



Social media research in the industrial marketing field: Review of literature and future research directions[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social media
Industrial marketing
Business-to-business marketing
Web 2.0
Literature review

ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of social media, industrial marketing academics and marketers have also been intrigued by the influence of such media on the discipline. As, social media research in the field of industrial marketing has been of increasing interest, this research attempts to review and assess the advances in social media research in the industrial marketing field. From the literature review conducted, it can be identified that some of the research areas have witnessed steady theory development increases, e.g., sales and marketing communications, while others are clearly lagging behind, e.g., pricing and ethics. Also methodological pluralism is called for instead of more traditional methods (conceptual analysis, qualitative and survey) to establish and solve more nuanced research problems. This research provides a review of the current state of research in the field and suggests directions for future development.

1. Introduction

Industrial marketing has been researched from multiple theoretical and methodological viewpoints for several decades, which has resulted in several helpful reviews and syntheses of the current literature (Möller, 2013; Reid & Plank, 2000; Wiersema, 2013). In the last four decades or so, information technology in its various forms has been of interest for industrial management practice and marketing (Kaufman, 1966; Mathews, Wilson, & Backhaus, 1977; Trainor, Rapp, Beitelspacher, & Schillewaert, 2011). Within the information technology field, one of the latest achievements is social media and its social media applications and networking sites which have been increasingly utilized and studied, especially in the business-to-consumer marketing context (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Lamberton & Stephen, 2015; Nadeem, Andreini, Salo, & Laukkanen, 2015).

Now, industrial companies en masse have embraced this novel technology. However, it has also been pointed out that even though industrial marketing practice is benefitting from social media used by marketers, research on that area is still argued to be in the embryonic stage (Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015), and further research is called for (Wiersema, 2013).

In this research, we argue that some of the research gaps, especially those related to adoption, barriers, and reasons to use social media, are slowly being filled in by academic research. As a result of the literature review conducted, we also point to areas where further research is

undoubtedly beneficial, for example, in pricing, social media influences on organizational decision-making or on buying center.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to answer the following research question: How much research exists on the social media deployment in the industrial marketing area, and what are the possible future research directions for industrial marketing? In addition to the literature review, this research aims to integrate some of the theoretical developments and show the abundance and deficiencies in the current research to aid marketing scholars, decision-makers, and marketers.

Similarly to the business marketing theory mapping of Möller (2013) and Reid and Plank (2000), in our critical analysis and literature review, we reviewed 40 research articles that specifically focus on the topics of social media use by industrial companies. Based on the review, we provide a state of the art overview of the current literature. As a result, this research shows the current state of knowledge of how social media has been influencing and is utilized by industrial companies as a form of an integrative framework, which also depicts future research avenues.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, the methodology is presented, and then, the review of the current research on social media use and influences on industrial marketing is analyzed and synthesized. Afterward, the abundant and deficient areas are identified in an integrative framework. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

[☆] This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.07.013>

Received 22 November 2016; Received in revised form 28 April 2017; Accepted 24 July 2017
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2. Methodology

This study follows the three-stage systematic literature review process (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) with three phases in stage one, five phases in stage two, and two phases in stage three. The systematic literature review process is explained in detail below.

In stage one, the review was planned. In the first phase, we identified a need for a review of literature in the field of industrial marketing in relation to social media usage, as multiple authors stated that the field is at an embryonic stage, even though knowledge production in the field has been and still is accelerating. In the second phase, we drafted a proposal to conduct a review, which was followed by a third phase, where a review protocol with inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed. All the studies with an empirical context of industrial marketing were included with an additional inclusion criterion – that studies should focus on social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There are several social media definitions and we adopted one of the frequently used by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). According to them social media includes collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Studies that focused on consumer markets or consumer markets with a social media focus were excluded (see Lamberton & Stephen, 2015).

