al. (2017) suggest to map the entire purchasing process to identify the customer challenges in each step of the buying journey and offer a customized solution while Bitner et al. (2008) suggests not basing the mapping process exclusively on the sales company as this could lead to neglect of the buyer's point of view. Such negligence could prevent the seller to intervene in an effective and timely manner. Consequently, this not make it possible for the seller to offer the adequate solution for the customer.

## **1.2 DIGITAL MARKETING IN B2B CONTEXT**

The digital transformation and the consequent changes in B2B buyer behaviour, but more in general the transformation the overall market is experiencing, brought out a service dominant logic philosophy, in which customers are viewed as part of an extended enterprise and as co-producers of the firms' marketing (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). More recently, with the spread of social media, there has been increasing interest in the role of user-generated content in influencing brand reputations, the development of brand communities and the co-creation of the brand (Christodoulides, 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Quinton, 2013).

The advent of digital marketing has unlocked new opportunities for this collaboration, thus academic research has drawn the attention on the implication of digital marketing in B2B context (Ancillai et al. 2019).

Until recent years, many business actors had the conviction that digital marketing is a resource only in B2C context (Lacka & Chong, 2016). Conversely, B2B firms such as Cisco and IBM demonstrated examples of successful implementation of digital marketing (Venkatesh et al. 2019) that are changing this belief.

Companies realized that digital marketing in the B2B setting increase flow of information and trust among customers (Krishna & Singh 2018, Pandey,2015).

Nonetheless there is a lack of comprehension and knowledge about the best B2B digital marketing practices, that has relevant impact on revenue and profitability (Wertime and Fenwick, 2011).

Digital marketing entails the promotion of a company product or service at least with one electronic or digital tool, it is an umbrella term that includes different types of activities (Kotler and Armstrong, 2009). These activities require the use of search engine optimization, content creation tools and social media, paid advertising, and a subset of other different tools (Hudson, 2022). An effective digital marketing strategy does not require the use of all the available digital channels; yet, creating a unique company voice and consistent business message across the chosen channels is pivotal. Managers in charge of digital marketing are responsible for testing strategies, measuring analytics, and making required changes to adjust strategies and determine which work best for the company. (K. Dwivedi et al. 2021).

There are various activities that support the development of an effective B2B digital marketing strategy, including blog publishing, advertising on specific platforms (Google, Facebook, Instagram ads...), free educational resources, SEO, create an online contest or giveaway, webinars, podcasts, email marketing campaigns (Hubspot, 2022).

Chaffey and Smith (2017) illustrate the beneficial use of B2B digital marketing to support the identification of customers' needs and wants, anticipate the customer behaviours by tracking its preferences, achieving customers' satisfaction through electronic channels.

The customer-centric view of marketing though give raise to the notion of content marketing. In the present analysis the term 'content' refers to all forms of digital

content (Jarvinen & Tarminen, 2016). Hence, the reference is to the definition of content marketing presented by Holliman and Rowley (2014): “*B2B digital content marketing involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome.*”. This is the first study to explore the use of digital marketing in B2B contexts, hence one of the main contributors in the field. Holliman and Rowley refer to the role of content marketing as inbound marketing, where they consider content the core of inbound marketing techniques. According to Halligan & Shah (2010), inbound marketing consists of the tactics aimed at creating valuable content and experiences customized to the needs of potential buyers who have already searched for information on a product or service.

A research conducted by Pulizzi and Handley (2014), in North America, demonstrates that content marketing is gaining momentum in the B2B market, as 86% of interviewed marketers declared to use content marketing tactics as a strategic marketing approach, and 47% have a dedicated content marketing group in their organization. Consistent with this, another survey conducted by eConsultancy's (2012) confirmed that content marketing and digital marketing techniques are becoming a priority both for B2C and B2B marketers, moreover Google introduced a new algorithm that has the potential to promote content and inbound marketing (Lin and Yazdanifard, 2014). Hence, understanding its role in B2B sales is relevant

related to the ongoing conflict between sales and marketing departments on lead generation and management (Jarvine & Tarminen, 2016). The literature (e.g., Biemans et al., 2010, Homburg and Jensen, 2007, Homburg et al., 2008), analysed the problem and emerged that the problem for sales people is the poor quality of leads generated by marketers, on the opposite side marketers blame the lack of skills in the follow-up. Digital technology is an opportunity to better integrate content marketing in the selling process to acquire deeper knowledge in customer preferences (Wiersema, 2013).

Social media marketing (SMM), although is commonly used as an interchangeable term, it is different. SMM is a subset of the general DM and focuses on the implementation of marketing strategies on social media platforms, however that aspect will be explored in the next paragraph.

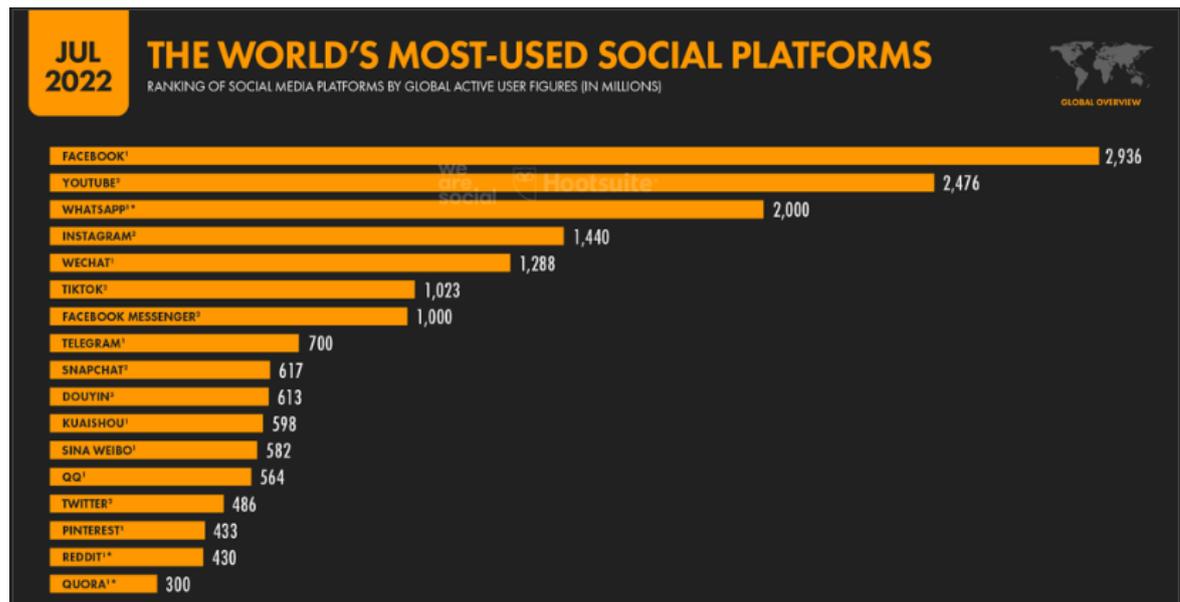
### **1.3 SOCIAL MEDIA: THE NEXT SOURCE OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

#### **1.3.1 Defining social media**

According to Kepios's analysis there were 4.65 billion of social media users around the world in April 2022 (58.7% of total population). Facebook is the world's most used social media platform followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat and TitTok as shown by the following graph. The data on twitter are missing, but

according to the recent statistics from Statista there are 229 million monthly active users.

Figure 3 The world's most-used social platforms



Fonte: <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>, July 2022

Social media can be seen as an evolution of the World Wide Web that was initially created as a platform to facilitate the exchange of information between users (Kaplan & Haenlein). Today they've become a powerful tool for companies and growing their importance in economic field daily. For instance, one of the main opportunities they bring to companies are the possibility to reach out the global market in a cheapest and easy way (Lashgari et al. 2018).

Although, the definition of social media can appear straightforward, it is not simple to delineate its boundaries.

Social media are defined as *“a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010 p.61).

Cohen (2011) define social media as digital content and networking interactions that are developed and maintained by and between people. Moncrief (2015) consider them a variety of methods to disseminate information and content through interactions between individuals or organizations.

Siamagka at al. (2015) argue that the features differentiate the social media from the other technologies are:

- The initial investment: social media do not require a significant initial investment for its use.
- Social media are free from ownership or control of other companies.
- Cooperation: social media content is generated by the interaction with external users such as acquired customers or potential ones or even with complementary companies and any other stakeholder.

Moreover, social media are considered more interactive, engaging and less complicated in comparison with other web-based applications or tools (Wamba & Carter, 2013). The power of this mean of communication comes from its potential in spreading viral messages and in generating WOM (World of Mouth) and the main task of companies lie in the ability of capturing the value generated from such channels (Agnihori, 2020).

Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) explain social media ecosystem related to two factors: the first factor in the interpretation is the half-life information, it refers to the availability and appearance of information on the screen or in the interest (e.g. Twitter-comments move quite fast on and off the screen). The second factor is the depth of information: the contents' richness and diversity of perspectives (e.g. Facebook community can bring together rich and comprehensive information on a topic). Along with this interpretation Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, classify social media platforms by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure:

- Blogs, the first form of social media are the equivalent of web personal journal.
- Online communities, that aim to facilitate the interaction between users through the sharing of media content. (e.g. Flickr for photos, YouTube for videos)
- Microblogs (as Twitter), which are useful to disseminate short topics or news in a fast and easy manner.
- Social networks (Facebook,), enable users to connect by creating personal profiles for the exchange of personal content and communication.

There are four commonalities in the current social media services (Obar and Wildman, 2015) they are Web 2.0 internet-based applications, user-generated content is the lifeblood of social media, individual and groups create user-specific

profiles for a site or app, they facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting profiles. The web evolution during the first decade of the new millennium saw the social component of web use take hold and social media services emerged both as a social and a business phenomenon.

Although the different platforms have similar potential, each platform is considered suitable for different types of communications. For instance, Facebook is useful to convey meaningful information about the business, it represents a good means for customer relationship management (Popp et al. 2016). Twitter provides a channel for the communication of quick brand messages and to track consumers feedbacks in real-time. It is to provide news and updating about the business and on the ongoing projects (Culotta & Cutler, 2016). YouTube is video based, it gives the possibility to explain business details or delve into interesting contents (Indvik, 2011). Finally, LinkedIn is a channel to share, provide and find meaningful information on competitors and customers. “Although certain channels have strengths in different arenas, better experience is driven by the presence of multiple channels” (Pozza, 2014. Pag.1274).

With the web evolution and the advent of web 2.0 the use of social media has widely spread between companies for marketing purposes. Due to low cost and minimal technical requirement, they can be deployed even by SMEs, this explains its continued exponential growth that leads to a new governance challenge among businesses (Bocconcelli et al. 2017). The popularity of the social media choice is

due also to the fact that they give the possibility to companies to have a many-to-many channel of communication overcoming in this way the restriction of private one-to-one conversation.

The B2C literature is more advanced on the study of social media and its impact on the consumer-seller relationship. The majority of scholarly work associated with social media marketing has been conducted in B2C context (Michaelidou et al. 2011), when it comes to social media communication, extant literature discusses message strategy and its effectiveness primarily in consumer context (Zang & Du, 2019). Ngai et al. (2015) proposed a comprehensive literature review of social media research and identify the role of social media in influencing brand reputation and consumer opinion and behaviours. De Vries et al. 2012; Kwok and Yu, 2013 studied the B2C measures of message strategy's effectiveness. Others scholars as Lee & Hong, 2016; Shi et al. 2016 analysed the impact of message strategy's upon customer's perception and behaviour.

Although the study on the use of social media in B2B setting is still in its infancy, there is indeed a difference between the use of social media in B2B and B2C setting, which is outlined in the next sections.

Hence, social media marketing (SMM) is a subset of the general DM and focuses on the implementation of marketing strategies on social media platforms.

Social Media Marketing strategy is defined as: *“an organization's integrated pattern of activities that, based on a careful assessment of customers' motivations*

*for brand-related social media use and the undertaking of deliberate engagement initiatives, transform social media connectedness (networks) and interactions (influences) into valuable strategic means to achieve desirable marketing outcomes* (Lil et al.2020).

The origins of traditional and SM marketing strategy are similar but the fundamental differences are that primarily the outcome of the social strategy is not decided by the individual actor, but they are a consequence of the customer-firm interaction, furthermore the traditional approach do not focus on the heterogeneity of motivation that lead to customer engagement, while SMM approach put the emphasis on the cultural, social, intellectual or other reason to engage with the business or with other clients. Ultimately the customer value in traditional strategy was considered to be the understanding of purchase behaviour through customer lifetime in modern strategy this value includes both direct (purchase) and indirect (advocacy) as contribution to the value of the company. The figure 5 explain how the dimension of the two aspects: social media and marketing strategy, combined together lead to the definition of social media marketing strategy that have been illustrate previously.

Figure 5

Dimension	Social media	Marketing strategy	Social media marketing strategy
<b>Core</b>	Interaction and connectedness	Long-term customer relationship building	Customer engagement
<b>Orientation</b>	Passive actor versus active actor	Transactional-oriented versus relational-oriented	Transactional-oriented versus engagement-oriented
<b>Resource</b>	Resource integrator	Basic resources and high-order resources	In exchange with customer-owned resources
<b>Purpose</b>	To interact and connect	To achieve competitive advantage	To generate, integrate, and reconfigure social media resources to achieve specific marketing objectives
<b>Premise</b>	To recognize different customer motivations of social media brand-related activities	To enhance long-lasting customer relationships by delivering superior value	To capitalize on social media interactions and customer engagement so as to generate marketing resources

Source: Li1 & Jorma Larimo & Leonidas C. Leonidou, 2020

Strategic a) **social media objective** are the specific goals that the firm want to reach with social media channel, they can range from transactional to relational oriented and this distinction give raise to different formulation of social-media sense of making, in particular in literature there four distinct types of social objective: promote and sell, connect and collaborate, listen and learn, empower and engage.

b) **social media interaction** can be classified into three categories: one-way interaction, the traditional form of communication from businesses to customers that are passive. Two-way interaction, that is reciprocal communication with information exchange from and to both directions and collaborative interaction that is the highest level of communication in which both firm and clients influence each other. c) **customer engagement** depends on both strength of connection and frequency of interaction with customer. Those three are the criteria on which the following SMMs classification in based on according the connected level of

strategic maturity: 1) Social commerce strategy, 2) Social content strategy, 3) social monitoring strategy, and 4) Social CRM strategy.

### 1.3.2 Barriers to the adoption and use of Social media in B2B

Whether social media are a challenge or an opportunity, the extensive phenomenon of web evolution affects every aspect of a company and this, in the near future, means that companies must evolve, adapt and accept the changes it brings (Moncrief, 2014; Mattila et al. 2021; Eid et al. 2019; Siamagka et al. 2015) However, while B2C marketers made up with their minds their B2B counterparts seem to not embrace this trend (Zang and Du, 2019).

Social media lead to a radical change in the way companies communicate and contact with clients, this transition has not been supported by a **guidance** for a holistic incorporation of SM into the B2B overall marketing communication strategy (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The **lack of appropriate competences** and know-how is perceived as one of the main barriers to the effective use of these resources (Kietzmann et al. 2011). The **limited or poor understanding** on how to use social media channels to establish and maintain customer relationship is due to a gap in academic and practical explanation of corporate social media marketing that is still in the embryonic stage (Michaelidou et al.2019). This shortcoming is directly connection to the second main barrier, market participants have not yet developed and adequate level of appropriate skills, this deters their adoption of

social media sites. As a consequence, lack of know-how creates a negative perception in marketers mind toward SM effectiveness and usability. These assumptions generate a spiral in which **lack of motivation** lead to a **lower level of performance**, that in turn reinforce the negative perception and slow down the transition process for a full incorporation and implementation of an adequate social media communication strategy (Swani et al.2014; Jarvinen et al. 2012). There is evidence that many marketers perceive social media as irrelevant in corporate market. They do not see the support role of SM channels in marketing goals and there is a common belief that they do not fit the nature of business sector. This generate a resistance to change that see the contraposition between traditional advertising and social media advertising. In corporate context to mitigate the perceived risk of the transaction marketers try to establish a collaborative long-term relationship (Homburg at al.2010). Therefore, they find difficult to leave the traditional belief that this business context requires face-to-face interaction and an individual, personalized approach. The spread conviction that this cannot be reached through online tools prevents an active adoption of SM sites for marketing (Zangh &Du, 2020). Finally, another obstacle is the fear of the **lack of control** that companies face after the advent of social media and evolution 2.0 (Mangold & Faulds, 2019). This evolution shifts the balance of power from companies to consumers, they became more informed and have a greater influence on other opinions that reside in the ability to produce and consume content, it relies in the

ease of access to product or service information (Kietzmann et al. 2011). The role that social media sites play as promotional tool gives customer the power to communicate with one to another in a quick and fast way. A mistake in the marketing strategy today has by far a greater impact than in the past, and can lead to a great loss. The audience has exponentially increased, this means that a wrong message can potentially be spread around the world through the web. The **reputational problem** according Aon's 2019 Global Risk Management Survey is the second top risk out of 15 risks. In the social media age, one inappropriate post can go viral in few hours and cause brand or reputation damage, that in turn can negatively affect revenue, profits, brand value and trust (Horn et al.2015). Other three obstacles have been identified in the use of social network: social networking's lack of importance within the industry in which the company operates, the company's uncertainty regarding whether or how social media would benefit its's brand and the staffs' lack of familiarity with social networks (Michaelidou et al, 2011). The above assumptions and executives' reluctance or inability to develop an appropriate strategy with the lack of resource allocation obstacle the social media deployment by companies. Even those that actively included social media in Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) states that they are ground-breaking in the field and that are not satisfied with their strategies (Kietzmann et al. 2015). Research findings suggest that B2B marketers must continue to integrate social media strategies into their overall marketing

communication strategies. Even if they feel uncertain of the role of Twitter or social media in general [...]. (K. Swani et al. 2014, p.879).

