

Studying the influence of social media use on sales performance: the role of relational mediators

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## **Studying the influence of social media use on sales performance: the role of relational mediators**

**Abstract:** Based on a relationship marketing approach, this paper studies the impact of social media use on sales performance and its underlying mechanisms. A conceptual model is proposed and empirically tested from the perspective of salespeople in B2B settings. The proposed model includes both the direct influence of social media use on sales performance and its indirect influence through relational mediators (i.e., adaptive selling behavior and relationship quality). The moderation role of emotions management on the relation between social media use and relationship quality is also studied. To test the proposed model, we use structural equation modeling with a sample of 199 French B2B salespeople. The proposed model is validated, allowing us to confirm the direct and indirect role of social media use on sales performance and to better understand the underlying mechanisms associated with relational mediators.

**Keywords:** B2B sales, Sales performance, Social media use.

**Track:** Business-To-Business Marketing & Supply Chain Management.

## **Introduction**

A strategic question for marketing and sales departments is whether they should promote the use of social media by salespeople, which involves investing in these technologies and in training (Julienne, Damperat, & Franck, 2019). With the development of social media, salespeople are constantly connected to their customers and managers (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012). Being active on social media allows salespeople to be present earlier in the buyer's trajectory, thereby giving them a better chance of participating in the development of business solutions for customers. By becoming aware of customers' views early on, salespeople increase their chances of winning business (Ancillai, Terho, Cardinali, & Pascucci, 2019). The way of selling in B2B is evolving: salespeople can meet prospects, propose offers, and make sure that customers follow updates through social media. Yet if some salespeople appreciate the use of social media, others display more reluctance on the grounds that only face-to-face meetings are able to create long-lasting relationships. This lack of a common viewpoint may be due to the fact that the use of social media is still relatively new in B2B relationships and that empirical research in the academic literature is extremely limited (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016). Thus there is a need for research in B2B settings on the influence of social media use on sales performance and its relational underlying mechanisms.

To understand the influence of social media use, various theoretical approaches have been adopted, mainly information and communication approaches. Some studies indicate that social media can be used for gathering information to acquire a better understanding of customers, build a network, and interact with stakeholders (Bocconcelli, Cioppi, & Pagano, 2017). According to Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp (2012), networks on social media can be used to build awareness and gain referrals, and active use of social media can help salespeople improve their communication with customers. Yet the relational mechanisms through which the use of social media influences salespeople's performance has yet to be studied.

Few studies focus on social media use from a relationship marketing standpoint. Among those that do, Itani, Agnihotri, and Dingus (2017) show the influence of social media use on adaptive selling behavior. However, the role of social media use that modifies touch points and the development of the buyer-seller relationship has been little studied. Indeed, Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, and Evans (2006) show in a meta-analysis the central and mediating role played by relationship quality. Thus further studies are called for to help understand the role

that social media play through adaptive selling behavior and the effect of enhanced relationship quality on sales performance.

Based on relationship marketing (Palmatier et al., 2006), we study the influence of social media use on sales performance in B2B settings. We also seek to understand the underlying mechanisms that could explain the influence of social media use on sales performance. Thus we examine the mediating effect of relational mediators (i.e., adaptive selling behavior and relationship quality) between social media use and sales performance. The originality of this paper lies in its addressing: (1) the influence of social media use on both adaptive selling behavior and relationship quality; (2) the mediating role of relationship quality between social media use and sales performance; and (3) the twofold mediation of adaptive selling behavior and relationship quality between social media use and sales performance. We also study how sales professionals use emotions in marketing exchanges to facilitate positive outcomes for their firms, themselves, and their customers with the impact on managing emotions on relationship quality.

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Model**

*Social media in B2B sales.* Social media are associated with different technologies able to provide users with services such as networking, online search, and analytics. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media comprise a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Mangold and Faulds (2009) have highlighted the importance of social media for various components of a company's integrated marketing communications strategy, including direct customer communication, such as personal selling.

Social media can be used at all stages of the sales process, from prospecting to relationship monitoring. They are considered to be an essential part of a company's sales process because they allow salespeople to interact with customers, and create social capital that encourages them to interact, engage and build relationships with customers (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012). Social media such as LinkedIn may assist in identifying genuine decision makers and buyers within an organization. Itani et al. (2017) argue that both sales management and salespeople view social media as an effective global tool for increasing connectivity, building personal and long-term relationships with customers.

