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Charting value creation strategies B2B salespeople use throughout the sales process: Learning from social media influencers

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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper explores how business-to-business (B2B) salespeople use social media and emulate value creation strategies employed by social media influencers.

Design/methodology/approach: Using 28 interviews with salespeople, this paper develops six propositions and a conceptual framework that outlines when and how B2B salespeople use social media in value-creating sales.

Findings: Our findings provide a critical analysis of when social media are most effective and beneficial in supporting salespeople’s value-creating sales in various stages in the sales process (e.g., prospecting, opening relationships, qualifying prospects, serving accounts) and when they are less effective (e.g., presenting sales messages, closing sales).

Originality: This paper contributes by (1) summarizing the B2B sales literature on social media and integrating recent insights from the social media influencer literature, (2) empirically identifying how B2B salespeople use social media to create value, thus validating previous findings and extending understanding by offering a set of six theoretical propositions, and (3) delineating B2B salespeople’s social media practice into 11 value creation strategies that are critically explored for their place in the sales process.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media have changed the way that business-to-business (B2B) buyers communicate with sellers (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many B2B marketers relied on social media, indicated by a rise of 74% in social media investments that are reported to be 24% more effective in driving sales (Scotto Cutaia, 2020). Unlike traditional broadcast media, social media are channels through which buyers communicate with each other by producing and consuming electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Okazaki *et al.*, 2020; Hartmann and Lussier, 2020). Although these conversations significantly impact buyers' attitudes and purchase decisions (Iankova *et al.*, 2019; Abrantes *et al.*, 2013), there is little understanding of how B2B brands can actively shape social media conversations and create more value for their consumers, as their B2C counterparts do with social media influencers.

Many B2C brands are actively partnering, or at least considering a partnership, with social media influencers to draw their customers' attention to online or offline retail presences (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Kay *et al.*, 2020). Previous studies illustrate how social media influencers build strong relationships with followers through social media content creation, and therefore impact customers' responses in favourable ways toward sponsoring brands (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). However, there is limited research that utilizes these findings to inform and direct B2B organizations' social media interactions with prospects and clients. