



Usability perspective on social media sites' adoption in the B2B context



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2015

Received in revised form 5 January 2016

Accepted 5 January 2016

Available online 11 January 2016

Keywords:

Social media sites

Technology Acceptance Model

Usability

Technology adoption

B2B

ABSTRACT

While social media sites have been successfully adopted and used in the B2C context, they are perceived to be irrelevant in B2B marketing. This is due to marketers' perception of poor usability of these sites in the B2B sector. This study investigates the usability of social media sites when adopted for B2B marketing purposes in the one of world's largest social media market: China. Specifically, by extending the Technology Acceptance Model with Nielsen's Model of Attributes of System Acceptability, we assess the impact of usefulness, usability and utility on the adoption and use of these sites by B2B marketing professionals. The empirical investigation reveals that marketers' perception of the usefulness, usability and utility of social media sites drive their adoption and use in the B2B sector. The usefulness is subject to the assessment of whether social media sites are suitable means through which marketing activities can be conducted. The ability to use social media sites for B2B marketing purposes, in turn, is due to those sites learnability and memorability attributes.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has seen a digital transformation that has driven marketing professionals' move from offline marketing and one-way online communication to a two-way interaction with consumers as enabled by Web 2.0. Social media sites, building on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), are the most popular internet-based applications used in the support of marketers' activities (Simula, Töllinen, & Karjaluo, 2013). This is because of the numerous benefits deriving from the utilisation of those sites for marketing purposes (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011). Those include but are not limited to effective consumer relationship management, greater consumer trust and consumer loyalty. Marketers operating in the business-to-consumer (B2C) sector seem to recognise those benefits and thus they increasingly adopt social media sites in support of marketing strategies. Business-to-business (B2B) marketing professionals, however, do not seem to share the enthusiasm of the B2C sector, as their adoption of social media sites for marketing purposes is rather slow (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014).

The literature indicates, but does not explore, that this slow adoption of social media sites is directly related to marketers' perception of poor usability of those sites in B2B marketing (Buehrer, Senecal, & Bolman, 2005; Järvinen, Töllinen, Karjaluo, & Jayawardhena, 2012). Specifically, marketers claim that because of the characteristics of the B2B company (which the American Marketing Association defines as a business

that markets its products or services to other businesses) and the nature of interactions between businesses partners, they find social media sites being irrelevant in B2B marketing (Swani & Brown, 2011; Michaelidou et al., 2011). This is confirmed by the most recent statistical data, which shows that marketers do not recognise the importance of those sites in B2B context. Specifically, as of May 2015 only 41% of B2B marketers considered LinkedIn as important platform on which marketing activities can be conducted, 30% valued Facebook whereas less than 20% recognised the application of Twitter to B2B marketing activities (Richter, 2015).

Despite this initial reluctance of B2B marketers to adopt or use social media sites for marketing, Brennen and Croft (2013) argue that those sites will have a growing importance in B2B marketing in the future. Hence, considering the growing role of social media sites in B2B marketing, it is imperative to fill in the gap in the literature and explore social media sites adoption by B2B marketing professionals. It is also pertinent to analyse the factors stimulating the adoption and use of those sites in the B2B context. Furthermore, as the usability of social media sites is the factor hindering the adoption of those sites in B2B marketing, it is of paramount importance to evaluate the adoption of social media sites from the perspective of those sites' usability. All of which is the aim of this study.

This remainder of this paper is organised as follows. To provide the context in which the research is conducted and highlight its importance, we present statistical data on the use of social media sites. We focus on the world's largest social media market, China. Next, in Section 2, we review the academic literature emphasising advantages arising from the utilisation of social media sites by marketing professionals to B2B companies. The advantages are contrasted with the disadvantages, and with the barriers preventing B2B marketers from adopting and using social

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media sites for marketing purposes. It is argued that the marketers' perception of usability of social media in the B2B context plays an important role when making an adoption decision. With this factor in mind, we develop a research framework and hypothesis based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Nielsen's (1993) Model of Attributes of System Acceptability. Next in Section 3, we discuss research methodology. This is followed by data analysis (Section 4). In Section 5 we present a discussion of our research findings placed in the context of the literature. We conclude with recommendations to theory and practice deriving from this study and research limitations.

1.1. Social media sites usage in China

Despite its government's policy of internet censorship, which prohibits the use of most western social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, China is now the world's largest social media market. This statement is verified by comparing statistical data on social media use in China and in western countries such as the US and the UK. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Facebook is the most popular social media site worldwide, with nearly 1.5 billion registered users as of November 2015 (Statista, 2015a). The second most popular social media site, however, is Chinese market specific: QQ (an instant messaging software) with 860 million active accounts (*ibid*). Users of Chinese-specific sites tend to be more active online than many western internet users. The statistical data shows that in 2014, access to social media sites in China exceeded that in the US and UK, making Asian habitual internet users, known as *netizens*, the heaviest consumers of social media sites globally (Ofcom, 2014). Such a heavy use of social media sites in China is directly related to the perception of those sites being a valuable source of information. Statistics show that in 2013 over 60% of Chinese internet users believed that social media sites were important sources of knowledge, whereas only 33% of users of UK and 32% of users of US-based social media sites regarded them as possible sources of information (Wiltfong, 2013).

