


Chapter 7

The Role of Social Media in the Internationalization of B2B Companies

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this chapter is to explore the role of social media in the internationalization of business-to-business (B2B) companies, addressing a remaining gap in the literature. It includes a qualitative study, where data from semi-structured interviews was subject to thematic content analysis. The study found that social media acts as a facilitator of internationalization in the B2B setting. While social media alone does not determine the success of internationalization efforts, it has become an essential tool for firms seeking to engage with global markets and maintain a competitive edge. The study provides relevant insights for managers, recommending that businesses should track social media performance to understand its impact on internationalization efforts and adjust strategies accordingly.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media has transformed communication and how people and organizations interact with one another. As a result of these new communication media, new business models have surfaced, creating new opportunities and challenging the conventional ways of how businesses operate (Hanna et al., 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Saari et al., 2022). Businesses in general and researchers have only recently begun to pay more attention to social media, especially when it comes to international business, recognizing the potential it provides for scaling up and expanding operations internationally (Almeida & Santos, 2020; Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Chetty, 2021; Glavas et al., 2019; Rialp-Criado et al., 2020; Saari et al., 2022). Lo et al. (2023) claim that internationalization has become a key business strategy for firms to achieve sustainable growth, gain competitive advantages, and increase profitability in the long term.

Further, in the realm of B2B companies, which have traditionally relied on personal interactions to build their relationships (Athaide et al., 2019; Sundström et al., 2021), researchers have also recently taken an interest in the impact of social media in the scope B2B companies. This interest has arisen in light of the exponential increase in the use of social media worldwide (Sundström et al., 2021).

Since the launch of the most popular social networking sites, business-to-consumer (B2C) enterprises have greatly utilized social media (López-López & Giusti, 2020; Salo, 2017). However, B2C and B2B sectors differ significantly, and as a result, knowledge and practices developed in one cannot be directly applied to the other. Consequently, B2B businesses adopt distinct approaches to branding, communication, and relationship building (Barbosa et al., 2022; Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Swani et al., 2014). Thus, while social media is widely explored in B2C sectors, corresponding research within the B2B context remains somewhat scarce (Cartwright, Davies, & Archer-Brown, 2021; Cartwright, Liub, & Raddatsc, 2021; Drummond et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2021). Hence, it is relevant to further explore as the use of social media by B2B companies. Moreover, while some previous research addresses the use of social media for business internationalization (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2020; Saari et al., 2022), the literature on the topic is still limited and disregards the B2B context. Therefore, the research question proposed for this chapter is: what is the role of social media in the internationalization of B2B companies? In line with this, the primary objectives of this research may be summarized as follows:

RO1: explore the adoption of social media as a tool for the internationalization of B2B companies;

RO2: identify how social media could maintain relationships with international partners and customers;

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