***Relationship marketing and relational mediators.*** Relationship marketing is well established in B2B sales (Guenzi, Pardo, & Georges, 2007). Morgan and Hunt (1994) define relationship marketing as “all marketing activities aimed at establishing, developing and maintaining good relationships”. Most research and managerial practices assume that relationship marketing efforts generate stronger relationships with customers, thereby increasing seller performance, sales, market share, and profits (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Relationship marketing emphasizes the importance of buyer-seller relationships, that improve the efficiency of business relationships (Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998) and develop business relationships over the long term (Mummalaneni, 1995).

The quality of the relationship between buyer and seller is recognized as a key relational mediator, and is conceptualized by three dimensions: (1) trust, i.e. confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity (Doney & Cannon, 1997); (2) commitment, i.e. the enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1992); and (3) relationship satisfaction, i.e., the customer’s affective or emotional state toward a relationship, typically evaluated cumulatively over the history of the exchange (Crosby et al., 1990). Overall, relationship quality is defined as an assessment of the strength of a relationship. It is conceptualized as a composite or multidimensional construct capturing the different but related facets of a relationship (Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001).

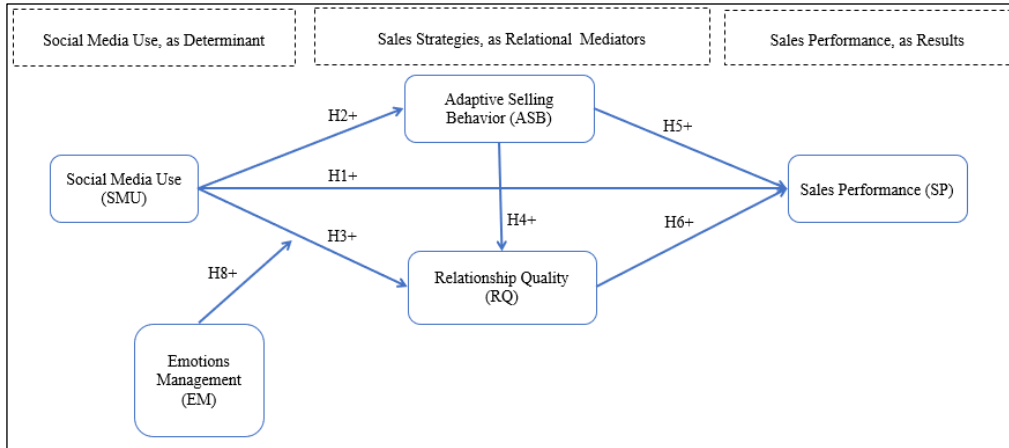
**Emotional intelligence in market exchange.** A good salesperson has the ability to get in touch with his client because he has the ability to do it. For example, the salesperson will be more likely to succeed when he does not experience (emotionally) his own emotions after a lost sale or a bad presentation and this will not lead to "negative emotion" when visiting his customers (Strutton & Pelton, 1998). The concept of emotional intelligence can be divided into four branches: (1) emotional perception; (2) emotional assimilation; (3) emotional understanding; and (4) management of emotions. Emotions management seems pretty interesting in negotiation. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), managing emotions is the ability to discover and implement effective strategies using his emotions to help achieve the goals, rather than being used by his emotions. In other words, the ability to live or abandon an emotion according to its usefulness in a given situation.

## **Methodology**

*Sample.* The sample comprised 199 French B2B salespeople based on a Qualtrics panel. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The sample comprises

45.5% men and 54% women (0.5% did not comment). Sales professionals were made aware that the research was being conducted for scholarly purposes.

**Figure 1 – The Proposed Model**



*Measurement Scales.* For social media use, we used a 3-item 7-point scale adapted from Agnihotri et al. (2016). For adaptive selling behavior, we used a 3-item 7-point scale adapted from the ADAPTS scale developed by Spiro and Weitz (1990). We focus on ADAPTS’s facet 6 corresponding to the current behavior of sellers. For sales performance, we used a 3-item 7-point scale adapted from Behrman and Perreault Jr (1982) and Boorum, Goolsby, and Ramsey (1998). For relationship quality as perceived by the salesperson, we used a tridimensional scale including trust, satisfaction and commitment, presenting all 2-item 7-point scales as developed by Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Hall, and Boichuk (2014). For Manage Emotions, we use a 4-item 5 point scale from the manage facet of EIME scale developed by Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, and Sheng (2011).