### 1.3.3 Drivers of Social media use in B2B

Different studies have been made on the role of social media (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012; Marshall et al., 2012), its value creation (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012; Trainor, 2012), its influence on performance (Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012; Schultz, Schwepker, & Good, 2012), and the motivation of sales representatives use of social media technology (Levin, Hansen, & Laverie, 2012). Schultz et al. (2012) studied the role of age, social media norms, and customer-oriented selling in explaining salesperson's use of social media. However, it is necessary to understand which factors drive the use of social media in B2B selling by the sales organization. Guesalaga (2015) suggest that the salesperson, the supplier company, and the customer are the analysis focus point to understand the drivers of social media usage.

The perception of customer of social media as more trustworthy, than information provided by organizations make them gain the momentum and customer utilize them as a source to get information of product and services (Foux, 2006). Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that an increasing number of organizations trying to

capitalize on the popularity of social media and their perceived trustworthiness by increasing their online presence to engage customers with their product and brands. Colliander & Dahlen (2011) states the evidence from scholar enquiry that social media can generate higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions than other traditional media. Their great potential as marketing communication means derive from the ability to rapidly diffuse viral messages and vehicle WOM. (Bampo et al. 2008; Trusov et al. 2009). The literature draws the developed theory on the determinants of the social media adoption upon the theory acceptance model (TAM and TAM2). This model was developed in 1989 to predict the users' adoption of new technologies both in B2B and B2C environment, it was accepted as the dominant theory (Siamagka et al. 2015). The TAM proposes two factors that determine whether a new technology will be accepted by its potential users: **perceived usefulness** of technology (the belief that the technology adoption increase performance) and **perceived ease of use** (degree of the use of effort) (Davis et al. 1992). The theory was extended including the influence of external social factors (TAM2). Venkatesh & Davis (2000) demonstrate that perceived usefulness is the strongest predictor of technology use or adoption in B2B context. Siamagka et al. (2015) extended this hypothesis in use of social media in business context arguing that perceived usefulness has a positive impact on social media adoption by B2B organizations. Their study goes beyond the limits of TAM and

base its study on additional determinants such as organizational innovativeness and perceived barriers.

Porter & Donthu (2006) indicate the relationship between income and perceived usefulness as those with lower income perceive internet usage as less useful. Ha and Stoel (2009) identify trust and enjoyment as predictors, Vijayasarathy (2004) individuate compatibility, privacy and security as other predictor of intention to use internet. Indeed, resource-based theories are drawn emphasizing how contribute in generating customer value. According Michaelidou et al. (2011) innovative B2B companies are more likely to use social media, consistent with this Wamba e Carter (2013) states that innovativeness is positively correlated with the adoption of twitter in SMEs. To summarise social media are adopted because they have seen as powerful marketing tools, because their perceived usefulness, their capability to enhance competitiveness, cost effectiveness, customer engagement, their potential as relationship builder and real-time feedback, image-enhancement and a certain sense of necessity or social pressure.

#### 1.3.4 Social media in B2B: goals and message strategy

Literature has also tried to shed light on the objectives pursued by companies through social media in B2B contexts and on message strategies.

As Jarvien et al. stated (2012) the main digital marketing objectives pursued by B2B companies on social media relate more on the “soft” side of general marketing

goals, namely, enhancing brand image and creating awareness than to driving direct sales. The existent literature in business market focus more on the social media use in the different areas such as sales or accountant management rather than the identification of the role they played in the overall marketing mix. Therefore, it is evident the gap that persist between actual use and potential use (Pardo et al. 2021). The actual use is for SEO enhancing, customer engagement and service, lead generation, targeting professionals while B2C use the social for mass and general public engagement. The relationship life-cycle view identifies Acquisition Orientated (AO) and Relationship Orientated (RO) usage of Social Media Marketing (SMM) in organizations, the former refers to the identification and the interaction with potential customers and engage them in their first transaction with the company, this activity in social media action can be implemented by paid advertisements or collaborations with influencers to promote the brand or by viral content. The second instead refers to any activity implemented to go beyond the category above described, it means any activity that is not AO (Iankova et al.2018). Attracting new customers and cultivating customer relationships are considered to be the most important goals for business organizations according to Michaelidou et al. (2011). “This finding highlights the important role of relationship marketing in a B2B setting, and is aligned with past evidence suggesting that the internet and technology could be used as tools to build relationships” (Bauer et al., 2002;

Sharma,2002). In addition (Mitchell et al., 2001) states that branding is a valuable differentiation goal, not only for B2C but also B2B organizations.

The message strategy is the concrete outcome of a company communication effort and it is developed around two dimensions: “what to say”, which kinds of information to communicate and “how to say it”, the message quality (Taylor, 1999). Social media message strategy in B2B research is not exhaustive, only few authors analysed this topic. The extant literature on the B2B social media message strategy focus on its effectiveness in term of visits, followers, interaction, comments, shares and likes. For example, Leek et al. (2016) provide evidence on the Twitter use by business marketers related to tweet functions, embedded media, followers’ responses to tweeted messages in terms of retweets and comments. Mehmet and Clarke (2016) propose a B2B semiotic analysis on marketing posts and the creation of virtual conversation on Twitter, Facebook, and websites. Jarvinen et al. (2012) state that social media marketing effectiveness lead to brand image enhancing and awareness creation rather than affecting direct sales. Holliman and Rowley (2014) offer insights on objective, obstacles, content development, message distribution and effectiveness evaluation. Cawsey and Rowley (2016) claim that one of the keys to successful SM marketing in B2B is the provision of interesting, relevant, compelling and timely content in different formats. Swani et al. (2014) conduct a comparative study into message strategies between B2B and

B2C companies. They investigate the differences in the use of Twitter in the B2B and B2C context. Business and consumer market differ in the product and service offerings and in decision-making processes, an appropriate social media communication need to adapt to the followers' characteristics this is the reason beyond the differences in social media strategy in the two contexts (Zang & Du, 2019). The business offer is more technical, complex and require a longer, formal and rational buying process, the consumer of a B2C market instead is more irrational and impulsive. Notice how the complexity of industrial products lead to a higher level of performance and economic risk, this characteristic requires the social media communication strategy to use a proper encoding process in order to motivate customer engagement (Swani et al. 2014). This complexity leads also to a long-term relationship with business customer and for this reason B2B marketers tend to promote more their corporate brand than the individual product brands and usually implement an umbrella brand approach, it is a common marketing practice where related product are sold under a single name brand. This approach is more powerful in the engagement of B2B customers than B2C ones (Michell et al. 2001). The Swani et al. (2014) study demonstrate that in B2B tweets corporate brand names is used more frequently than in B2C tweets. On the contrary there is no evidence for the opposite hypothesis of the major frequency of product brand names in B2C than in B2B. The second difference resides in the message appeal. A message could be developed according to a functional-rational appeal or emotional

appeal. The former contains product information and specifications and it is more technical, the latter aims to motivate purchase through the stimulation of positive and negative emotions as fear, guilt or happiness. The evidence illustrates that functional appeals are more effective in business tweets due to the complexity of purchasing process, while emotional appeals tend to be more effective in consumer context impulsiveness is influenced by emotions. The third aspect is the selling strategy approach as direct strategy (calls to immediate purchase). Direct calls to purchase are less recurring in B2B twitter as this strategy in such rigorous context make the buyers losing interest. On the contrary they are more frequent in B2C as the impulsiveness of consumer make this strategy more effective. Organizational buyers are more expert in their fields, their decisions follow a rational process and require a deeper research and technical information to made their choice. This characteristic reflects the use of embedded links, cues for additional information search as “learn more” or “read on”, prospects to white papers, testimonials because the search for information in B2B context has a greater importance. This include also a more frequent use of hashtags than in B2C setting as they are a facilitator for the information research. The research in business setting is still in its embryonic phase and this may induce businesses marketers to mimic B2C social media strategies, however the above-mentioned differences prove evidence that this mimicry is inappropriate and ineffective in business context (Swani et al.2014; Iankova et al.2018; Zhang & Du, 2019) The illustrated differences justify the use

of distinct social media message strategies, the common feature is that regardless of the market context twitter is used as an information-sharing tool, however business organizations prefer LinkedIn that is considered more professional social networks instead consumer-oriented organizations proper for a mass-consumption social media as Facebook.

Evidence illustrate that B2B marketers use social media prospecting, handling complaints, targeting professional and for after-sale follow-up, on the contrary B2C sales people focus on the ability of social media channel to engage general-public and to develop a valuable connection with the individual client.

In summary B2B companies use rational appeal more frequently and emotional appeal less frequently on their social media pages that B2C companies because the impact of message rational appeal upon customer perceived value is stronger in business markets and the impact of emotional message appeal is stronger in consumer markets. message informativeness is higher in B2C companies and business marketers release more firm-level and industry-level information. Finally, message interactivity and message variety are higher in B2B context.

The Iankova et al. (2019) study underline the differences in channel usage, social media used and importance of social media for marketing activities between the different business models. The first, channel usage, presents a dissimilarity in the compared modality of communication in the four business models. B2B use

impersonal marketing channels one-to-many less frequently and focus more on one-to-one communication. There is a lower usage also in many-to-many channel use from B2B practitioners. For the second aspect, importance of social media, the only significant difference is the higher use of LinkedIn from business marketers than from B2C, B2B2C or mixed models' marketers. The last aspect, technologies use of social media, for the RO in B2B sector, social media seems to have less importance than for B2C, however for the AO usage there is no significant difference in the two sectors. This is due probably to a lack of believe in the potential and usefulness of social media in B2B context.

The Pardo at al. 2022 article give an overview on the role of social media in B2B strategic action and their contribution in shaping the business position. The article provides evidence on the relevance of twitter as a strategic rather than a tactical tool. As social media transformed the nature of the relationships with other users, it implies a change in position. Networks actors view this change as a new role, new activities that the company want to do and it requires to be accepted by the network. A company is part of a complicate system of interconnections and the decision are taken to regulate its position in this net. To sum up for a company strategic action is about change its location within the system with respect to the other parties. The position says something about behaviours and action implemented by the firm and what the community expect from it. The position is basically what the company want to be, but its role become a position only if it accepted by others. (Pardo at al.

2022). Although it is not possible to control other actors, it is possible to influence them with social media in order to be accepted in the set role and this means use social media to shape the position thus they acquire a strategic role in B2B setting. To conclude businesses can strategically use social media to influence people opinion and make users associate the company with what they want to be.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE EXTANT VIEW ON SOCIAL SELLING**

### **2.1 THE SALE FUNCTION: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY**

As analysed previously, the technological innovation introduced in recent decades has profoundly altered social relations, the business market and in particular has affected the sales process and consequently the role of the salesperson, who is no longer the sole point of access to information between the customer and the product or service (Cuevas, 2018). This raised the interest among B2B markets in integrating the use of social media into the selling process, transforming in this way the sales processes and salespeople tasks (Agnihotiri 2016; Salo 2017).

In this regard academic literature question if traditional sales are dying or merely transforming (Moncrief, 2017) and if it should be defined as an evolution or as a revolution (Marshall et al. 2012; Moncrief et al. 2014). Rapp & Panagopoulos (2012) states that younger workers on both selling and buying sides are embracing new technologies, demanding an extensive adoption of social media and related technologies. This revolution created unanticipated challenges and opportunities for managers in sales organizations, business environment face challenges that did not exist ten year ago or have been heightened by social media. Moncrief et al. (2014) for example analysed how social media transformed the sales manager's daily routine and job. They divide the sales function in sales management functions and salesperson performance. The sale management functions are sub-divided in:

supervision, selection, training, compensation, deployment and performance in: role, aptitude/skill, motivation. For each sub-section they analysed the impact of technology use in their job. Digital tools enabled online meetings and reduced face-to-face interactions expanding the interaction field with a new range of B2B potential customers. Simultaneously the constant contact between managers and salesperson can be advantageous to share detailed information, and have a continuous exchange and dialogue, however this constant control from the sales manager can make the salesperson experience anxiety and a feeling of being always on duty.

The B2B sales function plays a central role in this process of change being fundamental in value creation for customers and other economic actors (Haas et al. 2012). As B2B buyers and procurement departments evolve, new challenges are posed to sales managers and the traditional approaches are questioned. Empowered B2B buyers has higher expectation connected to the experience with the seller, new skills (as problem-solving and decision-making support) are required and the sales person assumes the role of a consultant (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). In a salesforce survey (2019) 73% of B2B buyers revealed that their standards are higher than before and 81% that move their business elsewhere has become significantly easier. The potential number of connections introduced by social media increased competition in marketplace and industry boundaries blur making customer

experience a feeling of sameness where seller seem to tell the same story (Corsaro & Maggioni, 2020).

Again, this background made B2B salespeople move away from the concept of hard selling to embrace a value-oriented selling approach and a collaboration with customer to generate customized solutions and value for both parties (Sisti et al. 2015). Kienzler et al. 2018 noted how this affect sellers' function, as they need to quickly adapt their strategies and learn new skills, they became consultants, knowledge brokers and strategic accountant managers. B2B sellers need to be faster and smarter and quickly adapt to customer needs to personalize the selling strategy. Salespeople should teach customers something that they are not able to learn on their own, at the end customer are no longer searching for salespeople in the role of suppliers, rather than they are looking for trusted advisors (Osmonbekov et al. 2018). Salespeople assumes a new role as boundary spanners between the customer and the organization. These profound transformation in the sales world have been triggered by the digital revolution, Folstand at al. (2018) recognize as the sales process need to be adjusted along to all the stages of the new customer journey to support the design of a satisfying customer experience. The selling process need to be smarter and the application of advanced analytics and machine learning to mine rich dataset could to be a solution. The implementation of new technology and the advanced set of skills required have further increased the level of stress among salesforce, in this new scenario automation is an opportunity to improve time

management and reduce the effort dedicated to daily chores, allowing to increase the focus on developing customer relationship (Corsaro & Maggioni 2020).

The studies that analyse sales technology use impact on performance have contrasting results (Tarafadar et al. 2014). Some researches (i.e. Janilek et al. 2006) demonstrate that technology sales adoption (SFA and CRM) increase performance. Eggert and Serdaroglu (2011) analyse in particular performance enhancement consequent at the use of sales technologies related to customer relationship, for example lead management, opportunities management, product configuration and sales forecast. At the same time Aeharne et al. (2014) demonstrate that the effect of technology adoption is positive until a certain level as beyond a certain threshold, technology utilization has negative effects on performance as they take time to other added-value activities.

Other studies hypothesise that the effect of sales technology use on performance is indirect. For example, Park et al. 2010 make an investigation on the impact of SPA use on the quality of customer relationship and on sales performance and they do not identify a direct relationship. They demonstrate that technology use affects the learning method of the seller, that in turn affect relationship quality and this has influence on the performance (Alavi & Habel 2021).

Whether technology has positive or negative effect on performance, future research is needed to evaluate the outcome of technology use in sales, nevertheless Alavi &

Habel (2021) define digital transformation in sales a pervasive force that reflect the implementation, investment and adoption of digital technologies.

### 2.1.1 The concept of sale transformation

Corsaro and Maggioni (2021) define sales transformation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon comprising several processes of change occurring with reference to the skills of salespeople, the management of the relationship with customers and external actors and the role played by new technologies in supporting the sales activity.

This force is facilitating new working methods giving salesforce the opportunity to improve interaction and cooperation with customers as the information acquired on social allow to have a better knowledge and understanding of the entire selling process. In this regard authors such as Eggert & Swdaroglu (2011) notice how seller progressively decreased time to the sole order picking and increased the effort dedicated to create innovative and customized solution to strengthen and develop buyer-seller relationship, in a relationship selling perspective.

With reference to the technological sphere of the sales transformation the debate evolves around the innovative sales practices through customer relationship management (CRM), social media, and e-commerce (Anihotri et al.2016, Thaichon et al. 2018). B2B companies are increasing investments on technologies asking to commercial department to integrate digital tool to reach higher level of productivity

and efficiency. Vargo & Lush (2007) affirm that the service interaction comes from both goods-in-use and from buyer-seller interaction “The exchange concept is no longer transaction bound. Service-ability (the capability to serve) becomes the essence of a firm's value propositions” (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). The diffusion of this service-dominant logic lead to a progressive shift from an exchange of tangible goods to an exchange of intangible goods such as knowledge, capabilities and competences. These as services can be provided in a more accurate and cheaper way through internet, reducing human work and leading to an increase automation in sales (Sheth & Sharma, 2008). Consistent with this Cuevas (2018) affirms that online channel and web platforms offer opportunities, in several context, to provide customer service, reducing the cost of face-to-face meetings.

In this context, scholars in selling field increased their interest in the role that digital technologies had, starting from sales force automation systems and customer relationship management, to focus on social media (Andzulis et al.2012). Bocconcelli at al. (2017) propose a study on the role that social media plays in the selling process and practices. They evidence the fundamental role that social media assumes in establishing first contact and starting business relationships with customers, suppliers, producers of complementary products, experts. However, they state that in the negotiation phase social media have a supportive role as the process follow a more “traditional” pattern. According this vision social media integration is useful to increase brand visibility and enter in new markets and to

exploit networking opportunities establishing a first contact on social media that need to be nurtured after this phase. Another study conducted in this field is the Niedermeier et al. (2016) survey on the role of social media in creating and strengthening business networking and connections. The Authors studied the use and frequency adoption of specific platforms (e.g. WeChat, QQ) with clients and they illustrate how social media activities help, sustain, develop and influence business relationship, consequently enhancing operational and economic performance. Agnihotri et al. (2012) propose a conceptual framework based on task-technology fit theory explaining how the exploitation of social media allow to create value and benefit both for salesperson and the customer in learning, sharing valuable content, establishing relationship and seizing networking opportunities. Salo (2017) analysed the role of social media in B2B marketing with 39 articles published between 2011 and 2016. In the last research identifies thematic categories “advertising, buyer-seller relationships, computers in business marketing, decision support, public relations and marketing and other functions and sales”. The role of SM platforms consists in providing to companies a new method to manage customer relationship and to create value.

The studies conducted on the social media use in B2B market context outline how the sale function are still an unexplored area for social media advantages exploitation (Salo et al. 2017). The selling function potentially could be considered one of the most exposed to the recent technological changes and to the diffusion of

social media channels that have a profound impact on personal selling and even on sales management (Andzulis et al. 2012). In fact, Rapp & Pnagopoulos (2012) affirm that social media changed the way in which B2B companies and sellers interact with customers, B2B buyers are more informed than ever and can easily find real time information on the product, the service and the company without the need to rely on salesforce information, moreover they are able to provide in turn information on virtual channels contributing to information exchange flow (Moncrief 2015, 2017). The authors evidence how the social communication and globalization can change sales force organization. Traditional sales force was geographically divided, with social media this structure fades away as these tools allow bidirectional communication flows devoid of space-time constraints.

Corsaro and Maggioni (2020) identified technology as one of the four drivers of sales transformation in B2B (together with people, integration and acceleration process) and its subdimensions: social selling, big data analytics, advanced CRM, artificial intelligence, sales force automation. Social media applications in B2B were reported to have become of critical relevance when it comes to lead generation and identification of businesses opportunities.

Therefore, while in social media marketing in B2B companies communicate to a wide targeted audience in a perspective of brand awareness and relevant content marketing providing, the use of SM in the selling process aim to create specific

customized content finalized to the boot of a one-to-one communication between the seller and the buyer (Minsk & Quesenberry 2016).

These two approaches provide valuable content through social media, the difference consist in the fact that in social selling the focal part is specifically the seller and not the organization, that take active part establishing a connection with the single client being prepared to solve doubts and questions. This goes beyond the sole creation of awareness and affinity with the brand as in SMM and pushed the practitioners to shed the light on the use of social media at sales level (Kumar & Sharma 2022).

## **2.2 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SELLING**

The major changes in business markets, the empowerment of a customer that decreasingly rely on traditional selling methods and more on digital resource, such as the involvement of social media, limited the interaction of the purchase force with the salesperson and make the seller struggle to engage with clients in the early stage of the purchasing process (definition of the need), open the dialogue from cold it is now harder than ever (Ancillai et al. 2019). Along this wave social selling is emerging as a new force able to capture emerging opportunities and challenges at the sales force level, as confirmed by Minsky & Quesenberry's (2016) survey where 82% of B2B buyers affirm that social content has an impact on their buying decisions. This context places significant pressure on the B2B sales function and

sales representatives (Ancillai et al. 2019). The potential of the social selling approach in B2B sales is emerging as a new topic of study, as it has changed the way in which customers are engaged.

While numerous studies have been conducted on the overall use of social media by B2B salespeople in their work and on antecedents and outcomes, little attention have been put on the analysis of how social selling is conducted. The research is fragmented and there is a gap in understanding what constitute social selling. In literature there is not an empirical and rigorous definition or a description of the activities involved. However, there are various attempt to explain this concept: Agnihotri et al. (2012) define social selling as *“a professional selling approach predicated on the strength of social media allies within a social enterprise emphasizing salespeople’s use of social interaction-enhancing platforms for content-creation and networking.”* Minsky and Quesnberry (2016) describe social selling as *“the strategy of including social media in the salesperson’s toolbox for the purposes of researching, prospecting, networking and building relationships by sharing content and answering questions.”* Others (Fidelman, 2012; Wiese, 2017) suggests that social selling is *“an approach which leverages digital and social media channels for understanding, connecting with and engaging customers and touchpoints that are relevant for their decision making”*. The commonalities in these definitions are the use of social media channels in selling process to exploit networking and customer engagement opportunities by content sharing and

creation. Social selling entails being active at the **right time** and in the **right place** along the customer journey in order to move the connection established on virtual channels into the real word sales. This require to use a pull approach in a long-term view to engage the customer and other relevant actors. The sales results are not immediate nor direct. Academic literature considers B2B social selling as a subset of the broader digital marketing sphere at the level of personal selling (Ancillai et al. 2019) (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4 Subdimensions of digital marketing



Source: own elaboration

Academic contributions on social media focus on their role in the sales function, social media can facilitate dialogue with B2B customers, can increase customer awareness and sales performance, but the depth of the phenomenon is still limited. Ancillai et al. (2019) propose a study to conceptualize social selling and to identify its main features through a qualitative study. They see social selling as a way to leverage online channels in order to understand, connect and engage potential and

existing customers. Social selling is not a tool, it is a methodology, that entails three main activities (Ancillai et al. 2019): 1) Acquisition of deep customer insights in social selling; 2) Connecting to relevant actors in social selling; 3) Engaging through valuable content in social selling. Despite its potential, social media penetration among B2B firms remains low, thus generating a need for a deeper understanding of how social media can be effectively used in business markets (Bill et al. 2020).

The studies around this topic can be categorized into two subsections, the analysis of social selling at the individual salesperson individual level and the examination of social selling at the organizational level.

### 2.2.1 Social media use in sales processes

Academic research studied the role of social media into the sales process as explained previously, the adoption of social media must be driven by a deeper understanding of the customer and the customer specific needs, for this reason Andzulis et al. (2012) suggest that social media should be owned by sales and marketing functions as they are the frontline in the customer relationship and know them better. The evolution of social media perspective has emphasized as a key topic emerged in literature, that the use of social media appears to be necessary but not sufficient criterion. The implementation methodology used by employees, in

particular salespeople, to engage customers determine its utility (Anihotri et al. 2020). Sellers can implement their social selling strategy, however the outcome generated at the end depends on the customer perceived value, an effective strategy has to use social media to create customer-specific content and make them perceive that the seller cares about their business needs and objectives. To investigate on how B2B customer perceive the use of social media tools by the seller there is a need to examine the integration of this technology into the sale process and how they are used. In fact, metric to measure social media success are tailored to the customer and the value proposition. In this section we explore how social media can potentially affect the selling process determining a reduction of the sales cycle time and a merging of some traditional step (Andzulis et al. 2012). In the sale context they define social media as *“the technological component of the communication, transaction and relationship building functions of a business which leverages the network of customers and prospects to promote value co-creation”*. The authors explore how social media can affect the entire selling process from the customer understanding for example by participating to LinkedIn groups, customer approaching by posting news in Facebook or Twitter, needs discovering through blogs and debates, value presenting with videos, sale closing by driving customer from social network to sale channel, post-sale service provision for example by following customer on twitter.

Guesalaga (2016) define social media usage in sales as *“the intensity with which social media is used in the company’s sales organization, considering social media as web-based applications including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Google+, and similar media that foster social interaction”*.

The first phase of the selling process is prospecting, Moncrief et al. (2015) states that Facebook likes, LinkedIn recommendations, blog interests and twitter messages can influence the research of potential new clients. The social listening and the information gathering from different sources serve to prepare the approach for a new relationship (Lacoste 2016). Through social media channels the salesman has the possibility to be active and add value to the following step of the sale process. Lacoste (2016) suggest to use social network to individuate the right contact in the B2B customer company and collect information about its network, experience, interests to reach the interest party and facilitate introductory connection. It interesting to notice that the empowered B2B customer is more and more informed, search by itself for the potential information and contact the supplier company before being engaged by the salesforce (Moncrief et al. 2015). Agnihothri et al. (2012) see the usefulness of social media in the qualification of potential customers, by reducing the cost of lead acquisition. The second step of the process is monitoring as social media through the information collection allow to know the customer beyond the sole buyer-seller relationship and build this connection on trust and emotional links. The monitoring process is useful also to

track competitors activities interaction with respective customers (Agnihotri et al. 2012). The third phase is the approach, in this case social media support a less intrusive approach by social media messages avoiding cold calls. This aspect can be significant as sellers more often admit their difficulties in overcoming potential gatekeepers that block sellers request, exhorting to contact the company by emails that do not receive an answer (Lacoste 2016).

Going forward with the process in the building reputation phase social media can play a vital role posting referrals and reviews about product or service to enhance credibility into the sector of competence. LinkedIn is a good example of how social media can offer visibility and recognition to the sale figure from the community of reference. The key impact social media have in the sale process is in the offering phase, thanks to its interactivity social network allow to gather the necessary information to tailor the commercial offer to the specific B2B buyer and to leverage with visual demonstration (i.e. Youtube, Instagram). At the same time social media enhance co-creation process thank the bidirectional communication both parties can have an active role in the process of determine the most suitable solution (Marshal et al. 2012, Bocconcelli et al.2017, Anzulis et al. 2012). The authors argue that by adding value in the previous phases of the process social media can support the closing step, as the previous knowledge acquired permit the seller to rapidly solve eventual problems or doubts (Itani et al. 2017). Lastly social are particularly relevant for post-sale service and follow-up through the real time feedback and the

possibility of a continuous interaction in the long-term with the customer determining future selling opportunities (Agnihotri et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, the literature evidence how the mere presence of salesforce online is not sufficient to reach the settled goals if it is not appropriately supported by an integrate organizational strategy (Ancillai et al. 2019, Agnihotri et al. 2012). The authors outline the importance to define an organizational strategy for social media adoption, such as to provide guidelines to integrate SM in sellers job and avoid non-coordinated activities. In particular the strategy includes sales objective definition related to online channel use and evaluation metrics to assess the efficiency of the strategy. The objective outlining varies according the sector and should be oriented to the collaboration and involvement of business customer, this make possible to activate a bidirectional communication and provide value for purchasers. Social media interactivity supports two-way communication and valuable connection with prospect and customers, fundamental elements for B2B salesforce oriented to relationship selling, at this regard Niedermeier et al. (2016) study the use of social media in China and its effect on Guanxi relationship. The article explain that chines sellers use social media to contact geographically distant clients, however the most important aspect is the relationship building, through deeper customer knowledge and understanding to develop a relationship based on loyalty and favours exchange. Therefore Ancillai et al. (2019) outline the need for sales managers to consider the difficulty of establishing short-term objectives and the need to focus on long-term

goals. According to the authors an organizational social selling strategy should include social media policies for sales, buying behaviour-based segmentation and targeting, the integration of social selling into the selling process, social selling goals and metrics, organizational alignment, content creation and sharing and provision of technological sales tools. The latter aspect, social selling metrics present several difficulties in the evaluation, sales managers need to provide clear criteria to assess the performance and avoid negative effects of social media use in sales on performance and customer satisfaction. Social platforms have different assessment tools from generic brand awareness metric as number of Facebook follower per week, customer engagement metrics as number of likes or sharing, metrics related to new clients acquiring i.e. ratio of new acquiring. Useful metrics focus on quantity and on quality of performed activities and integrate both objective (service cost variations) and subjective (number of positive online reviews of the seller) results. Literature propose different studies on social selling metrics of evaluation. The first construct utilized is the intensity of the use of social media platforms in sales, in particular at seller is required in which measure they consider to be large users of social media. For example, it could be utilized the increased amount of time in social media use by salesperson to search for business opportunities and decision makers (see Rodriguez et al. 2012, 2016) or the number of posted post on specific platforms (see Hansen & Levin 2016, Levin et al. 2012). The second group of studies focus on the frequency of use of SM in sales and time spent on these

platforms (Bowen et al. 2020; Guenzi and Nijssen 2020). Finally, the last group utilize metrics developed for other technologies and adapted to social media characteristics (Agnihotri et al. 2017, Itani et al. 2021).

However even if recent studies (see Gianmarco & Gregoire, 2012) highlight the potential benefits of social media implementation in sales, in prospecting, qualifying leads and managing relationships with clients, sales managers have been slow in recognizing this potential consequently companies are still in early phases of SM integration. Sales Manager Association confirm this affirmation as in a survey conducted in 2012, emerged that 70% of B2B companies interviewed were not using or exploring the use of social media in sales. This drive the need to understand which factors pilot the use of social media in B2B selling by the sales organizations (Guesalaga 2015).

### 2.2.2 A review of social media-related research in B2B

According Ancillai et al. (2019), B2B social selling studies at individual level can be categorized in three different groups based on the examination approach utilized. The first group include descriptive studies that investigate how social media platform are used (Moore et al. 2013, 2015; Niedermeier et al. 2016; Schuldt and Totten, 2015). These articles are practice-focused and discover that social media adoption in B2B sales context focus on specific platforms such as professional networking platforms (LinkedIn) or instant messaging applications.

The second group of studies take into consideration the degree of social media use in selling either social intensity or the degree of SM integration (Agnihotri et al. 2012, 2016; Guesalaga 2016; Hansen & Levin 2016; Rapp et al. 2013). However, these studies are more useful to individuate and understand antecedents and outcomes of social media use and less in providing insight to leverage the adoption of online channels. The last group focus on social selling activities and how salespeople do social selling (Wang et al. 2016; Bocconcelli et al. 2017; Lacoste 2016). From the literature analysis what emerges is that social media are used to better understand customers through the information collected online, to construct and widen social networking, interact with customer and build long-term relationship, to build brand reputation being part of online communities.

At an organizational level the studies on business market can be organized around six different aspects of analysis that are: the social selling strategy, the integration of SM into the sales process, sales-related goals and metrics, functional collaboration between relevant company's departments, firm's provision of technological support to salespeople. (Ancillai et al. 2019).

Agnihotri et al. (2012) states how important is to develop and communicate a clear social selling strategy, that is not the mere presence online but it consists in a structured policy on how to conduct social selling and a methodological integration of social media in the selling process. Social media strategy includes goal delineation, information exchange, competitive intelligence, performance metrics

and relative challenges ad identified by the authors. Moreover, they delineate two objectives that a social selling strategy should achieve as acquiring new customers and serving existent ones and building relationships.

The second element of study is social media integration into selling process, the research argue that social media have the potential to affect each stage of the process from the prospecting phase to lead qualification and monitoring until the post-sale service (Andzulis et al. 2012). An effective integration of social media allows to monitoring the customer and approach them in a non-intrusive way, finding the relevant information can avoid questioning and initial sales calls to understand the customers' specific needs.

The third aspect, sales related goals and performance metrics is fundamental since setting specific sales goals connected to the use of social media and the relative metrics to measure the performance allow a wide-organization internalization of this way of thinking (Agnihotri et al.2012).

The functional collaboration between relevant company's departments should not be limited to the sales department and should be integrated to the company's overall strategy (Andzulis et al. 2012). The last aspect is the company's support through the provision of technological tools. Studies conducted emphasise how the organisation can help sales representatives build a connection with customers through the integration of traditional information systems and new digital technologies (Rodriguez and Peterson 2012).

