

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY SALESPEOPLE TRANSLATES INTO SALES PERFORMANCE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SALES STRATEGY

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Despite the growing importance of social media to B2B sales, not much is known about the processes through which social media use by B2B salespeople translates into sales performance. Using a sample of 162 B2B salespeople, this study examines sales strategy implementation as a mediating process through which social media use by salespeople leads to performance. Results indicate that when salespeople use social media to implement the sales strategy dimensions of customer segmentation, customer prioritization, and the use of selling models, it has a positive effect on their sales performance. The results and their implications for managers and researchers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is rapidly transforming the sales role in many B2B organizations with social media being increasingly adopted into the sales process by sales organizations worldwide. Using social media as part of the sales process is also known as social selling. Social selling is defined as “leveraging social media to find the right prospects, build trusted relationships, and ultimately, achieve your sales goals. This sales technique enables better sales lead generation and sales prospecting process and eliminates the need for cold calling” (LinkedIn, n.d.). A recent study by Forrester Research found 77% of B2B organizations have adopted or in the process of implementing social media technologies for use by their sales force (Forrester Research, 2017), and expect social media to be the dominant medium through which salespeople engage with customers and potential customers. However, the same study by Forrester Research found only 20% of sales organizations were implementing social selling effectively, an indication that it takes more than the adoption of social media technology tools for social media use by salespeople to translate in sales performance.

Due to the increased use of social media by the sales force, sales scholars have begun to research how social media is impacting the day-

to-day activities of salespeople. Prior research on the role of social media in the sales force has examined the effects of social media use on salesperson performance (Schultz, Schwepker, & Good, 2012; Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012), relationship performance (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014; Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016), customer satisfaction (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016), competitive intelligence gathering (Itani, Agnihotri, & Dingus, 2017), and post-sale service behaviors (Agnihotri, Trainor, Itani, & Rodriguez 2017). These studies have greatly enhanced our knowledge on how social media is impacting the sales force and the outcomes it yields for salespeople who can use social media effectively. However, there still exists important gaps in the literature on how social media influences salesperson performance and their daily activities. For example, not much is known about the processes through which social media usage by salespeople leads to performance. In seeking to understand how technology tools can have an impact on salesperson performance, Ahearne and his colleagues (2008) argued technology tools do not impact performance directly, but rather through “intervening variables..... germane to the selling context should indirectly influence salesperson performance” (Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, & Mathieu, 2008, p. 674). Therefore, it is not the mere usage of technology tools such as social media that leads to performance, but rather the use of these tools can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of salesperson behaviors which ultimately leads to performance. Hence, drawing on this logic, this

paper argues that sales strategy implementation is one process through which salespeople can translate social media use into performance.

Another area that has yet to be explored in the literature is how social media can assist salespeople in implementing sales strategy. Prior research has observed a disconnect between the sales strategy used by the sales force and organizational strategy (Strahle & Spiro, 1996; Cespedes, 2014). With firm strategy and business unit strategy increasingly dependent on the activities of the sales force especially in B2B organizations (Cespedes, 2014; Cron, Baldauf, Leigh, & Grossenbacher, 2014), an evaluation of how tools such as social media can help salespeople be more effective in implementing sales strategy, can help minimize the gap between the activities of the sales force and the strategic focus of the organization.

Using Task-Technology Fit theory (TTF) as a theoretical base, this study will also examine how social media usage can help salespeople implement sales strategy. Additionally, this study will examine the mediating effect of salesperson implementation of sales strategy on the relationship between social media use and salesperson performance. This study contributes to the sales literature in three ways. First, this study answers the call for more research into the “drivers” of sales strategy implementation (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010), by exploring how social media use can help salespeople implement sales strategy. With the relatively limited amount of research on how to encourage salespeople to implement sales strategy (Terho, Eggert, Haas & Ulaga, 2015), this study will examine how social media can be one method that enables salespeople to implement sales strategy effectively. Second, this study evaluates the role of salesperson implementation of sales strategy as a mediator of the relationship between social media and sales performance. Although, the effects of social media on sales performance has been studied in the literature (Schultz et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2012; & Itani et al., 2017), the processes through which social media impacts performance has been largely unexplored. Due to this gap in the literature, scholars have called for more research into the “chain of effects” of how social media use leads to performance (Itani et

al., 2017). Finally, this research study examines the performance outcomes of salesperson implementation of sales strategy, in contrast to prior studies that focused on sales strategy implementation at the firm level.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Media and the Sales Force

Social media has many definitions, but in a sales context it has been defined by Agnihotri and his colleagues (2012) as “any social interaction enhancing technology that can be deployed by sales professionals to generate content (e.g., blogs, microblogs, and wikis) and develop networks (e.g., social networks, online communities)” (p. 334). Social media encompasses various technologies and platforms including social networking sites (LinkedIn, Google+), blogging sites (WordPress, Tumblr), microblogging sites (Twitter), podcasts (Soundcloud), video (YouTube and Vimeo), and many others. Social media can help a salesperson with each step of the sales process (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012), from researching prospects and the challenges they face, to following up and keeping in touch with existing customers. When salespeople are effective in using social media, they are more effective in their jobs and achieve sales quota at a higher rate than salespeople who do not use social media (LinkedIn, 2017).

Sales Strategy

Traditionally, the strategy of the sales force was subsumed under corporate marketing strategy. This was because the sales role was considered a tactical activity mainly responsible for executing strategies developed by the marketing department (Lane, 2009). However, the role of the sales force has changed to where sales are considered a strategic function on par with marketing (Piercy, 2010). While marketing strategy is primarily concerned with marketing activities and decisions that help organizations create, communicate and deliver products that offer value to customers (Varadarajan 2010), sales strategy is concerned with the activities and decisions about managing the sales force. Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) defined sales strategy as “the

extent to which a firm engages in a set of activities and decisions regarding the allocation of scarce sales resources (i.e., people, selling effort, money) to manage customer relationships on the basis of the value of each customer for the firm” (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010, p. 48). They developed a sales strategy scale consisting of four dimensions: customer segmentation, customer prioritization, selling models, and the use of multiple sales channels. However, as the objective of this study is focused on understanding sales strategy implementation by individual salespeople, the multiple sales channel dimension of sales strategy is omitted from the model in this study, as it is not an activity typically practiced by salespeople.

Although the sales strategy scale developed by Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) was intended to evaluate sales strategy implementation at the organizational or business-unit level, the activities described in the scale can also be practiced by individual salespeople. Salespeople can use customer segmentation to identify groups of customers with similar needs, and who are also a good fit with the firm’s products and services. Salespeople can then tailor their sales approaches to address the unique needs of each customer segment (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010). Salespeople implement customer prioritization by choosing customers based on the potential value the customer represents to the firm and allocating more of their time in developing relationships with these types of customers. (Homburg, Schäfer, & Schneider, 2012). Finally, salespeople can use selling models to align their selling efforts with the relationship expectations of customers (Terho et al., 2015).

Although sales strategy just like other strategies in an organization is important, its real value lies in its successful implementation. The implementation phase of strategy is so important that it has been stated that “effective implementation of an average strategy, beats mediocre implementation of a great strategy every time” (Sterling, 2003, p. 27). For strategy to be implemented successfully, it requires employee participation (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2008).

Task-Technology Fit Theory

The use of social media as a technology tool to help salespeople is consistent with TTF theory as conceptualized by Goodhue and Thompson (1995). According to TTF theory, technology tools are likely to have a positive impact on performance when the technology tool used is a good fit with the tasks users must perform. Social networking sites are technology tools that can help salespeople in their jobs to the extent that they are a good fit for the selling tasks that salespeople perform as part of their daily activities. In the extant sales literature, TTF theory has been used to explain how sales technology and customer relationship management (CRM) technology leads to performance through intervening variables such as customer service and adaptive selling behaviors (Ahearne et al., 2008; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2008). Also using TTF theory, Agnihotri et al. (2012), proposed a framework in which social media helps salespeople create value with customers. Specifically, they argued that value creation with customers depends on the fit between social media and the service behaviors practiced by salespeople. Agnihotri et al. (2012) also proposed that social media is an enabler of information sharing, customer service and trust building behaviors of salespeople, which leads to value creation with customers. Similarly, this research argues that social media is an enabling technology tool that helps salespeople achieve performance through sales strategy implementation.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Social Media Use and Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy

Using Panagopoulos and Avlonitis’ (2010) conceptualization of sales strategy, salespeople implement sales strategy by segmenting among potential customers, those who are an ideal fit for the selling firm’s products and services, prioritizing among customers and potential customers based on their potential value, and adopting a selling approach that meets the expectations of the customer. Social media can help a salesperson in these three areas. Social media can help salespeople segment among prospects by providing information on

prospects such as key decision makers, their likely wants, needs, and news (such as venture capital raised, reorganizations, new executives hired or fired, etc.) on prospects that may be useful to the salesperson in choosing which prospects are the best ones to initiate contact. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn can also help salespeople use strategies such as “social listening” (Newberry, 2018) in which a salesperson monitors conversations occurring online to discover prospects’ needs, challenges, and business goals. The salesperson can then use this information to identify prospects whose challenges can be addressed with the solutions offered by the salesperson, and then start a conversation with them.