At stage two, the review was conducted. Phase one identified the existing research. First, we conducted key word searches (social media, web 2.0, industrial marketing, and business-to-business marketing) in the Financial Times 50 listed journals. As the key word searches in the premier journals were returned empty we proceeded to second step. Second, we moved to other journals such as Industrial Marketing Management (18), Journal of Business Research (2), Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (4), Journal of Interactive Marketing and Journal of Retailing. Third, the search was extended to Google Scholar and Scopus to identify other possible contributions. Scopus covers roughly 95% of academic texts (Oksanen & Räsänen, 2016). Textbooks, popular business books and conference papers were excluded from the analysis. As was expected, same articles were found through different routes, so duplications were eliminated. In phase two, studies were selected, categorized by key word searches, and the abstracts of each text were read through. A total of 40 academic research articles were selected for further inspection. In phase three, the quality of the study was evaluated. If the study was conceptual, then the rigor of the concept development and conceptual analysis was looked upon, while for empirical studies, the rigor of the quantitative or qualitative method use was to be evaluated. As the articles were accepted by well-known publishers, all of the 40 articles met these criteria. Phase four includes data extraction, in which we extracted the information source (title, authors, journal, and publication detail) into Excel and the article as a separate file into a designated folder. For the Excel spreadsheet, we also detailed the empirical context, method, and central results of the conducted research. Table 1 presents the sources and the number of articles. Academic journals with one publication were classified as ‘others’.

Table 1
List of journals and number of publications.

Source	n	%
Industrial Marketing Management	18	45
Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	4	10
Journal of Business Research	2	5
Journal of Customer Behavior	2	5
Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management	2	5
Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	2	5
Marketing Management Journal	2	5
Others	8	20
Total	40	100

Phase five is the data synthesis, in which, after reading the individual research articles and roughly categorizing them with two identifiers, i.e., theoretical areas and time of publication, we started to look at the key findings of each individual article and overlaps of the contributions. The theoretical thematic topic categories that were used to categorize were adopted, condensed, and revised from a popular business marketing state of the art review conducted by Reid and Plank (2000), in which they had 28 general theoretical thematic topic categories for industrial marketing research. Here, we have condensed some of the categories, e.g., personal selling, sales training, and sales motivation and compensation into one, labeled ‘sales’, and for the buyer-seller relationship, we added ‘business networks’. Also, for some of the categories, e.g., ‘pricing and logistics’ and ‘physical distribution’, we did not find any existing research. The category ‘computer use’ refers to social media use in general, while the ‘decision support’ category is leaning more towards the way social media is used in decision-making. Hence, we ended up with eight categories. Thematic categories as well as the number of publications per year are detailed in the Appendix 1.

In stage three, the report and recommendations are presented. We present these in chapter four and five. Chapter four summarizes the existing research surplus areas and identifies the deficiencies in the field by providing some avenues for future research. Chapter five concludes the research.

3. Critical analysis and review of the current contributions

Social media in the industrial marketing field have been researched to some extent. The aim of this section is to present the 40 identified pertinent articles and their influential contributions to the industrial marketing theoretical thematic categories and subfields, when possible. The review critically evaluates the theories and methods employed, as well as the context of the research, and most importantly – the results gained. The literature review proceeds in alphabetical order of the thematic categories.

3.1. Advertising

The authors of one of the first studies on industrial companies' social media advertising, Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides (2011), focus on the social networking site (SNS) used by B2B United Kingdom-based small and medium-sized companies (SME). A Survey of 102 companies in various industrial sectors revealed that 25% of the companies were utilizing SNS. In particular, the authors show that a majority of the companies consider their use irrelevant, while those using it are using it for three main purposes, namely, attracting new customers, cultivating relationships, and increasing brand awareness. Interestingly, their survey shows that companies are not using any metrics to assess their SNS effectiveness. Besides use in advertising, the content is also an important element in advertising.

Brennan and Croft (2012) conducted a content analysis of ten large high-technology sector B2B companies in the UK. They found out that companies were using almost all the mainstream social media channels, but adoption was not universal, and UK companies were lagging behind large US companies. Two motives were identified in social media participation. First, the B2B social media pioneers are striving to use these tools to position themselves as ‘thought leaders’ to take a market-driving role in the sector, and second, to build relationships with a range of stakeholder groups. In addition to content, message strategies are also an important aspect of advertising.

Swani, Milne, and Brown (2013) focused their research efforts on the message strategies that are likely to promote online word-of-mouth activity for B2B Facebook accounts. They also compare products and services as well as contrast B2B and B2C companies. Swani et al. (2013)

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