It has been empirically demonstrated that the interaction between sales-based technology and social media has a positive effect on post-sale service behaviours (Agnihotri et al. 2017) and customer relationship performance (Trainor et al. 2014). From the study conducted by Ancillai et al. (2019), a definition of social selling emerges that differs from the dominant interpretation in literatures based on the use of social media in the sales process. While the classic conceptualization emphasises the salespeople's efforts of adopting and integrating a new technology into the sales process and its positive effects of social media technologies usage on different salesperson's behaviours and capabilities the meaning of the concept emerging from the above-mentioned field-based study is presented as an operational vision focusing on the key components of social selling. This new study adds to the studies in the literature by bringing to light how the sales force employs social channels in practice. The definition of activity-focused social selling emerged from this study is *“a selling approach, which leverages social media besides other channels, for acquiring deep insights of prospective and existing customers, connecting to customers in relevant touchpoint through networking and consistent dialogue, as well as engaging customers through valuable content, for converting these connections beyond social media into business outcomes in the long-term.”*

Thus, the three identified activities identified according this definition are: acquisition of deep customer insight, connecting to relevant actors and engaging through valuable content. The first activity consists in the collection of all relevant

information concerning the potential customers, this is fundamental to gain competitive intelligence. This is the phase in which the seller screens the customers to identify those that fit the ideal client profile. An efficient screening is possible through social listening and customer listening by elaborating all the information collected, it is important to correctly understand the customer's needs. In this dimension is fundamental the timing aspect. The second activity is the crucial phase, once identified the ideal target customer is necessary to build strong relational network by establishing professional connections and constructive and consistent dialogue. The last aspect develops once the connection is established as it is necessary to nurture the relationship in order to keep the customer engaged. This method allows to influence the customer decision in investing resources on your business and engage relevant actors through valuable and consistent content. This operational definition of B2B social selling goes beyond the mere technology-driven social media usage and can be seen as the implementation of the digital marketing principles at the sales force level. This definition has a more practical value for studying social selling

### **2.3 DRIVERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN SALES**

Originally the literature registered a scarce and sporadic use of social use for marketing and sales purpose, positioning companies in the early stages of social

media adoption (Chickandiwa et al. 2013; Nakara et al. 2012; Salo et al. 2013). Studies on B2B SMEs demonstrate higher reluctance on SM adoption, however the results are highly varied as this reluctance may depend to different factors and the research conducted vary in size, country, sector and used platforms. Nevertheless, more recent studies demonstrate the use of social media has significantly increased in recent years (Siamagka et al. 2015). As affirm Ahmas et al. (2018) currently the social presence of all companies seems to be taken for granted regardless from size, sector or country of origin. At this regard academic researchers questioning themselves to find out which factors promote or obstacle social media use in sales. Ancillai et al. 2019 group these factors in three categories: organizational antecedents, individual antecedents (those relative to the seller figure) and other factors that represents non-theoretical constructs (control variables). More in general these division is presented as internal factors related to the seller personal sphere and external factors. The factors related to the organizational environment (external factors) are the organizational competence, the organizational commitment, the upper management support and the social influence. At this regard various studies demonstrate how social media use can be motivated by the **upper management support** (Rodriguez et al. 2016, Schultz et al. 2012). They demonstrate how the active involvement of the top management in the selling process and in the exploitation of potential opportunities and team members instruction lead to a higher use of social media by the sales force. Top management

in a company is a resource, they are a behavioural example for all the team (the use of social media from top management can be a relevant signal for sales force of the importance of social media adoption), this make their support a fundamental component for technologies initiatives' success. **Organizational competence** is the second element correlated to the social media use by salespeople, it is defined as the general knowledge that the supplier organization have about digital channels of communications and the expertise in making a productive and efficient use of it. Guesalaga 2016 noted how the degree of propension to use these tools in the organization culture in turn positively influence the use of these tools among the employees to communicate with B2B customers.

**Organizational commitment** instead is the measure in which the supplier organization invest in resources in social media, in employees and in particular in salesforce education and training and the degree of development and communication of a clear policy and strategy on how to use them (Guesalaga 2016). The author evidence the synergistic effect of these two factors, organizational competence and commitment, he demonstrates that the impact of organizational commitment is higher on social media usage in sales if the company is forward-thinking and experienced with social channels. This is consistent with Bill et al. 2020 opinion that sellers are more propense to use social tools if the working environment through training allow to exploit the potential of this channel and with the proper support reduce the perceived barriers. Terho et al. 2022 add that sales

organization should provide the right strategy but also furnish selling technologies and content so support sales representatives in their work.

The last drivers related to the external environment is **social influence**, in fact when seller perceive that customers, colleagues and competitors are active on online platforms experience social pressure and are more willing to use these tools in their sales activities (Guesalaga 2016, Schultz et al. 2012, Terho et al. 2022). Those economic actors are able to influence sellers' behaviour thanks the direct or indirect relationship with them. This phenomenon is explained by the social learning theory developed by Bandura in 1977, which states that human individuals learn by people by which they are surrounded and by the theory of planned behaviour by Ajzen 1991 according which individual perceive that among their group people expect them to act or not a determined behaviour and the individual is influenced by this perception. This means that the higher is social media use by peers the higher is the social pressure and the desire to stay updated with them, on the contrary if the colleagues do not use social media the interest of the individual salesperson in using them will be lower. Wang et al. 2016 identify two components of the social influence: social comparison and social identity. The former is the tendency of people to evaluate their capabilities and opinions by a confront with others' opinions and abilities, while the latter is the feeling of belonging developed through the participation at specific groups of interest. Those aspect induce the sellers to join online communities to search and share inspiration. Finally, recent studies by

Kumar and Srivastava 2022 identify two other factors: image and results demonstrability, the former give prestige and the second refers to the easiness about demonstrating results derived from the use of a new technology.

The second category of antecedents of social media use in sales is individual factors that are afferent to the personal sphere of the seller and in turn is subdivided in motivation (individual attitude, individual commitment, extrinsic intrinsic and apathetic motivation) and ability (sales person capability, individual competence, customer orientation) (Anciallai et al. 2019).

The **motivation** is one of the main drivers of human behaviour in general and in particular there are three types of motivation extrinsic, intrinsic and apathetic seem to guide the use of social media in sales (Guesalaga 2019). The extrinsic motivation is the fine, the scope that lead the person to undertake a certain set of actions. It is related to the implementation of an action in order to reach a specific result or a potentially desirable reward. In the specific case under analysis, social media use in B2B sales the results of comments or promote the working company online can increase the individual value perceived by the employer or can improve its work evaluation and lead to a salary increase. On the contrary intrinsic motivation is the pleasure derived from the implementation of a certain action or the related satisfaction. This means that sharing information about the working company can be entertaining or rewarding. According Hansen et Lavin (2012) extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are positively related with seller social media use

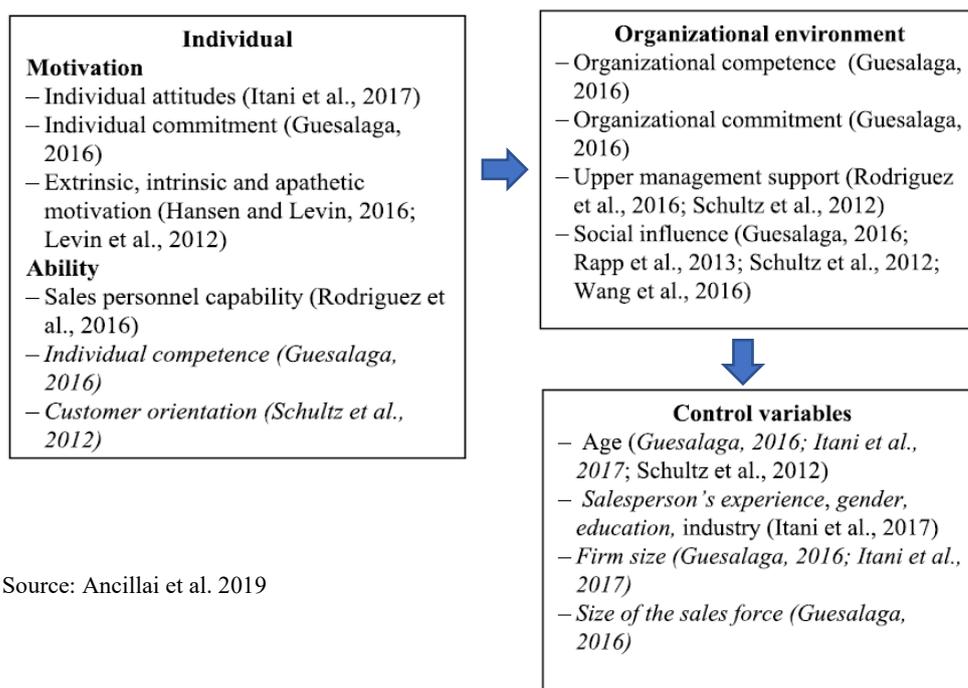
in their work activities. The last type of motivation, on the contrary, is negatively related with social media use in sales as it represents the lack of interest in performing a task or a specific activity. **Individual commitment** is the level of degree in which a person is actively engaged in utilizing social media platform and the variety of channels employed as well as the amount of time dedicated and the level of interaction with other users. Guesalaga (2016) considers individual commitment one of the antecedents of social media use in sales. **Individual attitude** instead is the effort expended to promote the adoption of these tools, it is fundamental to enhance the diffusion of these technology adoption inside the company.

Among the individual factors driving the social media adoption in sales, the second category of analysis is the seller **ability**. The first subdomain is **sales personnel capability** as the knowledge, experience about product or service offered and the level of customer understanding and needs recognition, efficiency in sales-closing and revenue increase over the year. Rodriguez et al. (2016) demonstrate that these abilities are positively related with social selling. Obviously, sales technology orientation (ability to use technology resources) and ability to integrate those resources with traditional ones have a positive impact on the use of social media (Guenzi e Nijissen 2020). **Individual competence** that is the personal knowledge and familiarity with internet-based apps, according the test model conducted by Guesalaga 2016 seems to do not have direct effect with the degree of social media

use, however the author identifies an indirect effect due to the synergy between individual commitment and individual competence as the latter positively influence the former as a result the summed impact on social media channels in sales at the end is positive. Finally, **customer orientation** still does not find empirical evidence on its positive influence in driving social media adoption in sales activities.

The last category is represented by **control variables** that include: age, salesperson’s experience, gender, education, industry, firm size and size of the sales force. The first element seems to be negatively related to the use of new technologies as the older seller seems to be uncomfortable with social media integration in the sales process (Ancillai et al. 2019). In the following figure we present a summary scheme of the drivers that influence social media use in sales.

Figure 6: antecedents of social media use in sales



Source: Ancillai et al. 2019

To sum up as Gueslaga (2016) tested with his model, the most important predictor of social media usage in sales is organizational competence, the second most relevant variable is customer engagement, followed by individual commitment and organizational commitment. Individual competence seems to not occupy an important role however it has a synergistic effect with individual commitment, this imply that the effect of individual commitment is higher when the individual competence is higher.

#### **2.4 OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN SALES**

The number of B2B companies that claim that they use social media for managing client relationships is rapidly increasing (Houssein, 2013). In a survey emerged that 59% of salespeople affirm they use social media in their work, and 89% of top-performing salespeople states that social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, are integrated in their sales strategy and relevant in closing deals (LinkedIn, 2019). This phenomenon illustrates the great potential that social media retains in improving sales performance. As an answer to this development, sales and marketing scholars have begun studying the role and effectiveness of social media in selling and tried to understand what are the results (outcomes) after the technology has been accepted and adopted (Ahearne et al. 2004). In particular these results or outcomes are classified into two macro categories: **soft outcomes** and **performance**

**outcomes**, in turn these two categories are subdivided into three different levels of analysis: organizational, salesperson behaviour and customer outcomes (Ancillai et al. 2019). The first bracket includes the effects produced by social media use in B2B sales that can be defined as intangible or those indirectly related with the hard outcomes. These are those results that affect the capabilities and competences improvement and often are the intermediate phase to arrive to the second group of results (Bartoloni 2022). Ancillai et al. 2019 analysed the data of the interviews with 21 thought leaders in social selling and find the potential outcomes of social selling. The first evidence (related to soft outcomes) is that at an individual salesperson level social selling allow to develop a strong *personal brand* and to build *professional credibility* (Lacoste 2016). A systematic social selling approach may lead to the building of a thought leadership position, this according Terho et al. (2022) is a key result of social media use in sales. The creation of personal brand identity on social channels allows salespeople to position themselves as trustworthy advisors, this can streamline the first contact with customers and support their spontaneous reaching out of the salesperson for buying related problems according Ancillai et al. 2016. Other outcomes at salesperson personal level are: the *ability to find information* on the competitive environment, an important aspect since, thanks to new technologies, this task is easier and at the same time more demanded by companies (Itani et al. 2020). The possibility to *improve communication*, as communication is the fundamental aspect in B2B buyer-seller relationship.

Technology spread changed the way to communicate and to share information, the wide variety of social media offers the possibility to establishing a constant dialogue consequently to upgrade the communication (Agnihotri et al. 2016). At the same time, they give the possibility to improve seller responsiveness and the frequency of answers leading to an efficient and rapid satisfaction of clients' requests. Ancillai et al 2019 results demonstrate that social selling can help salespeople to exhibit sales service and *adaptive selling* behaviour, in fact the information found on clients, competitors, market allow seller to tailor the offer and the selling approach to the single customer needs and characteristics (Agnihotri et al. 2017). All these outcomes obviously have to be supported by an adequate training of the salesperson to exploit all the potentiality that social channels offer. A further outcome is the *post-sale service improvement*, since B2B customer research added value to the product, this performance is more required, at this regard Agnihotri et al. 2012 illustrate the relationship between post-sale service improvement, customer relationship improvement and value creation. They explain how social media affect, support and improve three important elements of customer-seller relationship that are empathy, inducements (attention to personal customer's events) and sportsmanship (management of inappropriate selling situation), elements that helps to maintain and build a trustworthy relationship. Finally, *co-innovation* practices and dialogue in online communities allow to share ideas, inspirations, knowledge to develop new product and services opening the

firm boundaries and implementing a more flexible and creative process (Wang et al. 2016).

At organizational level, social media soft outcomes can be different, Rodriguez et al. (2012) empirically demonstrate that social media use in sales can *create opportunities* by improving selling process through lead generation, *customer-orientation* and *relationship management*. Nevertheless, social media tools use is not sufficient to have positive outcomes, the activity implemented by the salesperson and the methodologies are vital to obtain desired results. Social media channels are tools that allow the B2B seller to be reactive, prompt, available and furnish support to the client, those tools need to be correctly adopted in order to create a customized sales service and offer for the buyer instead of being selling-oriented. On the contrary evidence will suggest as will be explained in the next section that social media use in sales can have negative results if sellers communicate in an undifferentiated way, as they will not provide value and this can have the undesired effect of turning away customers. Lastly Bocconcelli et al. (2017) states that social media is a relevant resource to *enter new markets* as they are a new resource to communicate with international supplier have considerably extended the range of action.

At a customer level Rapp et al. 2013 propose a model according which there is a contagion effect of social media use across business suppliers, retailers, and

consumers, this means that the use of social media by salespeople lead to an increase in *customers' social media use*.

Going further with evidences founded by Ancillai et al. (2019) and results correlated to performance at salesperson individual level, the data analysis indicate that social selling has a positive impact on the sales process (higher closing ratios, increased number of better-quality leads, shorted sales cycle), however to have good results the focus has to be on the right activities and not on the results. Literature has contrasting results as the only studies that find a positive relationship between social media use in sales and performance improvement (Schultz et al. 2012, Guenzi & Nijssen 2020). Other studies (see Itani et al. 2021; Terho et al. 2022; Bowen et al. 2021) find only and indirect relationship. At organizational level social selling in the long-term can potentially affect company's performance in two areas *sales performance* and *brand awareness* however Rodriguez et al. (2012) suggest that the effect is indirect, as through the exploitation of social media opportunities the sales process improve and thanks to better customer understanding and relationship management. Wang et al. 2016 notice how also brand awareness effects are subordinated to co-innovation processes developed with social media channels. The last outcome to analyse at performance level is how the use of social media influence customer satisfaction the most important variable in the buyer-seller relationship.

Academic research examined the relationship and the effect of social media use in sales and performance by using subjective self-assessed selling performance measures (Rodriguez et al. 2016, 2012; Schultz et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2016), for example salesperson self-reported performance. Furthermore, even customer satisfaction has been measured based on the seller perception how satisfied are their clients instead of using customer perspective (Agnihotri et al. 2016). This leads researchers to search for different approaches to measure the effectiveness and efficacy of social media use in sales, see Itani et al. (2017) that use managed-assessed selling performance and Rapp et al. (2013) employ the realized sales of the brand. This research contributes to the literature investigating the customer perception of the use of social media channels by salesperson. The present work aims to take further steps into the research by trying to include the customer's point of view.

## **CHAPTER 3: SALESPEOPLE'S SOCIAL MEDIA USE: THE B2B CUSTOMER'S PERSPECTIVE**

### **3.1 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH GAP**

Overall, the phenomenon of sales transformation in the B2B market due to the use of social media by the sales force has been studied based on the perception from the seller's side. The present work attempts to take the research a step further by trying to include the buyer's point of view. This study wants to contribute to the understanding of how the advent of social media has been modifying the buyer-seller relationship by comparing seller's social media use and customers' perception of this use in B2B context. The aim of the study is not only to understand whether and how salespeople use social media in their work but also to understand if this use is properly perceived by customers. Is the information shared useful? Do they attribute professionalism and increase the seller's personal branding? Do they reach the right target group? Is the communication personalised? The answers to these questions are useful to understand where the business market is and how to use the new channels more effectively.

As highlighted in the previous chapters, there is a growing attention towards this topic, however empirical evidence continues to indicate a low usage of these tools by salesforce (especially in the Italian market) who remain doubtful about social media use effectiveness and actual return on desired results. According to Iaknova et al. (2019) the scope of social media in business markets remains more complex

and worthier of interest, however empirical research offers a narrower view of the phenomenon than in B2C markets.

This is the reason why this study focuses on the B2B context by investigating the challenges and opportunities that social channels introduce in the sales market, seeking to answer the call for further empirical investigation in this area. In particular, the study compares interviews conducted among sellers with those conducted on the buyers' side, bringing out the main similarities and differences.

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study conducted due to the exploratory nature of the research analysis. The advantages of a qualitative study according to Miles et al. (2014) are several:

- the data collected provide a holistic interpretation of reality,
- the data are based on real experiences that are useful in understanding the meaning that people attribute to the phenomenon being studied, unlike quantitative studies that take a more static view,
- qualitative studies allow for greater flexibility as data are collected over longer periods of time.
- the data are collected in their natural context so that possible influences of the context are considered.

Specifically, this research on how salespeople use technology and how this is perceived by their customers (i.e. the change in the interaction with customer) is the ideal context for a qualitative study to develop new theories or modify existing ones

(Jhonson, 2015). In this type of study, sampling constitutes a fundamental step in the research process and includes decisions regarding the subjects to be interviewed, the contexts and events to be analysed (Miles et al. 2014). For the purpose of this research for the sampling phase followed a theoretical sampling procedure. This procedure involves choosing individuals who have experience or work in the research field concerned. This means that unlike quantitative surveys, in qualitative surveys the participants are not chosen randomly but they are chosen on the basis of precise characteristics that meet the parameters and objectives of the research. Subjects taking part in interviews are called *key informants* and through the explanation of their thoughts, experiences and actions they enable the study and understanding of the reality of a given phenomenon. In this case, the interviewees through their testimony provided useful insight about the role of social media in modifying the buyer-seller relationship. After the sampling phase, the identified subjects were contacted by telephone or email to request their willingness to participate in the research project. A total of eighteen subjects took part in the interview: eleven from the buyer side and seven from the seller side. From the eleven individuals of the purchasing side five of them were in the role of buyers in the strict sense, the others were multifunctional figures within the company but still dealing with marketing service providers or other more generic suppliers. From the selling function the individuals chosen were all sales or account managers, this means they were the direct responsables for the sales. The interviewees were chosen

on the basis of 1) belonging to different industry sectors to ensure a more comprehensive analysis, 2) buyers/sellers of companies trading in a B2B context, 3) companies in both service and goods production, again to ensure a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews that took place in 2018 for the sellers and over a time span from March 2022 to approximately October 2022 for the buyers. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher, at least in the initial phase, has the role of a 'reporter', so he or she listens to the interviews, which in this case were conducted by video call and were recorded and then faithfully transcribed. These interviews were guided by the interviewer on the basis of a flexible, non-standardised scheme (the outline of the research questions can be found in appendix A and appendix B). In qualitative studies such as this one, the researcher does not impose theoretical constructs, but through the outline of questions he or she proposes, gives space to the interviewee's narrative and seize the opportunity to discover new concepts. The question track includes the topics to be covered during the interview, these are open questions that leave the interviewee free to tell past and future experiences. It also allows the researcher to explore themes that emerge during the interview, however at the same time it allows to maintain the same structure for all the interviews carried out. This type of approach makes it possible to collect data in a less rigid manner than questionnaires, but at the same time less detailed and precise than case studies.

In order to understand how social media influenced the relationship between buyer and seller, the interview outline was divided into five sections, first we analyse the buyers track.

The first section, **Background information**, is aimed at briefly explaining the focus of the interview and the objective of the study, and then delves into the interviewee's business and job position. In this first part, we want to understand the ways in which social media influences the company's business and in particular its purchasing activity, asking how the relationship with one's supplier arises, how they stay in touch, the nature of the relationship, whether the influence of social media is in any way visible in one's work, what the major benefits are and describing some key examples.

The second section, **Social media use**, is aimed at investigating into the activities that the buyer has stated that he/she carries out in his or her daily work with social media, trying to understand what he/she actually does and what objectives pursues, as well as the comparison between the use of social media and more traditional tools (e.g. email, website).

The third section, **Customer perceptions**, is the core of the interviews and of the research project. It is more specifically about what perceptions customers have of the social media activities implemented by salespeople. What impression they have of vendors using social media, what information they find most useful, whether and how they interact with content posted by vendors, at which stage of the purchasing

process the information are useful. (This section is only for the buyer side interviews).

The fourth section, **Drivers, barriers, contingences and outcomes**, aims to investigate which internal and external factors drive the use of such tools in the purchasing process. In this part, an attempt is made to understand the influence of corporate strategy in the use of social media by buyers, the presence of particular risks in their use and which factor can reduce these risks. Which is the company policy, whether social are more useful in the initial phase or in a later phase, what impact social media have on the relationship with the supplier.

The fifth and last section, **Future evolution**, aims to explore how the use of social media will evolve in their work environment. Thus, whether buyers will use social media more in future in their relationship with suppliers/vendors.

As already mentioned, interviews were carried out via telephone calls or videocalls (Skype, Teams) depending on the availability of the interviewee. The interviews were recorded and then faithfully transcribed in order not to leave out any important details or concepts. In this process, anonymity was guaranteed to protect the participants and the recorded material was not disseminated except for purposes strictly related to the research work. The seller interviews secularly are divided into five sections: The first section **Background information** and the last section **Drivers, barriers contingencies and outcomes** are the same presented for the buyer but with specific question targeted for the seller. The second section

**Opening-top mind of the issue** aims to collect top of the mind areas which as follow up will be thoroughly investigated in the next section. In this phase question as in which extent is visible the influence of social media in their job, the social media's level of importance in daily job and how they affect the sales process, which benefits derive from social media use in their job. The third section **Social selling activities** aims to capture further details on the topics that emerged from the previous section and to ask about the topics that have not yet been mentioned. The fourth section **Relationship with other activities** investigate into the relationship of activities pursued with social media channels and the traditional communication tools.

The research project was carried out as follow:

- Collection of interviews previously conducted from the vendor side and yet transcribed.
- Collection and transcription of interviews from the buyer side.
- Data and interviews study and analysis
- Matching phase between the results of the two parties involved in the analysis (Buyer, seller).
- Results and outcomes of the research.

The criticism of qualitative research is that researchers risk not adequately justifying the claims made. However, by following a systematic approach it is possible to provide relevant results. In particular the third phase of the process

described above (Data and interviews study and analysis) developed into a three-stage iterative interview interpretation process: search for main themes, search for similarities and differences, grouping into aggregated dimensions. In the first phase, the macro-topics that emerged were identified and the transcribed texts were then read and analysed, sentence by sentence. The second phase was aimed at searching for congruities and inconsistencies between what the two parties had said. This is the central phase in which more attention was paid to the search for constructs not found in the literature. The third phase served to aggregate the data and reconnect those that confirm or refute what was discussed in the theoretical chapters preceding.

## **3.2 SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN SALES: EMPIRICAL RESULTS IN ITALIAN BUSINESS CONTEXT**

### 3.2.1 Social selling: study on B2B seller's perspective

The second phase of the project after the collection of the interviews is the analysis of the transcriptions. The first group of interviews, the one collecting the testimonies of the salespeople on how they use social media in their daily work activities, took place in 2018. In total, seven interviews with marketers and sales managers in the b2b context are available for the present work. The following table summarises the company characteristics and the job position of the interviewees.

Table 1 Profiles of the sellers

<b>Sellers</b>				
<b>N.</b>	<b>Job position</b>	<b>Business tipe</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>
<b>S1</b>	Account manager	Service	Furnishing	-
<b>S2</b>	Manager	Service	Recruiting	-
<b>S3</b>	Sales business developer	Service	Business solutions	-
<b>S4</b>	Account manager	Service	Telecommunications	-
<b>S5</b>	Business founder and partner	Service	Inbound marketing	70 min
<b>S6</b>	n.r.*	Service	Digital marketing	50 min
<b>S7</b>	Sales manager	Product	Coffe machines	39 min

\* Not reported

Source: own elaboration

As mentioned above, the interviews were structured in five sections and below we report what emerged from the statements made by the interviewees regarding the growing phenomenon of social media use. In particular, how social media influences their sales activities and work routines. The outline of the questions made it possible to guide and give a homogeneous structure to the interviews and the elements of interest that emerged are repeated in the various transcripts. Below we analyse the different topics which arose.

The first theme emerged is related to the preferred social media platform. The results show that the most used social network for business purposes in B2B sales processes is LinkedIn, followed by Facebook and less Instagram and WhatsApp. In

fact, LinkedIn is regarded as the most serious and professional social networking site among others, whereas Facebook is not considered professional. WhatsApp is only used for short communications and only with established customers, while Instagram seems to be far less successful for sales strategies in the business sector.

*S1: Absolutely, it is fundamental. I use LinkedIn heavily. [...] So that's is the dynamic. I use LinkedIn more than anything else. Facebook sometimes but not much, mostly LinkedIn.*

*S3: Social selling, so the use we make of it is to go directly to contact people through the LinkedIn tool, which is the main one we use as social selling, somehow allows us to already have an introduction.*

*S4: We all have a substantially technological business, so we target IT managers in particular, so they are people and professionals who are also present in a fairly consistent manner on social networks. Of high-level socials such as LinkedIn for instance, much less so Facebook and the others.*

This concept is closely related to the role and importance ascribed to the information collected. The results show that marketers study the social media profiles of their customers and competitors in order to gather relevant information. Social media according to the interviewed sellers play a key role in gathering information. Three salient characteristics come into play are: the speed with which information is found, the democratisation of this information and the amount of information available.

*S2: When I think about how we used to fax proposals, we used to hear from customers this way, we used to rely on much slower contacts, so one of the biggest benefits is speed.*

*And the quantity of information, so when we can combine this speed and this quantity with a certain qualitative approach, that's when the more qualitative salesman makes a difference. Because the information is available to everyone, so*

*it is certainly democratic, but it is certainly more complex because when you start from the same point, it is more challenging, it is more beautiful, but you have to be clever because if you are not clever with all the same information, someone else will probably win. So, then the goal really is to sell and manage this information as well as possible.*

*From the point of view of the benefits, I could say speed, quantity, democracy, which can be seen as a benefit, but then the difference is made by the skills, the motivation, the desire to get there, the desire to do a little something extra, and so the key to selling, in my opinion, is not given by social media, because to sell it is given by the person and the professional and by what he or she puts into it. Social media can certainly provide a very interesting key to managing this type of situation.*

Speed was identified as the first benefit of using social media in sales activities by all respondents. With traditional channels, sellers were able to find the same information, but this activity took about twice as long. Today, with an internet search they are able to identify the purchasing manager or decision maker of the target company and contact him immediately. Ten years ago, to get the same information it was necessary to make calls and send emails, taking ten hours for an activity that today takes five.

*S1: Benefits of social media is to reduce time typically, i. e. I get less fearful of information. If there wasn't LinkedIn to figure out who I need to talk to and get the name of the person it would take me twice as long because I still have to get someone else to tell me. I have to let the secretary tell me, if she tells me or make two/three phone calls or write two/three emails with the risk that the interest is no longer that or comes down or is even intrusive. Instead, without even calling the company, I already know who those people are and I can still communicate with them. Of course I use the sales navigator, which I used it in the past, but not at the moment you are even more penetrating because you can even send messages to second level contacts so you can get even more communication and in tune. However, the halving of lead qualification times first comes to mind. So it's an advantage in terms of time because without maybe LinkedIn, it would take me 10 hours to qualify 10 companies, so I'll take five. Almost half of the time.*

Secondly, the information is in the public domain, therefore accessible to all, and for that reason all vendors start from the same potential set of information. While this makes the environment more competitive, it also makes it more challenging. It is then up to the individual salesman and his skills to use the collected data in a profitable manner. Hence the importance of content, being able to engage the customer through content that they find interesting. The creation and transmission of value to the customer is fundamental. One of the examples that emerged from the interviews is that if a customer posts content about art and culture when talking to them, an attempt will be made to start a conversation based on common topics. The salesperson must be good at creating ad-hoc content that can meet the customer's needs. The goal is therefore to be able to differentiate the proposed message from the masses through topics and content that can be of interest.

*S5: It all starts with identifying the buyer persona, i.e. who is my target audience. Above all, what are their search mechanisms, in what context, what do they search for, how do they interact with my service or consulting activity. Everything starts from there, in B2B the content is king, but if until before the content was rather generic, today many times the clients of companies as well as my clients already have the key ideas because marketing information is free and free, there is so much of it and we talk about information overload. What we do is create valuable content that helps people not to get trapped in this information overload. So, content is indispensable in B2B, there are no objections.*

*S5: I personally use social networks to search for leads. How? By publishing content, I hope of value, for those who follow me, via my personal accounts, particularly on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. I always, on a daily basis, dedicate activities to attending discussion groups. Because you go to fuel conversations on certain topics, which are not just self-referential topics, but are really about responding, commenting, advising, networking. So how do I use social networks on a daily basis?*

- By posting content, which I find on the web or which we develop with IDF;  
- By frequenting discussion groups, so I get leads and conversations, so there is a continuous exchange;  
By creating workflows for me, which give me a methodology to nurture that contact that is generated. Through, for example, e-mail marketing activities rather than follow up within the very conversation within social.

S5: It is imperative to have valuable content, because if I don't have valuable content, which can also be from external sources, that satisfies a lead's need, even in a one-to-one relationship, I can do all the SMM activity, but it is still an activity for one's vanity metrics. If I don't have valuable content in the B2B world, I don't do anything. [...]

That content goes to respond, via artificial intelligence mechanisms, to people who are looking for solutions. That's where all the social media activity starts. Social media, for us who do Inbound at least, is an important part of lead generation. But it all starts with the content on our very own, which we disseminate through social media, discussion groups, forums and whatnot.

S6: It all starts with content because for us social is part of the inbound process, so we start with content and I have a content source where I aim to convert traffic into contacts and that content I distribute either personally or Adw Media Lab and eventually either I or my sales people go and redistribute it on their personal social profiles. The buying process, as I said before, follows those 3 phases and there is lighter content, more structured content and case study content or entertainment content always in the business area and work in the entertainment in the business area. So specifically we work a lot with the awareness part and with the conversion part and often I or other people distribute the content to the groups.

S6: In the social selling process, the job becomes to intrigue or look for ways to interact with users. One important customer we engaged thanks to a comment made by a third party; I got stuck into the conversation, then one thing led to another, then a lead was generated, then a proposal and a sale.  
The social selling approach is a bit like this, either get stuck into conversations or try to find ways to generate them on your profile or in groups, basically.

The last element, i.e. the huge amount of information that can be found, not all of them are always useful. The seller has to skim through it and often some of them are incorrect. Several interviewees underline the fact that frequently profiles or

information available on social networks are untruthful or outdated. From this, the choice of which social media platform to use is influenced by the reputation and value attributed to it. The information collected on social channels are important for the sales force because it leads to a well-defined decision-making process and minimises the margin of error in strategy planning. This leads directly to the third topic that emerged: salespeople use social media predominantly in the first phase of the customer relationship that are the approach phase and the qualification of the lead. All interviewees stated that among the stages of the sales process, social media is undoubtedly most useful in the approach phase. In fact, one of the managers interviewed stated that information found on social networks makes the approach to the customer more effective. Social media make it possible to shorten interaction times, keeping the customer's attention level higher and decreasing the risk of losing the customer's interest. These channels also facilitate the generation of conversations through comments on posts or interaction on communities or groups of interest.

*S2: The research done with social media is useful above all with potential customers because then it occurs to me that an already acquired customer, in short, arrives at a later stage, no? Maybe you can get some more information for cuteness, rather than to be able to maintain a more solid and lasting relationship. Because I know it's a bit of a cliché, but it's hard to win a customer, but it's very easy to lose one, so in the second phase, well-managed information is certainly useful. But probably the major value in the ice-breaking phase, in the approach as you are two strangers and you find yourself two. In short, in the end it is not said that although the empathic level is much higher in person you can not benefit much more from such as that which comes from social. So certainly yes, and also I can not omit that*

*without that information you could remain in a phase of empass linked simply to the education of how to speak but then not to the actual achievement of the result.*

*S4: So no, the current customers (this is very individual as a thought), the customers we have already acquired have no problem, in the sense that we do not fear, once we have acquired them we have such a strength of customer loyalty that once acquired we care little. On the prospects, branding for us is fundamental because we are not very well known, so if we do branding using services, using references, that is, current customers, asking current customers to be able to use their name certainly that could bring a not inconsiderable incentive. And this certainly on the online social and not offline because having targets all online would be much more effective a policy of this type here.*

*S4: So there is a preference towards the prospect, this is beyond doubt because clearly I try to attract the prospect into the network, but I absolutely do not neglect the current customer, i.e. if the current customer posts something that I like and interests me, or I find something that I can pass on to the prospect because it might be interesting to him, I do it anyway.*

Another important issue identified is that due to lack of resources or time, a structured social selling strategy is not implemented. This is related to the fact that there is an objective difficulty in quantifying and measuring the actual return on social activities. This generates uncertainty and a lack of willingness to exploit the more advanced opportunities that such technologies could provide. Companies and vendors themselves would be enticed to invest more time, resources and money in using these platforms if they were able to measure the benefits (the actual outcomes).