Another use of social media is that it can help a salesperson ascertain among the many prospects who may need the salesperson’s services, those customers whose needs represent the best opportunity for value co-creation between the prospect and the selling organization. Also, social media can allow a salesperson to determine prospects’ and existing customers’ relationship expectations. According to Rackham and DeVincentis (1999), customers have various expectations for relationships with suppliers, ranging from transactional relationships in which the customer’s focus is on price and convenience with little to no expectations for ongoing interactions to enterprise relationships in which customers want in-depth, ongoing relationships with suppliers that involves frequent contact. When a salesperson uses social media, it enables them to determine customers’ relationship preferences early in the relationship-building process. Therefore, since social media can be an effective tool for a salesperson to perform the various tasks associated with implementing sales strategy, it is proposed that:

H₁: Social media use has a positive effect on salesperson implementation of sales strategy.

Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy and Customer Relationship Performance

Some of the goals of customer relationship management are to improve customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Previous

research as identified communication as an important prerequisite to customer satisfaction (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007; Agnihotri et al., 2016). In a meta-analysis of relationship marketing studies, Palmatier and his colleagues (2007), found seller communication, seller expertise, interaction frequency, and relationship benefits all had positive effects on customer loyalty through the mediating variables of trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Therefore, when a salesperson implements sales strategy by communicating through social media with prospects and customers carefully selected based on the salesperson’s solutions being able to address their unique challenges, the salesperson will be in a good position to establish trust, an indicator of relationship quality. Also, when salespeople are able to interact with customers through social media in such a manner that it meets the relationship goals and expectations of customers, salespeople are likely to increase customer satisfaction. Customer relationship performance has been defined as the extent to which firms are able to satisfy and keep loyal customers (Trainor et al., 2014). When salespeople practice sales strategy through customer segmentation, customer prioritization, and aligning selling methods to customers’ expectations, it should result in the development of strong relationship bonds with customers. Therefore,

H₂: Salesperson implementation of sales strategy has a positive effect on customer relationship performance.

Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy and Sales Performance

Salespeople implement sales strategy by segmenting customers based on fit, prioritizing among customers based on their potential value to the firm, and adapting their selling approaches to align them with customer preferences. Prior research has shown that when salespeople segment customers, they gain a better understanding of groups of customers with similar needs (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010). They are then able to tailor their sales approach to each customer segment based on each segment’s unique needs (Terho et al., 2015). Customer prioritization can help salespeople become more efficient in their selling efforts by allocating their time towards

prospects and existing customers who are likely to represent the greatest value to the salesperson's firm (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010). Finally, when salespeople adopt selling models ranging from transactional to consultative selling models that are aligned with customer preferences, salespeople are in a better position to co-create value (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999). As sales strategy has been found to have a positive effect on organizational performance (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010), it should also result in beneficial sales outcomes for salespeople when incorporated into their sales process. Hence,

H₃: Salesperson implementation of sales strategy has a positive effect on sales performance.

The Moderating Effects of Sales Experience on the Relationship Between Social Media Use and Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy

Although recent research in the sales literature has extolled the benefits of social media use for salespeople (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Agnihotri et al., 2017; & Itani et al., 2017), many salespeople do not know to use social media effectively. Previous research has found that more experienced salespeople tend to be more resistant to implementing new sales technology tools than less experienced salespeople (Weinstein & Mullins, 2012). One reason for the resistance towards new sales technology is that many experienced salespeople have developed elaborate knowledge structures on the sales process from prospecting to closing, (Ahearne, Rapp, Hughes, & Jindal, 2010), and may become resistant to changing their current practices. To use social media effectively, it requires salespeople to adapt to new ways of implementing the sales process. For example, experienced salespeople may already have become familiar with the various aspects of sales strategy, and may not feel the need to use social media as a tool to identify the right types of customers, or how to prioritize among customers.

Additionally, more experienced salespeople tend to doubt they can realize productivity gains by using technology tools (Guan, Barker, Faulds, & Gohmann, 2011), and therefore are not likely to use such technology tools such as

social media to their full potential. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H₄: The positive effect of social media use on salesperson implementation of sales strategy will decrease as salesperson experience increases.