Due to the popularity of social media sites marketing professionals operating in the B2C sector actively adopt social media for marketing whereas B2B marketers underestimate the importance of social media marketing. Such a reluctance to adopt social media for B2B marketing activities is noticeable in China. It is estimated that among the top 500 Chinese companies, only over 40% have some social media presence (e.g. blogging social media site) (Statista, 2015b). It is predicted however, that as the number of social media users in China grows, the number of companies present on social media sites should increase and so too should the adoption rates for social media by marketing professionals not only in the B2C sector but more interestingly B2B business environment. In this context the investigation of social media sites adoption by B2B Chinese marketers is an interesting and valuable research topic, not only for China-based companies but also for international businesses, which operate in or wish to enter the Chinese marketplace.

2. Literature review

2.1. Business-to-business

American Marketing Association (2015) defines B2B companies as businesses, which market their products to other businesses, in contrast to B2C organisations, which sell their products directly to individual consumers. In the B2B sector, there are fewer organisations involved in business transactions than there are consumers engaged in B2C interaction. Because of the number of organisations taking part in those business transactions, the nature of interactions between B2B business partners also differs from that in the B2C sector. It is more direct and more intense than it is in the B2C context (Jussila, Karkkainen, & Aramo-Immonen, 2014). It is based on trust and a relationship

established between industrial partners. Because of that B2B marketing is recognised as being vital to the success of B2B companies.

Traditionally, B2B marketing was carried out in an offline environment. In the past few decades B2B marketers have also incorporated a range of online platforms into their marketing strategies (Brennan & Croft, 2012). Those online platforms were however restricted to one-way communications (e.g. company's website). In recent years, B2B marketing professionals have started using online communication channels, which enable two-way interaction between B2B partners. Among those, social media sites are increasingly receiving marketers' attention. This is confirmed by Brennan and Croft (2012) who report that 'there is extensive practitioner interest in the use of social media for B2B marketing', and hence many B2B companies plan to double their social media marketing budgets within the next five years (CMO Survey Report, 2015).

This growing interest in B2B social media marketing seems to be directly related to the numerous advantages deriving from the utilisation of those sites to B2B companies. Before B2B marketers will be able to fully benefit from the application of social media for marketing purposes however, they have to recognise and address obstacles hindering the adoption and use of those sites in the B2B sector. All of which are outlined below.

2.2. Social media sites in B2B marketing; their advantages and obstacles

To date, research has shown that social media sites are effectively and efficiently used for a number of B2B marketing activities. Those include targeting and consumer relationship management (Moor, Hopkins, & Raymond, 2013). Specifically, it has been shown that B2B marketers successfully use social media sites to identify and attract new business partners (Michaelidou et al., 2011) and new business opportunities (Breslauer & Smith, 2009). They also effectively use social media sites to reach existing consumers and engage them in two-way communication, which industrial partners value. Such an online interaction enables marketers to obtain valuable feedback (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), which when analysed allow them to better tailor company's offering to industrial partners' needs. This in turn is directly related to an increased sales performance and greater return on investment.

Furthermore, research has shown that use of social media sites and a two-way communication between B2B companies allow marketers to deepen relationships with industrial partners (Jussila, Karkkainen, & Leino, 2012). This is because such a two-way online interaction creates the perception of the company being closer to its target market (Breslauer & Smith, 2009), which results in greater trust and loyalty (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Effective consumer relationship management, trust established between B2B business partners and loyalty, in turn, are key to successful B2B transactions.

In addition to the above listed application of social media sites in B2B marketing, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) emphasises that B2B marketing professionals effectively employ these sites in branding strategies. On social media sites they can create a unique brand identity (Michaelidou et al., 2011) and brand loyalty (Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013). Furthermore, they use those sites to direct traffic to a company's branded website (Breslauer & Smith, 2009), significantly increasing brand awareness worldwide (Van Den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007; Rapp et al., 2013).

Finally, Bughin, Manyika, and Miller (2009) report that the biggest advantage deriving from the utilisation of social media sites by B2B marketers is the access to knowledge it affords. Research has shown that social media sites encourage two-way communication and hence virtual co-creation (Simula et al., 2013). They also facilitate intra- and inter-organisational collaboration (Moor et al., 2013). This has a positive impact on innovation and product management, as it may result in the development of innovative offerings, which in turn can provide a company with a competitive advantage (Bughin et al., 2009; Jussila, Karkkainen, &

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