Leveraging a positive perceived image to boost social media usage in B2B companies

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Abstract

Context: B2B companies are becoming increasingly concerned with social media usage. This acknowledgement calls for further investigations, especially to understand if building a positive image of the company using social media stimulate usage intentions and behavior in business customers.

Purpose: This work aims at exploring the impact of image of companies using social media (IM) in the connection between perceived usefulness (PU) and the social media effective usage (SMU) in B2B companies. This has been done by assessing attitude toward social media (ATT) and intention to use (ITU).

Data: Primary research data were gathered through a survey based on the administration of an online questionnaire through LinkedIn, targeting a convenient sample of buyers operated in Italian B2B companies, applying structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess the social media usage.

Results: Findings suggest that image of companies using social media is positively related with the perceived usefulness of social media (PU) which, in turn, positively affects both attitude toward social media use and intention to use them. Image also affects internal social media agility (ISMA) which, in turn, positively affects perceived usefulness, whilst ISMA does not affect attitude toward social media use. Finally, attitude toward social media use is positively related with the intention to use which, successively, positively affects social media usage within B2B companies.

Originality: Social media usage has been largely investigated in B2C contexts, but research in B2B industry is developing (Diba et al., 2019). To contribute to extant literature, this study has verified a model aimed at deepen the comprehension of B2B companies' behavior within the realm of social media, through an extended version of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). In addition, we analyze how perceived image of companies using social media can boost social media usage.

Implications: The outcomes of this research are useful in terms of managerial implications, in particular for B2B companies and stakeholders alike, key players in the industry in general, and marketers making an effort to advocate social media use practices.

Keywords: TAM, Social media usage, Social media marketing, B2B, SEM.

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1. Introduction and objectives

The increased popularity of social media has allowed for a more direct, quick and interactive form of communication not only among consumers, but also between companies. Academic research has largely focused on social media marketing in B2C contexts and it clearly shows the positive achievements reached by such platforms on consumer purchase decisions (Wang, Yu, and Wei, 2012) and collection of market research data (Nunan and Yenicioglu, 2013).

Social media marketing is increasing its relevance and perceived value also in B2B companies and research needs to be improved in exploring the marketing potential of social media in industrial settings, with a focus on factors that determine social media adoption by B2B companies (Järvinen et al., 2012; Michaelidou et al., 2011). In fact, as remarked by Iankova et al. (2019), in B2B industry are used different social media channels to serve different purposes and have different perceived results.

This study contributes to the academic literature on the potential of social media as a marketing tool, by focusing on factors that determine social media adoption by B2B companies. A theoretical model based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is tested using a survey data, collected administering a structured questionnaire to a sample of B2B companies in Italy. The outcomes of this research are useful in terms of managerial implications, in particular for B2B companies and stakeholders alike, key players in the industry in general, and marketers making an effort to advocate social media use practices.

2. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypothesis

A structural model is proposed based on the literature on TAM, proposing an extended version of it. This model includes Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEoU) about a new technology that influence an individual's Attitude Toward and Use of that technology (Davis et al., 1989). In particular, theoretical and empirical studies demonstrated that TAM consistently explains a substantial proportion of the variance in usage intentions and behavior (Davis 1989, Davis et al. 1989).

Subsequently, the conceptual model has been further refined suggesting that the user's motivation can be explained by three factors: PEoU, PU[2], and Attitude Toward Social Media (ATT). The latter was seen as a major determinant of whether the user will actually use or reject the system. More specifically, the attitude of the user was considered to be influenced by PU and PEoU, with the PEoU having a direct influence on the PU. Finally, both beliefs were hypothesized to be directly influenced by the system design characteristics.