The results also show that, at least in the Italian market, these platforms are not used as a substitute for more traditional ones. Instead, they are used as support for the various sales stages and integrated with traditional techniques. Meetings at trade

fairs, calls and e-mails are still the main methods used. Sellers use social media to facilitate the first contact, after which they switch to e-mails or phone calls.

All of this, however, is crucial when contacts, interested people are converted into actual customers. The conversion of leads is therefore a recurring topic in interviews. Social media are useful in the approach phase, but once a contact has been made this contact must be converted in order to establish a relationship that will lead to negotiation and final transaction. The ultimate goal is still sales and increased turnover, but the advantage is seen in the lowering of the cost in the medium to long term. The negotiation and approach with the customer must not focus on the sale, because if this is perceived by the customer, the negotiation breaks down and at that point the sale and the customer are lost. According to salesmen Social media are useful at the moment of approach, because they help to create empathy, hence a connection that makes the first contact less cold. This connection has to be converted into a conversation and then into a working relationship. In this case, content is essential to educate prospects, make them aware of the benefits and service, nurture the relationship. The interviewees state that there is a close correlation between the marketing that creates the content and the sales force that is the front line in managing the relationship with the customer. All interviewees stated that there is a perfect alignment between the sales and marketing function or the company is working to improve this integration.

Finally, from the data collected it emerges that there is no a company policy regarding the use of these tools. There is a lack of a structured strategy that provides clear guidelines to be pursued in order to achieve the objectives set. The use of these platforms appears to be amateurish. Companies take it for granted that their employees have social profiles and use them to improve their work performance. Except in rare cases in which generic guidelines are given or in which marketing is required to control the publication of social content, the rest in the B2B market is still lacking in this respect.

Although with some minor variations, the responses collected from the vendors are consistent with each other and in line with the academic literature highlighted in the previous chapters.

### 3.2.2 Social selling: investigating the B2B buyer's perception

Also, in the second phase of the research, after the analysis of the interviews previously collected among the sellers, the interviews conducted among the buyers were analysed. The aim was to understand how widespread the use of social media in the buying process actually is, how these tools impact buying decisions and what perceptions they give of the seller's professionalism. Eleven interviews varying in length from thirty to fifty minutes were collected from buyers of different companies in different industries. The figures interviewed do not always correspond to that of the purchasing manager or the buyer within the company for two different

reasons: 1) the difficulty in finding contacts, 2) the presence of multifaceted and multifunctional figures within the company, where very often the roles are not well delineated and the same person covers several areas of competence. However, the questions were aimed at learning about the use of social media in the relationship with their vendors/suppliers in each case, so the interviews were all considered at the same level. For the summary of the buyers' profiles see the table 2 below.

Table 2: Profiles of the buyers

<b>Buyers</b>				
<b>N.</b>	<b>Job position</b>	<b>Business type</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>
<b>B1</b>	Freelance	Services	Healthcare	37 min
<b>B2</b>	Sales and marketing manager	Services and product	Construction	46 min
<b>B3</b>	Marketing manager	Services	Waste disposal	30 min
<b>B4</b>	n.r.*	Services	Tourism	20 min
<b>B5</b>	Buyer	Product	Medical devices and safety products	54 min
<b>B6</b>	Buyer	Product	Bar furnishings	29 min
<b>B7</b>	Buyer	Product	Medical devices, safety products and cosmetics	24 min
<b>B8</b>	Development project manager	Product	Household appliance	38 min
<b>B9</b>	Buyer	Product	Engineering	35 min

<b>B10</b>	Technology and Infrastructure Manager	Service	ITC	1 h e 2 min
<b>B11</b>	Buyer	Product	Wellness	25 min
* Not reported				

Source: Own elaboration

Again, the first theme that emerged is that for work purposes LinkedIn is the most used social network because it is considered the most professional. Facebook is used to join communities or interest groups but is looked upon with distrust.

*B1: I have to say that LinkedIn with the colleagues is the best thing to confront each other. I know that many of my colleagues are also on Facebook groups, but Facebook is a bit too open, then afterwards there is the risk that there are also patients, that it spreads too much, LinkedIn is much better to manage also because many patients do not have the LinkedIn profile.*

*B8: On Instagram what happens is that the new service providers like blogs, influencers who are looking for the right product contact us a lot through Instagram. On the other hand, on LinkedIn there are more business-oriented services.*

*B6: Yes, it happens to me to be contacted, more than looking for a new supplier. Definitely the main channel is LinkedIn, because it goes according to the job position of the person, and they search in that way. Yes, mainly LinkedIn, it never happened to me to be contacted on other channels.*

*B7: Lately, there have been increasing enquiries on LinkedIn, then as a social, perhaps more business-oriented. It often happens that companies I don't know contact me.*

*B10: One of the first things to check is how suppliers are present on social. By social I mean, here you have to make a distinction, because clearly there are those who prefer one platform and those who prefer another. Honestly at the work level I check information on LinkedIn, because it is the most serious among the various universes...*

*B10: So, whatever for the work part, I just use LinkedIn, it is on LinkedIn.*

*B10: Actually, in Facebook, at least in the groups I follow, there is a lower preparation with respect to certain topics. Apart from four to five obviously who know about it. But on average that. Whereas those on LinkedIn have a slightly higher average preparation, or rather those who iterate have an average high preparation.*

However, unlike vendors, the use of personal social profiles for work purposes is less widespread. Seven out of eleven respondents say they do not follow content posted by vendors or do not surf social for work purposes due to lack of time and sometimes due to lack of familiarity. These were the customers who defined themselves as 'passive' on social media, characterised by a low use of these tools and a low or non-existent interaction with the proposed content (likes, shares, comments). The other interviewees, on the other hand, stated that social media in their daily activities are useful both for scouting, but also for following the profiles of potential or established suppliers. This confirms that the phenomenon in the B2B market is still in its infancy, so there are buyer companies that do not adopt such approaches and others that are integrating them and perceiving the related benefits. Particularly popular is content that shows personal knowledge and interest on the part of the seller, rather than mere re-sharing of content posted on the company page. Respondents who claim to interact on such platforms mostly do so through likes or re-sharing. In particular, one of the interviewees stated that he personally limits his interventions to only when he feels prepared on the subject and if he is

really interested in the topic. This, he explains, because social media can be the cause of easy misinterpretation and therefore it is facile to fall into negative consequences or reputational problems. However, the buyer who uses his personal profile for work reflects the image of the company, so he has to be careful about how he presents himself on social networks and the activities he carries out. It also emerges from all the interviews conducted that there is no company policy or strategy that can help employees to tread the right path without the risk of falling into inappropriate or wrong behaviour.

*B9: No, I'm not an active one, it's perhaps also because of my little experience. It's still a bit difficult for me, just to find, to understand the limit of what can be disclosed, what can not be disclosed, also at the level of questions, etc. I would like to avoid finding myself in uncomfortable situations with my company.*

This is also related to the fact that there is a general scepticism related to social media and they are often seen as less professional than more traditional channels (i.e. emails to negotiate or regulate the final transaction) The information can be untrue and the content of just of appearance. Social media seems to be seen as unreliable. This is a further obstacle to the popularity of online platforms as a business tool. This is the reason why most of the buyers still prefer relying on traditional methods.

*B2: So, let's say at the beginning not so much, let's say yes, obviously I looked at a site and then afterwards I met them because, obviously we met in person.*

*B4: Yes, we had a look at the site and then we went straight to the phone. We phoned, we made an appointment, we went straight to talk to them in person.*

*B6: The information I generally release... In fact, I generally never release information, even if it is requested. Rather I prefer to be contacted, maybe even by phone. Rather I leave my number directly, if I am interested in that profile, that request. Otherwise, I generally never answer on, let's say on the channel, because I honestly much prefer to have a talk with the supplier, and secondly, to go through a channel that is a little bit more, let's say, less personal and more professional, and I prefer it that way.*

Here, too, the answers appear mixed because another current of thought considers online platforms useful and even revolutionary.

*B5: Absolutely. Because now, absurdly, you can buy several, several quantities of a product or several thousand euros worth of a product and never have physically seen your seller. This is something that fifteen years ago I don't think was feasible in any respect. So, I imagine our company, in order to buy or to get new suppliers, had to wait for the representative who knocked on the door and proposed himself or maybe an import company that proposed itself to small companies and went there with a package of Chinese producers that he had already found and went to propose his producers around Italy or the region. So, we now sit at our desks and do all this work through the use of the internet of social networking sites like LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Facebook. Because even through Facebook, however, the company itself if it has a channel, a dedicated page, is continually targeted by salespeople from all over the world and then contacted to have new to do, to have new negotiations and to have new contacts. In short, so today the choice is much easier, much more possibility to find new suppliers to be more and more competitive in the market.*

The content posted from the supplier can be an indication of a more or less structured company, of a more or less prepared salesperson, and an opportunity to learn about and deepen certain topics, through videos, articles or webinar.

However, all respondents agree that they are now bombarded with offers and messages due to digital channels. They receive these offers through a multitude of

channels, from e-mails to phone calls to messages on social networks. Many of these messages are not relevant, the remaining part is divided between standardised and more personalised proposals. The latter are certainly more successful and attract the attention of the buyer, who either replies to the supplier or keeps aside the most interesting contacts that may be useful at a later date. What is interesting to note is that the offer to be picked up by the customer must be made at the right time. Timing is crucial, respondents state that if they find an offer consistent with their need at that time or the appropriate solution to one of their problems at that time, they will not hesitate to contact that supplier.

*B10: with a few possible partner notes, the idea emerged to do something new, something that would improve the company, and so we started, perhaps with a spot project at first and then maybe more structural on that.*

*B8: That's a step I take when I'm interested, I mean timing is very important in this thing. When they tell me about a type of service that I'm not dealing with at the moment and that I have in my to-do list to deal with sooner or later there I go into it a little bit. But the timing is not so simple. In most cases I don't even look at the LinkedIn profile, I read the message very quickly: when it is very personalised I reply, let's say I decline though, replying personally. When it is not personalised, I don't reply.*

*B2: The discriminating factor that makes me choose to go deeper with one piece of content and maybe leave others aside is the degree of interest. Obviously, maybe when I open a piece of content, I choose what interests me and move on, maybe if I find something that interests me at that particular moment. Let's say that, in principle, a little bit everything interests me. But, you know, since we don't always have time to go into everything, maybe I stop at what may be important for that moment is what I'm interested in at that moment, so I go deeper.*

From the difficulty of being noticed among the many messages and of contacting the client at the right time, it follows directly that it is the buyers themselves who

scouting on social media at the moment of the need and look for the company that can provide them with the right solution or product, then contact the seller. The more specific is the industry sector of the buying company (i.e. they need a specific material or need that certain standards are respected) the more this is true.

*B4: We as a company dealing with medical devices have a whole supplier certification process that is very complex, due to the ISO standards in force and therefore that there are a series of regulations and high standards that we have to respect in order to be able to market medical devices. Even the inclusion of a simple supplier is complicated, it requires a lot of verification on the part of the company, both qualitative and of the production process. It is not a purchase, for example, of a piece of iron that costs twenty per cent less from one supplier than from the one I am buying now and I can easily change the supplier. Here there are more complex situations that have to be analysed and so it is not always easy to make a change of supplier. That's why I also decided to protect myself a bit as a figure, as I don't have a social profile.*

*B1: This happens from time to time, several times, from unidentified companies of ketogenic diets. Then there are the serious companies that we see at medical-scientific congresses, that are certified, and have specific medical products, and others that are unknown, but who want you to be their point of reference, this happens very often. [...]*

*In our business (in the medical sphere) there are validated things that have specific channels and then all the other non-validated products that have other channels. These products are equally successful but I have always tried to avoid.*

A common point in all interviews, however, is the fact that when buyers are contacted via social media, they are always contacted with the seller's personal profile and not with the company profile. This is an indication that the seller is trying to establish a slightly more personal relationship and a one-to-one communication between him and his customer. However, little consideration is still given to vendor profiles and the content they post when it comes to select the most

suitable supplier. The elements that characterise this choice are: the company's degree of trustworthiness (reviews, recommendations from colleagues in the same sector, word of mouth), the company's experience in its field of work (i.e. the number of years since they have been doing that their activity), company size (very often, suppliers prefer small companies because they offer a more customised, flexible service and are more attentive to the customer's needs).

Finally, it is interesting to note that buyers actually use social media more in the later stages of their relationship with the supplier than in the initial phase. WhatsApp is used a lot for quick and informal communication regarding the stages of product preparation and shipment. Here again, the preference for traditional channels such as email for more formal communication of the negotiations themselves emerges. This is because email still remains the official channel of communication. Furthermore, these channels are used with already acquired suppliers and not with new or potential suppliers as buyers prefer to use the website (considered a more traditional channel on a par with email and calls) to obtain information and assess the suitability of a potential supplier.

Overall, the data collected shows that B2B customers believe that the benefits brought by these tools in the relationship with the supplier outweigh the negative sides. Although still skeptical or uncertain about a more profitable use of online platforms, they believe that in the future there will be an ever-greater pervasion of these technologies in relations with suppliers.

### **3.3 COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE: COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THE SELLER AND THE BUYER REALITY**

As analysed above, the digital evolution has strongly influenced the B2B market and in particular the relationship between supplier and seller. It has therefore transformed the sales affecting all the stages involved in the process: from the moment they establish the first contact to the final transaction, the post-sales service and the follow-up. In the first two phases of the research, we analysed how social media are used by B2B sellers respectively and how this use is perceived by the customer. In the present section the scope is to match the interviews collected from the two parties involved in the sales relationship in order to understand at which point the phenomenon stands and how it is evolving in the Italian business markets. An attempt was made through this phase of analysis to understand the similarities and the differences between the testimonies of the two groups of interviewees and whether these elements support or refute the theoretical studies illustrated in the previous chapters. From the data collected, a number of analysis themes common to the two groups of respondents emerge, thus demonstrating that the customers have an appropriate perception of the online activities implemented by the salespeople.

Both categories involved (i.e. sellers and buyers) stated that the most used channel for business reasons is LinkedIn. As mentioned above, this social network enjoys a higher reputation compared to the others, it is considered the most serious and

professional among social media. The information shared and content posted on LinkedIn has a medium-high tone, so that for formal contacts especially in the B2B context this channel is preferred. The contacts followed or connection requests accepted on the personal LinkedIn profile are strictly professional, i.e. work colleagues, suppliers, customers and potential business contacts

A second element of importance common to both sides, is that social media when used in daily work activities are used as a tool to support the process, to integrate these channels with traditional ones rather than to substitute them. For both buying and selling function, online channels are exploited to speed up the processes, however for the formal stages of negotiation, they switch to traditional channels that are considered less personal and more official (mail, calls, etc.).

Sellers use social media to search for the information and the contacts they need then what they really want is the corporate e-mail and phone number of the buyer in order to proceed with a call to explain the details of their offer.

Buyers search for information about the supply company on websites (considered traditional channels as they do not fall within the definition of social media). Buyers states that they consider the web site as the company business card. In case of well-organized and structured website, the perception about the firm is positive. On the contrary if the web page is unstructured, missing or chaotic, this negatively influence their perception about the business.

The reason for this still heavy reliance on more traditional channels is that digital ones are perceived as a recent and new phenomenon in Italian B2B context, for this reason social media are still little used compared to B2C sector (especially for buyers). Companies and employees intuit the potential benefits and advantages that social media can bring, however there is still scepticism about the actual results and conversion rates. Many do not know how to use these tools, others are afraid of the risks involved and still others prefer to prevent them from conveying useful information to competitors and protect themselves by not opening social profiles. For all these reasons, sellers and buyers still heavily rely on traditional channels. From the cases examined it can be noticed that when used, social media are used to get contacts or information and when it is necessary to step into to the operational part, the preferred method is the phone call or a message to the buyer corporate e-mail.

Social media seems to be not appropriate for complex business solutions. Several interviewees emphasise that in very specific and particular industry sectors where certifications and compliance with certain products' parameters and quality standards are required (sectors such as medical, pharmaceutical or metallurgical requiring particular material compositions), social channels are not suitable. In the medical field, in fact, validated suppliers move according to specific and regulated channels, while on the Internet and on social networks in general, all those

unidentified and non-certified products are proposed, therefore considered scams or invalid.

Going further when asked about the benefits of using social media, respondents all indicated speed as the main one. The use of online channels allows unprecedented speed in the search for information. Buyers can quickly investigate who is offering them a particular product or service. They can also quickly check the corporate social profiles that are now particularly active in updating their channels with the news and the information about their services and products. Sellers can quickly find out via LinkedIn profiles who within the company performs the purchasing function and which are their contacts. Respondents state that the time needed to find information has halved compared to when the use of social media was not possible. In addition, the data collected offer an interesting issue that seems in apparent contrast with the previous statement. The major reason indicated for not updating and maintaining social media private profiles (in relation to the working sphere e.g. post company-related content, update their job position) is lack of time. Lack of time is also the biggest reason why buyers themselves do not follow and read content posted by suppliers (both acquired and potential ones). It is therefore interesting to draw attention to this twofold aspect: while on the one hand, social media saves time when searching for information, when take place the transaction (e.g. communication via WhatsApp allows faster and more immediate updates on the progress of the sale), on the other hand, there is no the necessary time to be able

to view all the proposals received or to keep up to date with the content posted by sellers.