Mediating Effects of Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy on the Relationship Between Social Media Use and Sales Performance

Most of the previous empirical research in the literature on salesperson use of social media has focused on the main effects of social media use on sales performance (Schultz et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2012), with hardly any studies examining the processes through which social media use leads to sales performance. One exception is a study by Ogilvie et al. (2018), which showed when salespeople use social media; it has a positive impact on salesperson behaviors, which in turn has a positive impact on performance. With up to 72% of salespeople not being able to use social selling effectively (HubSpot, 2016), it becomes important to not only know that social media use leads to performance but also to know *how* social media use by salespeople leads to sales performance. In the study by Ogilvie and her colleagues (2018), the authors found social media use by salespeople had a positive effect on product information communication and adaptability. They also found salespersons' product information communication and adaptability had a positive effect on performance. However, in their study they did not test for the mediating effects these salesperson behaviors had on the relationship between social media use and salesperson performance.

In this study, it is proposed that salesperson implementation of sales strategy is one of the processes through which social media use leads to performance. When salespeople use social media tools such as LinkedIn Sales Navigator, Hubspot, Hootsuite, Twitter, and the many other B2B social media tools available, they can identify customer segments that are ideally suited to benefit from the salesperson's offerings. They also become more efficient in their time allocation by prioritizing among accounts more effectively and are able to adopt a selling approach that matches customer

preferences. Based on the preceding, it is proposed that:

H₅: Salesperson implementation of sales strategy mediates the relationship between social media use and sales performance.

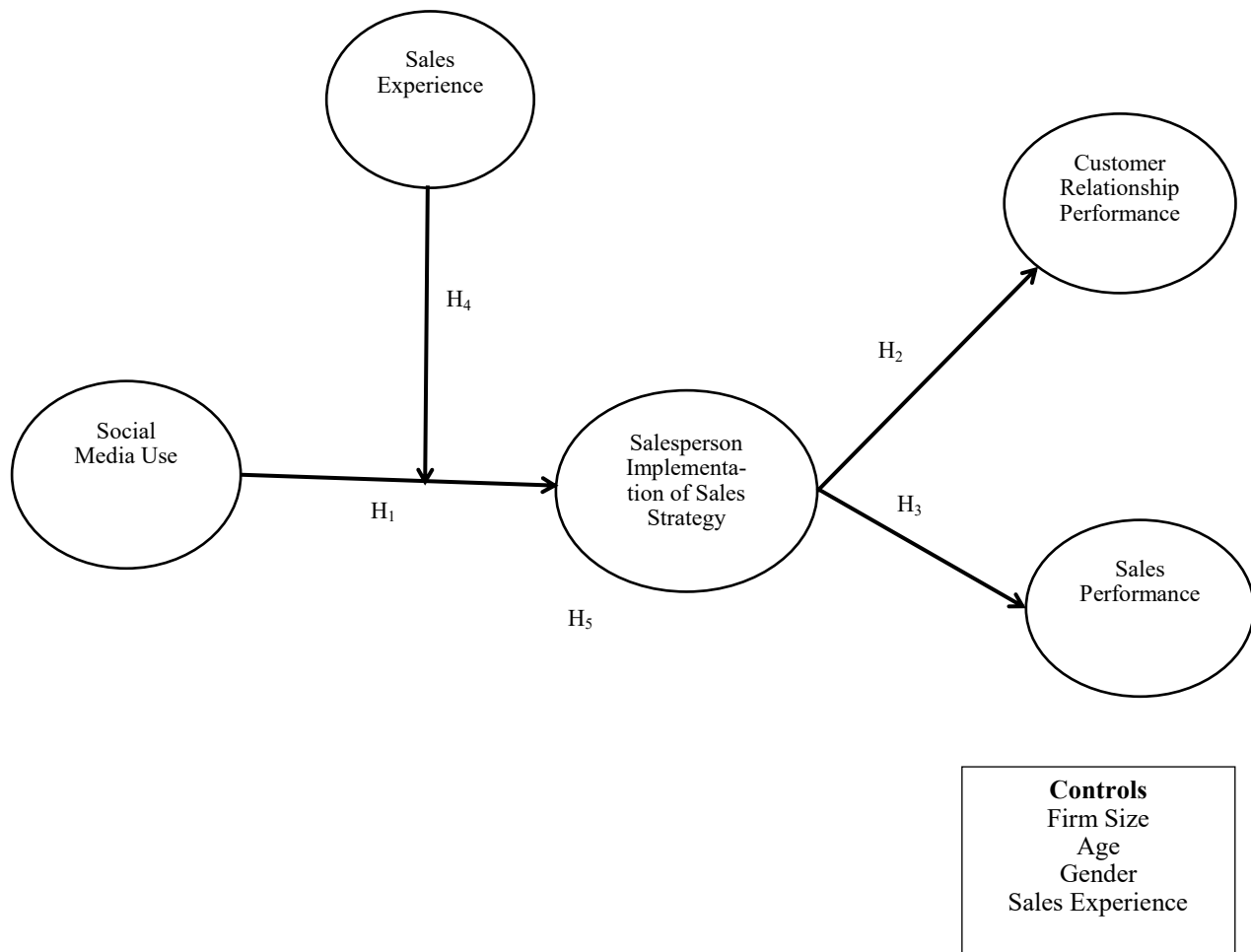
METHOD

Sample

The sample used in this study consisted of salespeople from various industries and organizations of different sizes. To obtain a diverse sample of salespeople, a list of U.S. based B2B salespeople was purchased from a commercial data provider. An e-mail with a link to an online survey was sent to a randomly selected sample of 2000 salespeople from the list. Salespeople were offered a chance to win