Further extensions implied to TAM have incorporated additional variables into the model in order to explain the predictors of TAM key elements. According to Venkatesh and Davis (2000) individuals tend to establish or maintain a favorable *image* within a reference group (Kelman, 1958) and may perceive that using a system will lead to improvements in job performance (i.e., perceived usefulness) indirectly due to image enhancement, despite any performance benefits directly attributable to the use of the system. In addition, the concept of image captures perceptions about the prestige and status due to the use of a specific technology (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000) which, in turn, influences perceptions about whether the technology is useful and effective in achieving objectives (Siamagka et al., 2015). As evidenced by the findings of studies such as those conducted by Medina et al. (2022) and Sousa et al. (2023), social dynamics and perceptions of prestige have a notable influence on PU. In particular, social benefits have been identified as a

[2] The perceived usefulness is the degree to which it is believed that using the system would enhance the job performance. The perceived ease of use is the degree to which it is believed that using it would be free of effort.

significant factor in developing positive attitudes toward technology adoption. Therefore, applying this approach to a B2B setting, we hypothesize:

H1*. The positive Image of those companies using social media (IM) will have a positive effect on Perceived Usefulness (PU).*

According to Davis (1989), a new technology is adopted primarily because of the functionality offered, rather than because it is easy to use. Thus, users tend to overcome difficulties in using new technology if the benefits of usage are substantive.
As our data on B2B industry do not contain specific information on PEoU, thus on post-adoption perception of effortlessness as defined by Iannacci, Fearon and Pole (2021), we replaced this information with a latent construct on Internal Social Media Agility (ISMA), as explained in Table 1. The concept of ISMA has been taken from Chuang (2020) and it is defined as a key business imperative related to social-information processing capability and customer co-creation agility. In our model, this concept is related to the advantage of using social networks for increasing cost efficiency, quick delivery of products and services, company's reliability and flexibility in day-to-day operations. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2*. The positive Image of those companies using social media (IM) will have a positive effect on Internal Social-Media Agility (ISMA).*

Prior studies found that the easier the system is to use and the more useful it is (Davis et al., 1989; Igbaria and Guimaraes, 1995), and this has been also validated in Internet technology use (Moon and Kim, 2001). As specified, the data do not contain information on ease to use, but we have indicators of ISMA that can be interpreted as a *proxy* of it. Thus, our hypothesis is that:

H3*. The more Internal Social-Media Agility (ISMA), the more the buyer will Perceive Social Media as Useful (PU).*

In addition, wide empirical evidence perceives ease of use as significantly linked to intentions, both directly and indirectly via its impact on PU (among others, Davis et al., 1989 and Venkatesh, 1999). Empirical studies on TAM sometimes employed organization's attitude toward social media (Porter and Donthu, 2006) as a latent construct that influence the social media usage, whilst other findings found that attitude did not fully mediate the PU and the PEoU. Thus, a parsimonious TAM was proposed, replacing the attitude construct from the model with behavioral intentions (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000).
To further investigate the relationships at work, our empirical model employs both attitude toward social media use and then, in turn, intention to use. In fact, in its original version, TAM included these components: PU, PEoU, ATT, Behavioral Intention to Use, and Actual System Use. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4*. The more that a company Perceives Social Media as Useful (PU), the more favorable that company's Attitude Toward Use of Social Media (ATT).*

H5*. The more Internal Social-Media Agility (ISMA), the more favorable that company's Attitude Toward Use of Social Media (ATT).*

H6*. The more company's Attitude Toward Use of Social Media (ATT), the more that company's Intention Toward Use (ITU) of social media.*

In TAM framework, perceived usefulness is hypothesized to be the direct predictor of behavioral intention to technologies adoption (Davis, 1989). In fact, PU has been found to be crucial in acceptance of technology within the workplace. Therefore, we hypothesize:

***H_7**. The more Perceived Usefulness (PU), the more company's Intention Toward Use (ITU) of social media.*

Finally, according to the original TAM model (Legris, Ingham and Collerette, 2003), we hypothesize that:

***H_8**. The more company's Intention Toward Use (ITU) of social media, the more Social Media Usage (SMU).*

Siamagka et al. (2015) employed an extended TAM and resource-based theory to analyze the adoption of social media by B2B organizations in the UK, finding that PU of social media is determined by image, PEoU and perceived barriers. In addition, adoption of social media is significantly affected by organizational innovativeness and PU. Therefore, our empirical study can be interpreted as a first attempt to investigate the mechanism at work for technology acceptance in a B2B Italian setting through an enriched version of the original TAM.

3. Research Method

The study focuses on Italian B2B companies and, specifically, on the social media usage in purchasing and supply in a buyer perspective. The respondents targeted were specifically buyer professionals of B2B industry. Primary research data were gathered through administering an online questionnaire shared on the LinkedIn social media platform to a list of professionals covering a purchasing role in a B2B company. The first step was to filter the users according to the role covered and to geographically restrict the target within the Italian area. The survey targeted a convenient sample of B2B Italian companies in Winter 2023. A number of 241 questionnaires have been collected and met the required criteria for inclusion in the final analysis.

[Table 1 here]

The sample exhibited a relatively unbalanced distribution in terms of gender representation of respondents (63.5% are males), but was quite reflective of various age groups even though half of the sample is between 36 and 50 years old.

[Table 2 here]

4. Empirical strategy and findings

Measurement items were derived from extant literature and adapted to the context of this study. Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree - 1" to "strongly agree - 5". In order to analyze the mechanism at work and investigate if our hypotheses are supported, we employed a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework.

In the empirical model there are five latent endogenous variables (PU, ISMA, ATT, ITU, and SMU) and one exogenous latent construct (IM). Results show that all items are statistically significant (p-values < 0.05) and of expected sign (+), in addition they present standardized factor loadings higher than the threshold of 0.7 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Finally, the Cronbach Alpha, used to assess the internal consistency of a set of items, is higher than the threshold (according to Cortina, 1993, values higher than 0.7 are acceptable and higher than 0.8 are preferred) and, similarly, Raykov's Rho (Composite Reliability) is always higher than the threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010).

[Table 3 here]

Switching to the fit statistics, we find acceptable fit indices for the model: RMSEA=0.078, CFI=0.925, TLI=0.916, SRMR=0.067 and CD=0.897 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

As shown in Figure 1, all hypotheses are supported, except H_5. More specifically, the exogenous latent variable, IM, is positively related with the PU of social media use which, in turn, positively affects both ATT and ITU. In addition, IM significantly and positively affects ISMA which, in turn, positively affects PU, whilst ISMA does not affect ATT. Moreover, the last two hypotheses are also confirmed as ATT is positively related with the ITU which, successively, positively affects social media usage within B2B industry.
Finally, control variables are not significant, except for gender - significant at 10% level with a negative sign. Thus, male salespeople operating in B2B companies are more prone in using social media.

[Figure 1 here]

5. Discussion

Social media usage has been largely investigated in B2C contexts, but research in B2B industry is still developing. To contribute to extant literature, this study has verified a model aimed at deepen the comprehension of B2B industry behavior within the realm of social media, through an enriched version of TAM, which is used by many empirical models confirming its robustness in predicting social media usage (Adams et al., 1992; Mathieson, 1991).
Findings confirm the goodness of the proposed model, contributing to digital marketing studies in verifying the importance of social media usage in B2B companies.
This research holds pragmatic significance for B2B industry and marketers striving to advocate national social media usage to foster their economic performance, increase market share and visibility. In addition, it contributes to the understanding of buyer professionals' PU in using social media for their B2B supply/purchase. In fact, in rending evident the positive return in terms of corporate image of the use of social media with internal marketing communication strategies, companies can boost the perceived usefulness of social media among buyers, developing their positive attitude and proneness to use, resulting in a consistent behaviour. This is particularly reinforced when we consider male buyers, even if this result is expected as men tend to hold more managerial positions in B2B settings.

6. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the role of social media usage in B2B setting, confirming the validity of the original TAM in explaining the mechanism at work, as well as its revised and enriched versions. Despite its explorative but potential usefulness in this study context, some limitations should be mentioned. First, our variables do not cover important features that can be included in the model, such as job relevance, output quality and result demonstrability, as proposed by Venkatesh and Davis (2000). In addition, it can be of great interest to collect data that allow to distinguish the analysis between mandatory and voluntary usage contexts (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000), even though it is well known that mandatory technology adoption is more common in the B2B industry compared to B2C environment. Future studies should also focus on collecting more information on respondents and setting characteristics in general (i.e.: segment respondents based on job characteristics) and extending the survey to other countries. Finally, our data are cross-sectional in nature, thus the dynamic relationships in terms of causality cannot be demonstrated. In future research, a longitudinal study may help in underlining the hypothesized sequence of effects.

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Appendix

Table 1. Variables' Description

Variable name	Description
IMAGE (IM)	
IM1	Companies using social media have a better image than those who do not.
IM2	Companies using social media are better regarded by their customers.
IM3	Companies using social media have a better reputation than those who do not.
PERCEIVED USEFULNESS (PU)	
PU1	I think social media can be useful while conducting B2B purchase/supply activities.
PU2	Using social media improves my performance in conducting B2B supply/purchase.
PU3	Using social media enhances my effectiveness in B2B supply/purchase.
PU4	Social media sites enable me to conduct B2B supply/purchase faster.
PU5	Since I started using social networks, I have improved my buying performance.
PU6	Since I started using social networks, I realized a positive return on my ability to reach my job objectives.
INTERNAL SOCIAL MEDIA AGILITY (ISMA)	
ISMA1	Since our company started using social networks in its purchase activity, the reliability of our company's offer of products and services has increased.
ISMA2	Since our company started using social networks in its purchase activity, my company's day-to-day operations have been flexible for customized demand.
ISMA3	Since our company started using social networks in its purchase activity, my company's offerings (i.e., products and services) have been more cost efficient than those of our competitors.
ISMA4	Since our company started using social networks in its purchase activity, it has delivered our offering (i.e., products and services) more quickly.
ATTITUDE TOWARD SOCIAL MEDIA USE (ATT)	
ATT1	Overall, I consider the use of social media a good thing.
ATT2	Overall, I like the use of social media.
ATT3	I consider social media networks very essential.
ATT4	I would describe my overall attitude toward social media networks very favorably.
INTENTION TO USE (ITU)	
ITU1	Given the chance, I intend to use social media for work.
ITU2	Given the chance, I intend to use social media for B2B purchase and supply activities.
ITU3	I intend to use social media for B2B purchase and supply activities.
ITU4	I will frequently use social media for B2B purchase and supply activities.
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE (SMU)	
SMU1	I am using social media to its fullest potential for supporting my own work.
SMU2	My use of social media is pretty much integrated as part of my normal work routine.
SMU3	I use social media for the purchase and/or supply activities related to my job.
Five-point Linkert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).	
Gender	Dummy variable equals to 1 if female, and equals 0 if male.
Age group	Categorical variable: 1=18-25, 2=26-35, 3=36-50, 4=51-65, and 5 if over 65.
Company's turnover	Categorical variable: 1 if ≤ 2 million euros, 2 if > 2 and < 10 million euros, 3 if ≥ 10 and < 50 million euros, 4 if ≥ 50 million euros.
Company's number of employees	Categorical variable: 1 if < 50, 2=50-99, 3=100-499, 4=500-999, 5=1000-1999, and 6 if ≥ 2000.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

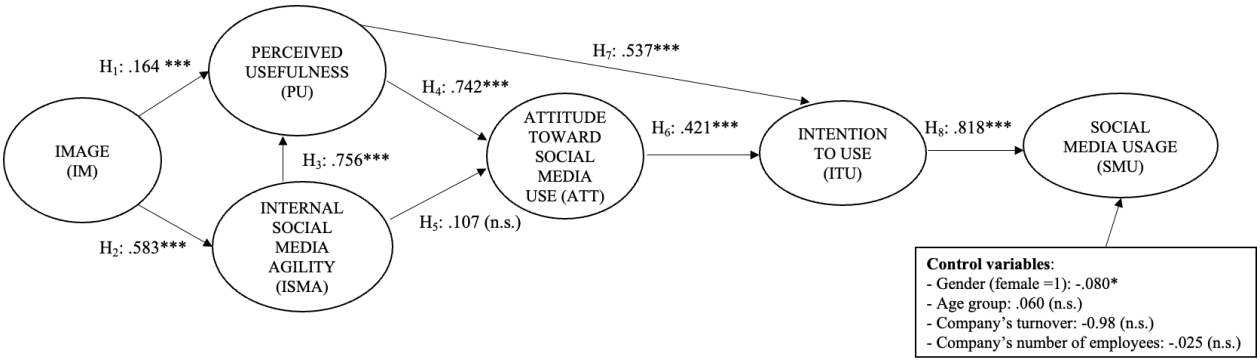
Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
IMAGE (IM)					
IM1	241	3.73	1.07	1	5
IM2	241	3.64	1.08	1	5
IM3	241	3.56	1.11	1	5
PERCEIVED USEFULNESS (PU)					
PU1	241	3.39	1.17	1	5
PU2	241	2.87	1.24	1	5
PU3	241	2.95	1.22	1	5
PU4	241	2.90	1.32	1	5
PU5	241	2.69	1.23	1	5
PU6	241	2.67	1.18	1	5
INTERNAL SOCIAL MEDIA AGILITY (ISMA)					
ISMA1	241	2.65	1.13	1	5
ISMA2	241	2.63	1.14	1	5
ISMA3	241	2.56	1.12	1	5
ISMA4	241	2.61	1.20	1	5
ATTITUDE TOWARD SOCIAL MEDIA USE (ATT)					
ATT1	241	3.51	1.17	1	5
ATT2	241	3.45	1.13	1	5
ATT3	241	3.20	1.23	1	5
ATT4	241	3.44	1.20	1	5
INTENTION TO USE (ITU)					
ITU1	241	3.41	1.18	1	5
ITU2	241	3.20	1.20	1	5
ITU3	241	3.07	1.18	1	5
ITU4	241	2.75	1.17	1	5
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE (SMU)					
SMU1	241	2.73	1.10	1	5
SMU2	241	2.71	1.23	1	5
SMU3	241	2.66	1.25	1	5
Control variables					
Gender	241	.37	.48	0	1
Age group	241	2.77	.82	1	5
Company’s turnover	241	3.05	1.08	1	4
Company’s number of employees	241	3.45	1.75	1	6