Directly related to this statement buyers report (especially when searching for a specific product or service) that they are bombarded with requests, proposals and offers, many of which are not relevant for their job. It is also often difficult to identify among the mass of offerings and proposals which ones are interesting or potentially useful. However, making the comparison with the situation of few years ago buyers notice an improvement in the customization of the offers that they receive, describing them as more personalised. At the same time, the problem of all those standardised offers that are annoying and are not considered remains. So even if sellers put more effort into correctly analysing information obtained via social media in order to create tailor-made offers, these efforts risk not being noticed when they end up in the daily pile of messages that potential buyers receive. This is in line with the theory as Corsaro and Maggioni (2020) identified the issue of all the potential connection created by social media channel as an increase of competition in the marketplace making the customer experience a feeling of sameness where all the proposals seem to lose importance.

The elements of fundamental importance therefore to differentiate oneself from the numerous competitor proposals are two: 1) Timing and 2) Differentiation through the posted content.

Proposals sent are taken into consideration by the customer if at the time they are sent the customer is interested in that specific solution or product (timing) or if the proposal is particularly interesting and the customer perceives added value or an advantage for the company. If the offer/ message meets these requirements the customer take the proposal into consideration, answer to the message or keep the information for a possible future need. The rest of the offers (the ones that does not meet these characteristics) are ignored or politely declined or even lost in the pile and not even viewed.

This is in line with theoretical studies that emphasise the importance of providing relevant, interesting and timely content according to customer needs (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvien e Taiminen, 2016).

Hence as Lemon & Verhoef (2016) suggests, monitoring and managing the increasingly complex customer journeys is a key aspect of customer experience management if the seller want to reach and engage the right target.

Timing is neither simple nor obvious, sometimes it is even random. It is up to the salesperson himself to make good use of the information gathered, what makes the difference in fact is the salesperson's touch. Respondents agree that social media is only a means to the end goal (sales and increased turnover), but this should not be perceived by the customer. In fact, the aim must be to improve the relationship with the customers and support them in the sales process, only then indirectly can the improvement of financial performance be achieved). Below is an interesting

practical example of how the salesperson was able to optimally exploit the relationship with customers for new sales opportunities using information from social networks.

*S2: I had met someone, a colleague of mine, who knew when his customers' children were turning 18. He sold cars and when he had the information through social media, so when he knew that his customer's child was about to turn 18, he would send out the brochure saying come and try the mini rather than other cars more appropriate for young people with new drivers. That's exactly what I'm talking about, nurturing a relationship with a customer, and that's where social networks can certainly help. The example of the car salesman in my opinion is very interesting. That is a stroke of genius, a real salesman's stroke, to put it bluntly.*

Although still at an early stage of use for many companies, there are others (especially those trading with foreign countries) who instead identify numerous advantages in using social media in the purchasing process. Social media makes it possible to keep an eye on things remotely. Empirical evidence confirms the studies done by Rapp & Pnagopoulos (2012) that affirm that social media changed the way in which B2B companies and sellers interact with customers, B2B buyers are more informed than ever and can easily find real time information on the product, the service and the company without the need to rely on salesforce information. This make possible to finalize the transaction without ever having met the seller.

Finally, all interviewees, with no exceptions (both from seller side and buyer side), state that a structured company policy is lacking. Companies often take it for granted that their employees have social profiles. However, their use at work is not regulated in any way. A few states that they follow the company's general code of

conduct when using their personal profiles for work purposes. Others state that they refrain from using social media for fear of incurring unpleasant reputational consequences for themselves and for the company. This is a critical point to reflect on as social media have become pervasive in both personal and working life. In order to exploit its potential, facilitate its use, and avoid unpleasant mistakes, it would be advisable to outline real codes of conduct and company policies on the use of social media in working activities.

### **3.4 MISALIGNMENTS BETWEEN SOCIAL SELLING ACTIVITIES AND CUSTOMER PERCEPTION**

Going through all the interviews one by one, the main themes emerged from both sides have been outlined. How salespeople in the Italian B2B context currently use social media platforms in their work, what benefits they derive from this use and what limits still need to be overcome. How buyers, on the other hand, perceive the nature of their relationships with their suppliers has changed, what advantages they have gained from using social media and what are the negative aspects. After matching the answers collected from the two groups and identifying which commonalities emerged from the topic, some profound differences come to light from the data collected between what vendors declared and what was actually perceived by their customers.

The first information obtained from the data is that sellers agree that social media are very useful especially in the first phase of the sales process: the approach phase, as the information search carried out allows them to be more accurate in presenting their offer and asking for an initial contact. However, on the other hand, customers are often reluctant to leave their phone number and prefer instead to leave their email address to receive the material and contact the company by themselves if interested. Others, however, state that if their phone number is made public and they are contacted on WhatsApp they perceive it as a dry and invasive contact. The statements made by sellers are therefore in this case not matched by the buyer who is bombarded with enquiries and offers when searching. Eight out of ten offers turn out not to be in line with buyer's company needs and are either standardised messages or products and services that are poorly developed in relation to the company needs or even have nothing to do with the business.

*B9: It depends, honestly, eight times out of ten I don't reply, two times out of ten when I think it might be interesting maybe I forward the contact to my Chinese colleague and ask her to check or maybe I try to reply.*

Another discordant note is that sellers often claim that one of the advantages of social media (in particular LinkedIn) is that it overcomes possible gatekeepers so they can easily find the person in the sales role and can immediately contact him/her. This is not always the case because very often the marketing function filters the proposals received to be passed on to salespeople, thus carrying out an initial skimming. This may represent a barrier to be overcome. Secondly, it was

pointed out that sometimes the person who is contacted is not the person responsible for the area sought and that therefore those requests are discarded or ignored. Finally, it is important to note that buyers state that they use social media very little, sometimes they do not even have profiles. This means that many times the information found by sellers on the job positions held by a particular person is not up-to-date and therefore no longer true. Much more often, instead, buyers deliberately hide or do not release/publish important or key information to protect themselves. They explain that this is a way of protecting relevant information and not revealing it in order to maintain their competitive advantage over that particular information (which suppliers they use, what role they play within the company, what kind of business relations they have etc.).

*B5: I, by my professional choice, since I started I don't use social for my work. I have chosen not to use LinkedIn type profiles or in any case have profiles specific to my profession on the various social networks. I obviously have my personal company email address, I have my company Skype account, so not personal but just company, which I use mainly to be in contact with my foreign suppliers. [...] I for now have chosen not to use LinkedIn because I know anyway that the company has a channel on LinkedIn and so I also avoid spam situations very often. So, I prefer to focus on requests made directly from the company's main channels and not be contacted simply because my name is associated with the company being a Buyer. That's why I decided to safeguard myself a bit as a figure (buyer) by not having a social profile.*

*B5: The fact that it comes to you personally is different than being on the page or having liked the supplier's page. Which a buyer in theory should never do, because otherwise if you see that I have liked that supplier you already know that the company buys from that supplier. That is also why I don't use social media much, because the connections that are sometimes the important things, the most*

*important things in our work, should be kept private, this at the buyer level. At the sales level it's obvious that for example someone who has a machinery company wants to show that they sell to Barilla or whatever. Because for them it's an important reference, so it's normal. I, who maybe have a trading company, for me it is essential that I buy from that supplier that product at the best price and I know that it is only I have these conditions for a number of reasons, I would like to keep it hidden and I would also like to mind my own business. Selling this information for free on social media would bother me personally, that's another point of view that maybe I didn't share before that can be useful.*

*B11: No, there are hardly any groups dedicated to shopping on LinkedIn. So only in emergency situations where I really can't find anything or I need something really super specific that I can't find in Italy or other reasons I can refer to these groups, but I always need anonymity, so I have to ask the group administrator to do an anonymous search.*

The most interesting point to be analysed is the mismatch between the phase of the sales process on which sellers focus their efforts and the one considered most important by buyers. When analysing the interviews conducted among sellers, they were asked at which stage they considered the use of social media to be most important. The answer was unanimous, sellers consider social media to be most important in the initial approach phase. They then use this tool to search for the necessary information. When this question was posed to buyers, the consensus was that social media would be useful in the relationship with their sellers at a more advanced stage, i.e. with already established sellers.

*B6: Definitely in the offer phase, that yes. Because also to make it clear what the need is, maybe you need to develop a product or anyway to find a good solution for a project that is already standing, maybe you have a prototype, you would like to ask your supplier for a solution. So, in the offer phase it could be very, very useful. Surely the use there in the phase of non-compliance in the phase of surely that is to*

*and say, if there are no problems surely you make a phone call so WhatsApp, let's say it is more for the use of the exchange, precisely, of visual material.*

*B7: I honestly social so like WeChat, LinkedIn I don't use them to search for information. So, let's say I use social, mainly WeChat, LinkedIn I use them very, very little and to have a conversation with already developed contacts. Searching for suppliers I don't use LinkedIn, maybe I happened to use Alibaba. However, once I have the first contact, I tend to move directly to the email conversation. Then afterwards, if via email there is a need to have a quick communication anyway it is a bit complicated, then I go to instant messaging like WeChat can be. Because on this channel the conversation is much more immediate.*

*B9: Those no, even those in target let's say, it is not a reason to choose someone because he is in target, since he has the information, then as I said before, once the supplier has been selected that gives satisfaction it is fine instead that he has all this access to brand knowledge, because it strengthens the partnership even more, but in the initial phase it does not allow me to understand how good a supplier is.*

*B10: I if I clearly follow all the partners we work with, this by default and then there is the interaction with the classic like, the sharing if something that I actually think is very interesting that can be of help to my contacts, to let them know of course the solutions that I am comfortable with. Because once upon a time there was the classic word-of-mouth, that is, I get the supplier guy and I don't know him, he tells me look at the work with A, B and C. Maybe you know A and you give him a call. Now you do the same thing but on a social level. So, from that point of view the interaction is not so much with new ones, but with existing suppliers. [...] And then, at the end of an event, maybe the week after you post a shot or the little piece of video where we talk about the product and services, so the iteration is there. Mainly there was a strong use of WhatsApp messaging apps, basically.*

*B11: None, I don't see any benefit of using social even in the research phase, so of the information. No, I go to the corporate site, I search the corporate site. I get the fleet well done, the main information in the case of direct suppliers and I go from that, then it's very much up to the responsiveness and the obviously competence and the willingness to work that the supplier has when I contact him. Now it has happened to me, because I have now started a scouting activity, that maybe out of ten suppliers contacted half have still not replied to me. It's been three weeks, on those, the start is really false, so whatever happens now, it's unlikely that a relationship will be established.*

*S1: Absolutely, it is fundamental. I use LinkedIn mainly for the first contact. When I'm in front of a company, to understand the people who work within that company, it's fundamental because then I can directly call, not by asking I can talk to someone, but directly call the person who is responsible for that precise function in the company. Clearly the fact that you have the person (and LinkedIn tells you this) with one click, even if it's not first level but even if it's second level you see it anyway so you can already call the company asking for a specific person so you can pass the gatekeeper no? Because the answering secretary says gosh if you already know the person's name it means somehow, it's not a cold call, it means you already know more than we do.*

*S2: Information found on social media is especially useful with potential customers, because then it occurs to me that an already acquired customer will come in at a later stage, right? Maybe you can get some more information for cuteness rather than to be able to maintain a more solid and lasting relationship. But probably the first value in the ice-breaking phase, in the approach phase. [...] Information is important. So, if social media can give information it can give it in practically any context. That is, the customer is satisfied not when you hook him, social is useful for hooking, for managing, the customer is satisfied when the service you have sold him or her is effectively brought home, the result is brought home.*

*S3: Let's say that it is becoming increasingly difficult to approach new customers, so-called prospects, who have never yet bought from us by making the classic phone call, rather than trying to qualify at events or trade fairs. It is becoming more and more difficult because the customer is more and more informed, and more and more hounded by thousands of companies trying to sell him from toilet paper to the most complex solutions, and so it is becoming more and more difficult to qualify professionally. Social selling, the use we make of it, is to go directly to contact people through the Ff tool, which is the main one we use as social selling, which in some way already allows us to have a presentation because by going to read our profile, what we have done and what we do already qualifies us and if they respond to us in some way it means that there is an interest and then they are not stormed but they can also make a selection of people who go looking for them. The biggest advantage is to be able to get to talk to a very high-level interlocutor, because the people who are on LinkedIn tend to be people who have important, decision-making roles within companies. It would be a bit difficult through a phone call rather than an event to approach them, whereas in this way there is a bit of a flattening, in the sense that it becomes easier because I send a message and simply the person answers or not. There is more speed let's say in being able to contact these people.*

In the approach phase, in fact, social media are still not considered fundamental by buyers as they (by unanimous consensus among respondents) prefer when looking for a new supplier to use traditional methods. They therefore still rely on trade fairs, search engines (Alibaba, google), websites, calls and word of mouth when looking for a new supplier. Among these methods when it comes to select a new supplier, they sometimes consider social media enquiries, but marginally.

*B9: Of course, I contacted those companies that looked interesting from the website. I come back to say that for me the website is still a very important business card of the supplier. Because trivially one visits a website and there is a problem with the domain or the page is not beautiful or you don't find the content. You click on the About Us section and it's under review. No. So for me the website is a very important business card of the supplier. The more information the better. When I find suppliers on websites that give answers to my questions, of course I contact the supplier, on Monday I meet a supplier I found like that.*

Another discordance found is on the vendor selection criteria used by customers. Sellers believe that posting relevant content helps them to build their personal reputation as also evidenced in the literature (see Lacoste, 2016; Rollins et al., 2014; Wang et al. 2016). These studies argue that digital platforms are an excellent tool to build a salesperson's reputation while the vendor is interacting within business communities, sharing posts or blogging. These platforms, according to the studies, are in fact ideal for sharing testimonials and increasing seller's credibility. For example, LinkedIn allows community members to validate specific salesperson skills thus providing visibility and recognition from other group members.

However, statements left by customers contradict this belief. Certainly, among those who check the profiles of sellers, seeing content that shows the seller's own point of view is more appreciated than mere corporate re-posting. This appreciation, however, does not influence the customer's purchasing decision because when selecting a vendor, customers check company profiles and pages, and much more often websites. Consequently, they state that they base their purchasing decisions on the reliability of the company (reviews by people who know or have used that company), years of experience and work in the field concerned, and the size of the company (this is, however, related to the belief that smaller companies offer better customer service, satisfying the customer's needs more than larger companies that treat them as a number). Furthermore, for the evidence claimed by the studies to be true, buyers should be present within these communities. Instead, the interviews show that buyers do not follow and are not active in online discussion groups. Among those with profiles, only a few interact by leaving a few likes or a short comment. The majority, on the other hand, declare themselves to be passive subjects and do not take the time to delve into the proposed content. Therefore, if these communities remain closed only to sellers, they cannot hope to have the desired effect on their image in the perception of potential buyers. Marketers should therefore focus more on using this content to educate acquired leads and to nurture the relationship with existing customers by trying to stimulate their interest with useful content.

### **3.5 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

This research fills the gap by highlighting the customers perception and point of view on the activities performed with social media by the seller. Social media triggered change in the relationship with the customer. If ten or twelve years ago the seller had to go and knock on the buyer's door to present the company and the product, today one click is enough to have all the necessary information. Today is possible to conclude the transaction without ever meet the seller. Often the buyer declare that the first contact is more efficient when he/she search for the supplier by him/herself rather than answer to online messages and requests.

The present research offers some useful insights to improve the daily activities performed on digital platforms.

First of all, the lack of a company policy that clearly and unambiguously regulates the use of social profiles for work purposes is the first problem to be solved. Very often, in fact, this turns out to be the biggest obstacle to the use of this platforms for working activities. Regulating the use of social media and indicating how it should be used, instead of taking it for granted and leaving the employee free to choose how to integrate them is fundamental in order to pursue a structured social selling strategy and would allow for greater feedback from the buyer side.

A second fundamental point is the inclusion of training courses within companies so as to make their employees prepared on the use of these tools and explain to them all their functionalities. Although social media in the B2B sphere is still little used

to date, sales managers strongly believe in the growth of this tool and that social media is the future and will therefore be used more and more. In fact, some state that they would be willing to increase their use right away if they received appropriate training. It is believed that the use of these tools will grow exponentially, so it is expected that investment in training and integration in this area will have an adequate return.

The data demonstrate that social media can open new and valuable window for B2B sales companies, allowing them to customize their offer for the customer and to nurture the relationship once is established, furthermore it should be exploited to improve customer care and customer service. Social media channels can assist B2B firms in obtaining information more efficiently which can contribute to strengthen the relationship with the customer, build trust, better regulate the stages and the sales relationship. In order to achieve these results, however, it is necessary to introduce some changes in the approach to social selling. Salesforce should not neglect the benefits that social media bring in the relationship with existing customers. As they focus their efforts solely on the initial phases of the relationship (approach) this can damage the later relationship and they risk not making the most of the potential offered by digital channels. It is additionally advised to introduce structured guidelines (corporate policy on social media use) and training courses, especially for the buyers' side, who seem to be the most deficient in terms of the use and knowledge of digital platforms. Salespeople, on the other hand, seem to

have understood the importance and advantage of these tools in their work, but they need adequate metrics to monitor the results and the return of their activity on social networks. This is necessary to understand when they are proceeding correctly and when they need to adjust their focus.