one of ten \$25 restaurant gift certificates as well as the summary of the study’s findings in exchange for their participation. 217 salespeople accessed the online survey site and started the survey. Of the 217 salespeople who started the survey, 55 did not complete all survey items and were dropped leaving a final sample size of 162 salespeople, for an effective response rate of 8.1%. The demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows; 56% were men, with ages ranging from 25 years up to over 65 years with a mean age of 46.3 years (SD = 9.6). 75% of the salespeople in the sample had a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the average number of years of sales experience was 13.2 years (SD = 6.3). The salespeople in the sample came from various industries including; business/professional services, financial services, computer/

**FIGURE 1:
Conceptual Model**



information technology/software, healthcare/pharmaceutical, publishing/media, manufacturing, and telecommunications.

Measures

To examine the relationships between the constructs used in this study, existing scales were used. Sales strategy was measured using eleven items from the Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) sales strategy scale. The items were reworded to reflect the activities practiced by salespeople. Four items measuring social media use was used from Rodriguez et al. (2012) and Rapp et al. (2013). To measure customer relationship performance, five items from Trainor et al. (2014) was used. Sales performance was measured using seven items adapted from Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) and Terho et al. (2015). Salesperson experience was measured using a single item of number of years in the sales profession. Age, gender and firm size were used as controls and measured with a single item. All constructs, except age, gender, firm size, and sales experience were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, and are listed in Table 1.

Measurement Model

To examine the reliability and validity of the measures used in this study, an indicator analysis was used. As the model includes both formative and reflective constructs, the indicator analysis occurred separately for the formative and reflective constructs. To assess the reliability and validity of the only formative construct used in this study (salesperson implementation of sales strategy), collinearity and relevance of the indicators were examined (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). To assess if collinearity exists between the indicators, each indicator was regressed against all other indicators, and variance inflation factor (VIF) scores were obtained. VIF scores for all indicators in each dimension of salesperson implementation of sales strategy, ranged from 1.4 to 2.9, which were below the recommended threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2016), providing evidence that collinearity is not a problem. The next step in examining the validity of formative indicators is to determine their relevance. An indicator is relevant if the loading of each indicator is greater than 0.70

and is significant (Hair et al., 2016). Ten of the formative indicators' loadings on their respective dimensions were above the recommended 0.70 threshold and were all significant ($p < 0.05$), providing evidence of indicator relevance. Two indicators had loadings below the recommended threshold of 0.70. However, low loadings of formative indicators (< 0.70 , > 0.50) is not necessarily a requirement for deletion in formative constructs (Garson, 2016), and therefore the two indicators were retained in the model.

To assess the reliability and validity of the reflective measures used in this study, Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE) and HTMT scores were calculated. The Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability scores for each of the reflective measures in the model exceeded the recommended level of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2016), demonstrating convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using AVE and the HTMT criterion. First, using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) procedure in which the square root of each construct's AVE should be higher than its correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the results show the square root of AVE for all reflective constructs exceed their correlations with other constructs. Second, discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The HTMT ratio for all pairs of reflective constructs was below the recommended level of 0.85 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015), providing further evidence of discriminant validity. The correlations between constructs and the results of the reliability and validity checks are listed in Table 2.

Structural Model

The relationships among the constructs in the model were examined using partial least squares (PLS), and the analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 3 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). PLS structural equation modeling (PLS) was chosen as an appropriate method for two reasons. First, PLS is much better in handling mixed models (models that include both reflective and formative constructs), when compared to covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM)