*Measurement evaluation.* To assess the quality of the measurement scales, we followed a two-step procedure following the recommendations of Steenkamp and Van Trijp (1991). The first step was to study the correlations in order to purify the scales. Items with correlations less than 0.30 were removed. The second step consisted of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) evaluated on the basis of the indices recommended by Hu and Bentler (1998). Based on these recommended indices, the measurement model is satisfactory:  $\text{Chi}^2/81 = 1.504$ ;  $\text{RMSEA} = 0.05$ ;  $\text{TLI} = 0.962$ ;  $\text{CFI} = 0.971$ ;  $\text{SRMR} = 0.049$ . The standardized coefficients, critical ratio and p-value of each item are presented in Table 2.

The analysis of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity highlights the satisfactory results for each construct. The convergent validity of the constructs is confirmed with average variance extracted (AVE) values greater than 0.50, in accordance with the

recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981). Likewise, discriminant validity is established, since the average variance extracted from each construct is greater than the correlation squares, which are well below the threshold of 0.50. The detailed results are presented in Table 3.

## Results

*Direct effects testing.* The proposed model and its related hypotheses (H1 to H6) was tested using the structural equations using maximum likelihood method with AMOS 27. Based on Hu and Bentler (1998) indices, the structural model is satisfactory:  $\chi^2/107 = 1.549$ ; RMSEA = 0.053; TLI = 0.960; CFI = 0.969; SRMR = 0.053. Results show that social media use positively and significantly influences sales performance (H1:  $\gamma = 0.30$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) and adaptive selling behavior (H2:  $\gamma = 0.28$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ), but has no significant influence on relationship quality (H3:  $\gamma = 0.018$ ;  $p = 0.835$ ). Thus H1 et H2 are confirmed, but H3 is not. Adaptive selling behavior positively and significantly influence relationship quality (H4:  $\beta = 0.403$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). H4 is confirmed. Sales performance is positively and significantly influenced both by adaptive selling behavior (H5:  $\beta = 0.296$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ) and relationship quality (H6:  $\beta = 0.193$ ;  $p = 0.027$ ). H5 and H6 are confirmed.

**Table 1 – The results of the proposed model**

			$\lambda$ stand.	t-value	p. value
H1	Social Media Use	→ Sales Performances	0,26	3,355	0,000
H2	Social Media Use	→ Adaptive Selling Behavior	0,33	3,872	0,000
H3	Social Media Use	→ Relationship Quality	0,08	1,703	0,089
H4	Adaptive Selling Behavior	→ Sales Performances	0,30	3,147	0,002
H5	Adaptive Selling Behavior	→ Relationship Quality	0,38	3,872	0,000
H6	Relationship Quality	→ Sales Performances	0,18	2,114	0,035
<b>Fit Measures :</b>					
	$\chi^2 / df$	165,789 / 107 (1,549)			
	RMSEA	0,053			
	TLI	0,960			
	CFI	0,969			
	SRMR	0,053			