The study also revealed the importance of adopting a personalised social selling approach. The many enquiries received from buyers are still standardised and not very targeted. Very often in the interviews conducted emerges the buyers' disappointment for being bombarded with offers and messages that are not relevant when searching for information online, making it even more difficult to identify among the many which proposals are useful. When sellers search for information on customers' social profiles to profile possible targets clients, it is recommended to be more careful in processing the data and contacting the right person, the responsible figure for the company purchases if they want their efforts not to be lost among the multitude of messages. Properly understand who the interlocutor is and implementing a highly customised approach is recommended if sales managers wants to obtain satisfactory results, since when a customer decides to follow up on a request, he/she does so only with customised ones; all others are trashed and/or ignored. This is possible thanks to more in-depth research, more adequate controls, correct data processing and/or the possible help of special technologies. Furthermore, an aspect closely related to the previous one and which emerges largely from the study's data is the importance of timing and differentiation. These

elements, although difficult to pursue, are crucial in a sales offer or contact request in the new business environment. Sales managers in their strategies should take these aspects into account if they wish to have positive customer feedback. The first element concerns proposing one's offer at the moment when the customer has that particular need that the sales company can satisfy. Differentiation consists in proposing content that meets the customer's expectations, is not trivial and is either innovative or different from other offers on the market.

A fundamental point that all interviewees agree on is that social media is a tool, a simple and easy-to-use medium where information is public and available to everyone. It is up to the salesperson or sales manager to know how to properly exploit the information and create strategies and tricks that make the difference in the market.

The social selling strategies that salespeople use today are aimed at acquiring new contacts and new customers, neglecting the opportunities that social media instead offer to develop and improve relationships with existing customers. In fact, many buyers state that social media is more important to them in stages after the first one, i.e. with already acquired suppliers. Therefore, structuring actions, strategies and content that are useful to one's customer base is necessary in order to nurture the relationship and exploit the potential collaborations and co-creations with customers that social media facilitate. In fact, buyers are very careful not to post relevant information on social profiles, so it is easier to find the necessary

information once the relationship has been established and trust has been built with the customer. In this case influencing purchase decisions is easier than in the initial phase when a cold approach is attempted.

On the sellers' side, one of the biggest concerns is the inability to correctly identify the return on activities carried out on social media platforms, the introduction of clear and objective metrics to measure the return or improvement in sales performance is necessary.

The importance of updating and maintaining websites also emerges, as buyers still rely heavily on this tool as the company's first business card and the impression it gives influences the customer when choosing a supplier. Not neglecting this element is important in a market where B2B customers still very often rely on it for the information they need rather than on social profiles. Referring the customer to these pages from the website can therefore be a good way to increase the visibility of company pages on the various social media.

The value of content remains undisputed, to keep customers engaged and up-to-date it is necessary to create ad-hoc content that is able to stimulate the customer's interest and provide them with information they do not already have. The importance of creating value for the customer emerges throughout the interview track in particular content such as webinars, updates or job progress, videos on the supply company's processes and changes are particularly interesting for customers who wish to stay up-to-date and follow the movements and evolution of their

supplier. When a customer visits a vendor's personal social page, they particularly appreciate that the content is related to their own work, However, it should be reworked rather than being a mere re-post of content posted on company pages. Posting content reprocessed by the seller shows a certain knowledge and professionalism in one's field of work, and could therefore be helpful in increasing the customer's trust in the salesperson and help to consolidate the working relationship with the customer. It is crucial to emphasise that among the various social platforms, the one considered most serious and reliable on both sides (seller and buyer) is LinkedIn. In the business sphere, it is the preferable social platform of choice due to its professional reputation. It therefore remains the best choice for seeking information, approaching customers, maintaining contacts and developing business relationships in the B2B sphere. Sales managers must therefore continue to exploit this channel in order to identify their ideal customers and build a solid network of relevant connections in their business environment.

Many purchasing managers in the B2B sector still heavily rely on traditional channels to make new contact and search for suppliers, due to scepticism about new methods or lack of knowledge in their use. Nurturing relationships across an integration of the use of traditional and digital channels is therefore crucial in order not to overlook or miss important opportunities to work with customers who are absent or have little presence on web platforms.

Lastly, when it comes to proposals for complex solutions and in sensitive sectors and areas such as chemistry or healthcare, given the scepticism of buyers to trust proposals made on non-validated channels, if you want to obtain greater response results, it is a good idea to show all the certifications as well as the conformity and authenticity of your proposals in order to prove that they are not scams or non-validated products.

### **3.6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The aim of this study is to investigate how the relationship between buyer and seller has been transformed by highlighting in particular the perspective of the B2B customer. However, like all research, it is subject to limitations that could be the starting point for future research.

First, the sample collected for the interviews consists of sellers and buyers from Italian companies. The research therefore only presents results that can be attributed to the evolution of the phenomenon in the Italian business context alone. This implies that the research must be further extended to other countries in order to complete the study with the situation in the international field. Therefore, future research can focus both on studying the phenomenon in individual countries (others than Italy) to monitor its evolution or in a broader context, where results in different countries are compared. Again, a joint study could be carried out where the data collected comes from different cultural contexts indifferently.

A second limitation is that within the sample taken into consideration, not all interviewees held the role of buyer or were not directly part of the company's purchasing function. This is due both to the difficulty encountered in finding contacts and to the inherent characteristic of the companies considered, which are small and medium-sized, so that the roles played by individual employees are not well defined nor delineated. More specific and in-depth research can be conducted by interviewing only individuals with very specific roles and certain characteristics. However, it should be pointed out that even in cases where an interviewee had a role other than that of a buyer, the questions were nevertheless addressed in order to understand the relationships between the company and its suppliers (for this reason no differentiation was made between the two types of interviews).

The third point is that the sample collected, in order to make the study more general and homogeneous, includes companies from different industries and both service and product companies. Since the interviews revealed that product companies still seem to follow a more traditional approach to purchasing (i.e. the use of social media in the relationship with the customer seems to be less pervasive), it might be interesting to deepen the studies by differentiating the interviews between the two types of companies in order to better understand the development characteristics of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted on different categories of sellers and buyers who did not belong to the same supply chain. A more specific study could

be conducted on a number of sellers in a first step and then on their current and potential customers. This would allow us to understand how social selling activities are actually perceived by the sellers.

Finally, the study conducted is based on a B2B context, which is a more complex market and therefore slower in the process of adaptation and evolution of business processes, so it is not surprising that the social media phenomenon also struggles to fit into business logic. The results of process change triggered by social media introduction will be visible in two or three years from now. Therefore, future research should focus on the study of the phenomenon between now and three years in order to actually understand whether the desired results have been achieved.

## CONCLUSIONS

The world in general and the B2B market in particular has undergone enormous transformations and changes due to digital evolution and the consequent introduction of social media. Their use in the business market and in sales processes specifically has altered the existing balance and nature of the relationship between seller and buyer. While the traditional sales approach involved hard-selling tactics, aimed at closing the sale, the working relationships to be established today have profoundly changed and are based on building trust and long-term relationships. Social media in particular have fostered the development of this type of relationship by allowing close (albeit virtual) contact between the two parties at every stage of the sales process. This makes it possible to agree and adjust every single detail of the final transaction and product in order to satisfy the customer and provide him with the most suitable and satisfactory sales solution according to his specific needs. The concept of co-creation process is born, where the customer is no longer just a client, but it takes an active role in the process thanks to the exchange of information and feedback that give rise to a close collaboration between the parties. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory research is to answer questions regarding customers' perceptions of social selling activities carried out by suppliers. Through the collection, analysis and comparison of semi-structured interviews on a sample of eighteen sales and buyers employed in Italian companies operating in the B2B context. The results made it possible to highlight the commonalities and

disagreements between the responses of the two groups of interviewees, revealing interesting starting points for improving sales relations with consumers.

From the comparison analysis and the similarities emerge the traits of the social selling strategies which are implemented and accepted correctly by the customer and which do not need to be modified. First, the use of LinkedIn as the main platform in the construction of professional and working relationships in a business context. The professional and medium-high tone of the conversations and content shared on this platform makes it ideal for researching and exchanging contacts and information for work purposes. Secondly, the proper integration of digital and traditional channels, both online and offline, remains important. For various reasons, users are still not very active on digital channels, focusing attention on the latter while neglecting the traditional ones would result in the loss of a large share of the market that still relies on websites, trade fairs and word of mouth. The use of a proper mix of the two types of channels is therefore appropriate in a market where the phenomenon is still in its infancy and needs more time to develop further. Although not yet fully implemented, the principle of the importance of content emerges, adding and creating value is central to engaging the customer, attracting his/her curiosity and making him/her a participant and active follower of his/her own business. Webinars, videos of their production processes and the latest company innovations, e-books, targeted posts make customers curious and positively influence their perception of the company, which shows up to be

dynamic, active and in step with the times. The last fundamental point is the lack of a clear and integrated social media corporate policy that can outline the limits and the correct methods social channel within the company for work purposes in order to protect the company's reputation and reassure the employee about the correct guidelines to follow. Both for sellers (who often limit themselves to share content already posted on the company's social pages) and for buyers who often avoid using these tools for fear of making mistakes. In this regard, ad hoc training courses on the use of social media are also needed to overcome the lack of familiarity with these tools and to fully exploit their potential.

On the contrary, from the discrepancies between the declarations of the sellers and those of the buyers, it has been possible to outline the aspects of the social selling strategies that are implemented and must be improved or adjusted in order to obtain optimal results in the management of the relationship with the customer. The fundamental theme that is highlighted from this point of view is the importance of adopting a personalized social selling approach where at the moment of the request buyers and decision makers are bombarded with only ad-hoc requests and specific to the needs of the client are analysed and considered for current or future work developments. The second element worthy of discussion is the functionality of social channels, these in fact are only tools and their use does not ensure the achievement of certain objectives or results. It depends on the skill of the seller himself in collecting the information and his ability to process it and exploit it

properly and to his own advantage. Understanding well who is the interlocutor you are talking to, their role, their needs and preferences and using these notions to build the most suitable solution is the key to a successful social selling strategy. It should also be noted that these precautions should not be addressed exclusively to potential customers but should be extended to already acquired customers who are those who follow the most and find the most useful activities carried out on their salesperson's social profiles. Finally, the last important element is the need to develop specific metrics to measure objectively and clearly the results of activities carried out on online platforms.

These results, although highly valid, remain limited to the scope of the research carried out in the Italian B2B market. Further research on this aspect extended to the international market is desirable in order to have a more complete and clearer framework of the phenomenon that is still in evolution.

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## **APPENDIX A– Customer Interview Track**

We are conducting a research project on the use of social media in sales in B2B contexts. In a first phase, we investigated how salespeople use social media and for which activities these platforms can be useful in sales. In this new phase, the aim of the study is to understand their customers' use of social media.

The data collected through the interviews will remain strictly confidential and will be treated in an aggregated manner exclusively by the scientific research team in charge of the project.

Ask for permission to record the conversation

### **Background**

- Name and job title/professional title
- Can you briefly tell me about the company's business?
- What role does buying the product/service you are responsible for play in the company's business? (only for buyers)
- Can you briefly tell me about your work and your relationship with suppliers of products and/or services? How do you choose the products and/or services to purchase?

### **Social media use**

- Many in the business world say that social media have profoundly influenced the nature of purchasing, hence the relationship with suppliers of products and/or services, even in B2B contexts.
- Is this aspect in any way visible in your company's business / work? Do you use social media in your relationship with suppliers of products and/or services (e.g. search for information on suppliers, first contact with suppliers)? If yes, which social media? Why and how does social media influence your work or relationship with vendors? If not, what factors make you not use them in your relationship with suppliers (but probably in your relationship with customers)?
- What are the key benefits of using social media in the relationship with sellers? (only for buyers)

### **Customer perceptions**

- How do you feel about the fact that vendors can use social to gain information about potential customers?
- What information are you willing to share on social media? Is there any information you are not willing to share on social media? Why?
- How do you perceive being contacted by a seller within social media? What do you do when a salesperson contacts you via social media?
- Do you participate in social media conversation (e.g. discussion groups)? If so, why and how do you interact in social media conversation? If not, why do you not participate in social media conversation?
- How do you perceive the content shared by sellers through social media and why? (useful, annoying, etc.). Please provide some concrete descriptions of a given content you found useful and relevant.

- What formats do you find more useful (e.g. videos, images, ebooks, case history, etc.) and why?
- How do you interact with content that you find useful / interesting for your job (e.g. like, comment, share, download, spontaneously reaching out to the seller, etc.)?
- At what stage do you consider digital content useful (e.g. searching for information, evaluation of purchase alternatives, interface with the seller, negotiation, etc.)?
- After viewing an interesting piece of content, have you ever spontaneously contacted the supplier or seller (even if you did not know them)?
- What content currently not shared by vendors would you like to find within social media?

### **Drivers, Barriers, Contingencies & Results**

- Does your company have a strategy, concrete goals or policies regarding the use of social media? How does this influence your work?
- Do you consider social media to be more effective for an initial contact with potential suppliers/sellers or later on during the relationship to be constantly in contact with them and enjoy their content?
- What impact does the use of social media have on the relationship with the supplier/seller? (e.g. professionalism of the seller, trust, satisfaction, competence and skills in the work, etc.).

### **Future development**

- Do you think you will use social media more in your relationship with suppliers/sellers in the future?

Closing remark: thank you and ask for the opportunity to ask any further questions by e-mail

## APPENDIX B– Seller Interview Track

### Background information:

- Inform the interviewed about the confidentiality / use of voice recorder
- Explain briefly the topic and the aim at a general level
- Ask the interviewee the name and the job title
  
- Please describe shortly your company's business
- Tell us a few words about your job and your customers

### Opening – top of the mind issues:

*Transition with the participant to the topic of social selling. Do not mention directly the notion of 'social selling' itself. Instead ask the participants indirectly about these issues. During the interview: "Please tell more...", "Can you explain this in detail...", "Can you tell this with other words...", etc.*

Many people in business argue nowadays that social media affects notably the nature of sales work - even in B2B business.

- Is this issue somehow visible in your firm's business or your job?
- Do you think that social media is important for your job? Why and how social media affects your job or selling process in practice?
- Tell us a bit more how you leverage social media in your work. Can you point out the key ways how you leverage social media in sales? Which are the key benefits of using social media in your work?

*In this section we collect critical "top of mind" dimensions. In next section ask first more about the here mentioned areas. As a follow-up, investigate those dimensions not mentioned spontaneously.*

### **Social selling activities:**

You mentioned 1,2,3,4, can you please describe this further? *And when not mentioned: How about 1,2,3,4 – is this a relevant topic for you?*

1. Acquiring information about customers and prospects
2. Content generation & sharing to customers and prospects
3. Interacting with customers and prospects
4. Other mentioned issues
  - What does this activity mean in practice in your work? What are the key aspects of this activity in your work? - Please give an example(s)?
  - Do you have any concrete goals here? (*i.e. what do you try to achieve with this activity?*)
  - What factors helps you to do this activity? What do you require to be effective in this?
  - What are the main challenges you face in this area?

*When you hear interesting answers related to above activities, ask for more details – you mentioned xxx, tell me more about that.*

### **Relationship with other selling activities**

- Tell us more how your “use of social media in selling” relates to your other sales activities? (*i.e. the relationship between social media and other ways to communicate and interact with customers. E.g. face-to-face meeting, email, etc.*)

### **Drivers, Barriers, Contingencies & Outcomes**

*Start by asking for possible antecedents/ moderators:*

- Does your firm have strategy, concrete goals or policies related to the use of social media? How does this affect you?
- Does your firm somehow promote / support you in using social media? How?
- How does your firm’s management see the use of social media? How does this affect you?

- How do your colleagues perceive the use of social media in your firm? How does this affect you?
- What have been the key drivers for you to start leveraging social media in your sales work? (*e.g. skills and capabilities, attitudes, internal factors or external factors, etc.*)
- What factors have you faced that prevent or hinder you from succeeding in social selling (*i.e. barriers or challenges; risks, internal or external factors*)? - Please give concrete examples -
  - Is there anything that you can do from your side to overcome these challenges?
  - Is there anything that the organization can do to overcome these challenges?
- Do you think that social selling is equally important in all situations? Or is it more effective in certain situations or settings? Could you please give an example? (*e.g. prospect vs. extant customer / stage or nature of customer relationship*)

*Then, potential outcomes:*

- What kind of positive or negative consequences has the use of social media had to you?
  - Sales performance related (*e.g. better targeting, higher sales and profits, percentage of revenue from social selling activities, attaining goals, etc.*)
  - Other “soft” work related consequences (*e.g. skills, competencies and abilities, etc.*)
  - How about customer side? (*e.g. customer satisfaction, etc.*)

Ending: thank you and ask is it possible to ask more questions with email if needed.