**TABLE 1:
Construct Items and Loadings**

Construct Name and Indicators	Indicator Loadings
Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy (adapted from Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010) (formative measure)	
To what extent do the following statements describe what you practice as part of your sales activities (1= not at all; 7 = to a very great extent)	
<i>Customer Segmentation</i>	
I identify prospective customer groups based on the expected lifetime value/profitability of each customer to the firm.	0.65
I identify specific customer groups based on the customers’ demographic characteristics (firm size, location, industry etc.)	0.85
I identify specific customer groups based on the customers’ uses/applications of our products/services.	0.74
I identify specific customer groups based on the benefits that they expect from buying our products/ services.	0.81
<i>Customer Prioritization</i>	
I prioritize customers that I have identified based on their expected importance to the firm.	0.81
I target my selling efforts to different customers.	0.70
I develop specific selling strategies for each targeted customer.	0.87
<i>Selling Models</i>	
I set different relationship objectives for different customers.	0.85
I consider customers’ preferences when setting relationship objectives.	0.78
I use different selling models when selling to different customers.	0.69
I consider the costs (in time, resources etc.) and potential value associated with a particular customer when setting relationship objectives and selling models.	0.76
Social Media Use (adapted from Rodriguez et al. 2012 and Rapp et al. 2013) Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.86, Composite Reliability = 0.91	
I use social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Twitter etc.) as a tool to identify potential new customers.	0.87
I use social media as a tool to identify decision makers.	0.89
I enhance my customer relationships through social media.	0.88
The use of social media for business purposes in my company is encouraged.	0.74
Customer Relationship Performance (adapted from Trainor et al. 2014) Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.87, Composite Reliability = 0.91	
Relative to your competitors.....	
..... our customers work with our firm for a long time.	0.78
..... once we get new customers, they tend to stay with our company.	0.85
..... our customers are very loyal to our firm.	0.81
..... our customers are satisfied with our company.	0.86
..... customer retention is very important to our firm.	0.86
Sales Performance (adapted from Panagopoulos and Avlonitis 2010, and Terho et. al., 2015) Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.89, CR = 0.92 (1 = much worse, 7 = much better)	
Relative to other salespeople working in your company, how would you evaluate your overall performance with regard to the following:	
I contribute to my company’s market share.	0.80
I sell high profit margin products/services.	0.78
I generate a high level of dollar sales.	0.86
I quickly generate sales of my company’s new products/services.	0.77
I identify and cultivate major accounts in my territory.	0.76
I exceed sales targets.	0.82
I assist my sales manager in meeting his/her goals.	0.68

CR = Composite Reliability

(Hair et al., 2016). Second, PLS is the recommended SEM method for studies that have small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2016). This study has a sample of 162 salespeople, making PLS an appropriate method.

To account for the possibility of common method bias, the full collinearity assessment approach (Kock, 2015) was used to identify any common variance that can be due to the method of measurement. In the full collinearity assessment approach, variance inflation factor (VIF) scores are generated for all of the constructs in the model. If the VIF scores for all constructs are below 3.3, then the model is considered free of common method bias (Kock, 2015). The VIF scores for the constructs in the model were in the range of 1.0 to 1.2, all below the recommended level of 3.3, demonstrating that the model is free of common method bias. Prior to running the PLS analysis, the formative construct in the model (salesperson implementation of sales strategy) was modeled as a second-order factor, with the dimensions of customer segmentation, customer prioritization and selling models used as indicators of sales strategy implementation in the structural model (Hair et al., 2016).

The PLS analysis was run using 5000 bootstrap samples to obtain parameter estimates. The model demonstrated adequate fit (SRMR = 0.075) with the SRMR below the recommended level of 0.08 for good model fit (Hu and Bentler 1998). The PLS analysis path coefficient results show social media use has a positive effect on

salesperson implementation of sales strategy ($\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$) in support of H₁. Also, salesperson implementation of sales strategy has a positive effect on customer relationship performance ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.001$), providing support for H₂. Likewise, salesperson implementation of sales strategy has a positive effect on sales performance ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$), providing evidence in support of H₃. An analysis of the interactive effects of social media use and salesperson experience on salesperson implementation of sales strategy finds sales experience weakens the positive relationship between social media use and salesperson implementation of sales strategy ($\beta = -0.20, p = 0.023$), confirming H₄. Finally, to examine the mediating effects of salesperson implementation of sales strategy on the relationship between social media use and sales performance, the mediation analysis procedure for PLS was utilized. Mediation exists when the indirect effect of an independent variable (IV) on a dependent variable (DV) is significant (Matthews, Hair, & Matthews, 2018). The mediation effect is considered to be partial if the direct effect of the IV on the DV is significant, or full mediation exists if the direct effect of IV on the DV is not significant (Matthews et al., 2018). In the PLS results the indirect effect of social media use on sales performance was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.001$), and the direct effect of social media use on sales performance was also positive, but not significant ($\beta = 0.15, p = 0.10$), therefore, support was found for full mediation, corroborating H₅.