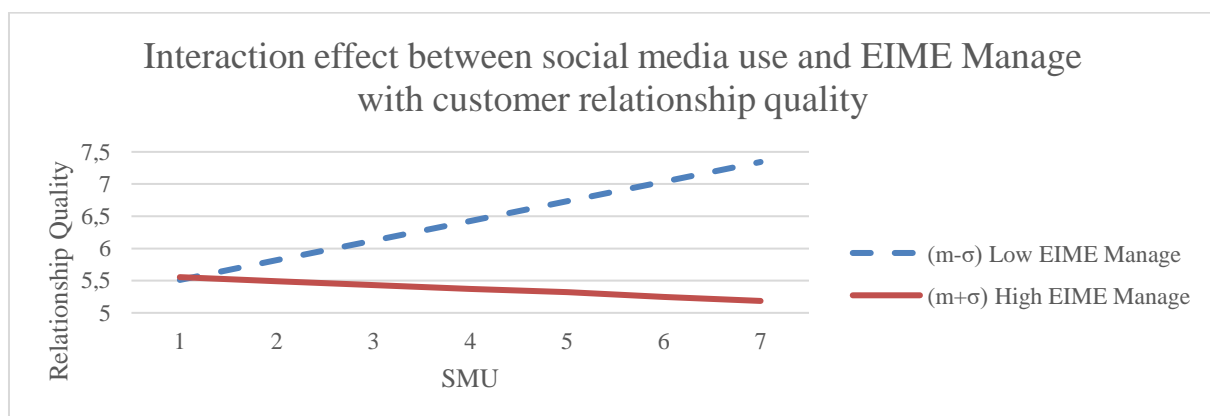
*Indirect effects testing.* Regarding the mediating role of adaptive selling behavior and relationship quality, we followed the recommendations of Zhao, Lynch Jr, and Chen (2011) et al. (2011) and of Preacher and Hayes (2004), leading us to perform the bootstrap test of the

indirect effect via structural equations. The results show that the indirect effect of adaptive selling behavior is statistically significant ( $b = 0.12$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ) with a 95% confidence interval ( $b$  between 0.040 and 0.224) excluding the value zero. Likewise, the indirect effect of adaptive selling behavior and relationship quality is statistically significant and positive on collective creative efficiency ( $b = 0.15$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ; with  $b$  between 0.083 and 0.249).

**Table 5 - The indirect effects**

	Coef stand.	Lower bounds	Upper bounds	p. value
SMU → ASB → RQ	0.12	0.040	0.224	0.005
SMU → ASB → RQ → SP	0.15	0.083	0.249	0.005

*Moderation effect.* Regarding the moderating role of emotional management (i.e. the facet called Manage of EIME scale), we followed recommendations of Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch Jr, and McClelland (2013) for the floodlight method. The results show that individuals who use social media heavily perceive a higher quality of relationship in the case of a weak emotional management than in the case of a strong emotional management.



## Discussion

The main objective of this study was to broaden the understanding of the benefits of using social media use by empirically examining its effects on two key constructs: the quality of the customer relationship and the performance of sellers. The results confirm our conceptualization of the influence of social media use in B2B sales, as most of the hypotheses were confirmed. In line with our hypotheses, the use of social media has a positive and direct influence on sales performance, and an indirect influence through adaptive sales behavior. Our results also shows that adaptive selling has a significant direct influence on the quality of relationships and the performance of sellers.



Surprisingly, however, we find that salespeople's use of social networks does not improve the quality of relationship with their customers. It seems that social media do not create a social bond and are only a source of information for sellers. Marshall et al. (2012) found that sales managers and salespeople view social media as an effective tool for increasing connectivity, building personal and long-term relationships with customers, and maintaining global relationships. However, our results call into question the nature of the social bonds that social media actually offer. The other surprising result is regarding how managing emotions impact the relationship quality. Those with low manage emotion ability improve relationship quality significantly with the use of social media while those with high manage emotion ability see no additional benefits.

*Limitations and research perspectives.* There are several limitations to our study that may affect the reliability of the results. First, all measures were self-reported by the salesperson. While a dyadic sample would be preferable, sample accessibility was limited to sellers only. However, Agnihotri et al. (2016) argue that "in general contact employees are good sources of information on customer attitudes (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994) and a perceptual measure can be used when an accurate objective measure is not available (Dess & Robinson Jr, 1984)".

It could be interesting to explore the implications for the sales force of the rise in what the "always-on" communication technology usage patterns associated with them, as well as the "dark side" of the use of social media on salespeople's job satisfaction. Some face a problem known as "social media fatigue", in which they feel anxious about being overwhelmed by social media (Han, 2018). Social media are a new tool for some salespeople and can, in this sense, constitute an additional cognitive load and therefore lead to an overload, with the accompanying risk of burnout and dissatisfaction at work.

We have found that it is not enough that salespeople simply use social media to increase their business performance; instead, salespeople need to understand how using social media can improve different selling behaviors which, in turn, have direct effects on performance. For example, as Itani et al. (2017) suggested, researchers should try to understand how salespeople use different social media tools and other CRM technologies at the same time, and the effect that simultaneous use can have on performance.

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