Table 3. Measurement Model

Standardized Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P>z	[95% conf.	interval]
IMAGE (IM) Cronbach's Alpha = 0.8699 Raykov's Rho = 0.8716					
IM1 .8056917	.0287738	28.00	0.000	.7492962	.8620873
IM2 .887923	.0228167	38.92	0.000	.843203	.932643
IM3 .8029918	.0286478	28.03	0.000	.7468431	.8591405
PERCEIVED USEFULNESS (PU) Cronbach's Alpha = 0.9467 Raykov's Rho = 0.9474					
PU1 .7660016	.0280531	27.31	0.000	.7110185	.8209846
PU2 .8930372	.0148744	60.04	0.000	.8638838	.9221905
PU3 .9089457	.0130868	69.46	0.000	.883296	.9345954
PU4 .8428665	.0201255	41.88	0.000	.8034212	.8823117
PU5 .8980886	.0140829	63.77	0.000	.8704866	.9256906
PU6 .889304	.0151555	58.68	0.000	.8595997	.9190083
INTERNAL SOCIAL MEDIA AGILITY (ISMA) Cronbach's Alpha = 0.9394 Raykov's Rho = 0.9394					
ISMA1 .9035612	.0144433	62.56	0.000	.8752527	.9318696
ISMA2 .9138268	.0133887	68.25	0.000	.8875854	.9400682
ISMA3 .8661288	.0183833	47.11	0.000	.8300981	.9021594
ISMA4 .8840595	.0165699	53.35	0.000	.851583	.916536
ATTITUDE TOWARD SOCIAL MEDIA USE (ATT) Cronbach's Alpha = 0.9277 Raykov's Rho = 0.9280					
ATT1 .8691457	.018596	46.74	0.000	.8326983	.9055931
ATT2 .8984558	.0155542	57.76	0.000	.8679702	.9289414
ATT3 .849734	.0206481	41.15	0.000	.8092644	.8902036
ATT4 .8795606	.0173921	50.57	0.000	.8454727	.9136484
INTENTION TO USE (ITU) Cronbach's Alpha = 0.9487 Raykov's Rho = 0.9498					
ITU1 .8572415	.0184834	46.38	0.000	.8210146	.8934684
ITU2 .9380512	.0097773	95.94	0.000	.918888	.9572143
ITU3 .9461009	.0089129	106.15	0.000	.928632	.9635698
ITU4 .8920653	.014659	60.85	0.000	.8633341	.9207964
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE (SMU) Cronbach's Alpha = 0.9041 Raykov's Rho = 0.9051					
SMU1 .8267626	.0245023	33.74	0.000	.7787389	.8747863
SMU2 .8877079	.0188601	47.07	0.000	.8507427	.924673
SMU3 .8945125	.0184054	48.60	0.000	.8584386	.9305864

Number of observations: 241.

Figure 1. Structural Model Results



Note: ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1, n.s. → not significant path