FIGURE 2



The R² values of the PLS results shows social media use accounts for 37 percent of the variance in salesperson implementation of sales strategy. Additionally, salesperson implementation of sales strategy accounts for 19 percent of the variance in customer relationship performance, and 42 percent of the variance in sales performance. All PLS results are shown in Table 3.

DISCUSSION

Social media has become an increasingly valuable tool for salespeople to use in

developing and building relationships with customers. Social media use by salespeople has become so important that a whole new terminology “social selling” has been coined to describe how salespeople can use social media in the sales process. However, despite the increased attention paid in both the academic and practitioner literature on the use of social media by salespeople, there is a gap in the literature on *how* salespeople can use social media effectively. Practitioner research has shown that a large percentage of salespeople do not know how to use social media in selling effectively (HubSpot, 2016), and therefore the

**TABLE 2:
Correlation Matrix**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Social Media Use	.85							
2. Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy	.48**	N/A	-					
3. Customer Relationship Performance	.23**	.39**	.81					
4. Sales Performance	.37**	.52**	.50**	.78				
5. Sales Experience	-.03	.28**	.16*	.28**	1			
6. Age	-.003	.20*	.18*	.19*	.70**	1		
7. Gender	-.01	-.01	.12	.01	-.01	.06	1	
8. Firm Size	.06	.16*	.03	.21**	.10	-.15	-.13	1
Mean	4.94	5.52	5.71	5.72	13.2	46.3	-	-
Standard Deviation	1.46	0.94	0.93	0.97	6.3	9.6	-	-

*Correlations significant at $p \leq 0.05$, ** Correlations significant at $p \leq 0.01$. Square roots of average variance extracted (AVE) shown on diagonal for reflective constructs.

**TABLE 3:
PLS Results**

Hypothesis	Independent	Dependent	Path Coefficient	Results
H ₁ (+)	Social Media Use	Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy	.48**	Supported
H ₂ (+)	Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy	Customer Relationship Performance	.39**	Supported
H ₃ (+)	Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy	Sales Performance	.35**	Supported
H ₄ (+)	Social Media Use X Salesperson Experience	Salesperson Implementation of Sales Strategy	-.20*	Supported
H ₅ (+)	Indirect Effect of Social Media Use	Sales Performance	.17*	Supported

* Paths significant at $p \leq 0.05$, ** Paths significant at $p \leq 0.001$.

increased investments by many organizations in social selling tools (Forester Research, 2017), could yield suboptimal results. For social media to be beneficial to salespeople, they should know how to use it effectively as part of their daily activities.

As previous research has argued that technology tools such as social media do not impact performance directly (Ahearne et al., 2008), but indirectly through intervening variables, this study demonstrates that salesperson implementation of sales strategy is one process through which social media use by salespeople leads to sales performance. When salespeople use social media, they can find and identify customers who match the ideal customer profile of the salesperson's firm. Salespeople can also use social media to develop a list of accounts for targeting and build and nurture relationships with these prospects, prioritizing among the various accounts based on their level of engagement and the potential value they represent. Also, social media can help salespeople understand and meet the relationship expectations of prospects and existing customers. In summary, social media use can assist salespeople in performing all of the tasks associated with implementing sales strategy; customer segmentation, customer prioritization and the use of selling models. When salespeople use social media, they can improve their sales performance through sales strategy implementation. However, this study also demonstrates that the effects of social media use are not uniform across all salespeople, as more experienced salespeople are less effective in using social media to implement sales strategy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the literature in four ways. First, the research identifies social media use as one of the antecedents of salesperson implementation of sales strategy. In their development of the sales strategy scale, Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) had issued a call for research into the "drivers" of sales strategy and its implementation, and this

research answers that call by showing that social media use can help salespeople implement sales strategy. Using TTF theory (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995), this research showed social media use is well suited towards the tasks of sales strategy implementation. Second, this study identifies salesperson implementation of sales strategy as a mediating variable in the relationship between social media use and sales performance. Prior research has primarily examined the main effects of social media use on sales performance (Schultz et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2012), with hardly any empirical studies examining the processes through which social media use leads to sales performance. This study shows salesperson implementation of sales strategy fully mediates the relationship between social media use and sales performance, illustrating a process of how social media use by salespeople impacts sales performance. Third, this research demonstrates that sales experience weakens the relationship between social media use and sales strategy implementation. Hence, more experienced salespeople may not realize the productivity gains of using social media when compared to less experienced salespeople. Finally, this research contributes to the literature by showing a positive effect of sales strategy implementation on customer relationship performance and sales performance which has not been previously studied in the sales literature.

Implications for Practice

The results found in this study provides some actionable information that can be used by managers to make their sales teams more effective in using social media. First, this research shows social media can help salespeople implement the sales strategy dimensions of customer segmentation, customer prioritization and the use of different selling models. With salespeople increasingly finding it difficult to find prospects who are a good fit for the products and services they offer (Richardson, 2016), sales managers can train their salespeople to use social media to find customers who are likely to be suitable candidates for the selling firm's offerings. With social media tools such as LinkedIn Sales Navigator, salespeople can identify ideal

prospects, and by using the filtering options available in LinkedIn Sales Navigator, salespeople can find prospects who have expressed an interest in solving challenges that the salesperson's solutions can address. A salesperson can then prioritize their prospecting efforts towards these highly motivated prospects and engage with them on the social network to share information on how the salesperson's solutions can help. With prospects having various needs and expectations, sales managers can instruct their sales teams to use social media to uncover the types of relationships that prospects expect from their suppliers. For example, if a prospect is only interested in a transactional relationship, and the salesperson can find that out through the use of social media, then the salesperson should refer that prospect to an inside sales team. When salespeople use social media effectively, they will be in a better position to ascertain prospective customers' needs and adopt a selling approach aligned with customer preferences. Hence, when managers are aware of how social media can be used to implement sales strategy, it will help their sales team in becoming more efficient and effective in their sales efforts, which should result in increased sales performance. Another important takeaway of this research for managers is the weakening effect of sales experience on the relationship between social media use and sales strategy implementation. With many organizations increasingly emphasizing the use of social selling over traditional prospecting techniques, (Forrester Research, 2017), many salespeople are ill-equipped to use social selling (Forrester Research, 2017), and therefore may not be able to improve their sales performance when using social media. This problem is further exacerbated among more experienced salespeople who tend to be more resistant to using new technologies (Weinstein & Mullins, 2012). Therefore, to reduce this problem particularly for more experienced salespeople, managers should train their salespeople to use social media to find the right prospects who are a good fit (and clearly define and explain what type of customers are consistent with their ideal customer profile) and train them on account-based selling. Managers should also make sure their sales representatives understand the strategic positioning of the firm and teach them to use social media to implement a sales

strategy that is consistent with the strategic focus of the organization. When managers instruct their sales teams to use social media to identify customer segments, prioritize among potential customers, and adapt their selling approaches to meet the needs of prospects, they are likely to reap the benefits of their investments in social selling tools through improved sales team performance.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this research has shed some light on a process through which salesperson social media use leads to sales performance, this study and its findings do come with several limitations. The objective of this study was to identify and confirm sales strategy as a process through which social media use leads to performance. Although this was confirmed, sales strategy is likely just one of several processes through which social media use by salespeople translates into sales performance. Future research should try to identify other mediating mechanisms through which social media use leads to performance.

In operationalizing social media use, traditional measures of social media use in the sales literature were used. However, these measures may not fully capture how effective a salesperson is in using social media. For example, LinkedIn has come out with a tool called the Social Selling Index, which is an objective measure of how well an individual practices social selling activities. Measuring an individual's Social Selling Index (SSI) score, may provide a more accurate view of how effective a salesperson is using social media in their selling activities, and future researchers should consider incorporating SSI scores into research on social media which may provide a more granular view of the effects of social media use by salespeople.

Another potential limitation of this study is the construct of sales strategy was operationalized in the model as a second-order factor comprising of customer segmentation, customer prioritization, and selling models. Although, the various dimensions of sales strategy aggregated into a single measure has been used in the literature (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010),

how social media use affects the various dimensions of sales strategy has not been fully explored. Future research examining the relationship between social media use and sales strategy should examine how social media affects salesperson implementation of customer segmentation, customer prioritization, and the use of selling models, separately. The use of self-reported sales performance is another potential limitation of this study. However, the use of subjective sales performance measures has not been found to lead to higher sales performance results when compared to objective measures of sales performance (Franke & Park, 2006).

Additionally, the use of a single source of data is a potential limitation. As the study only included responses from salespeople, how effective salespeople are in implementing strategy cannot be fully determined. Future research should consider examining how effective salespeople are in implementing sales strategy by using dyadic data (e.g. salesperson-sales manager dyad, or salesperson-customer dyad). With the perceptions of how sales managers and/or customers view how salespeople implement sales strategy are taken into account, a more holistic view of how effective salespeople are in implementing sales strategy can be developed.

A final limitation of this study is the cross-sectional nature of the study. Even though a positive mediating effect of sales of sales strategy implementation on the relationship between social media use and sales performance was found, the effects of social media use are likely to be more pronounced over time. Therefore, future research should consider adopting a longitudinal design, to examine the effects of social media use by salespeople on various individual-level and organizational-level outcomes.

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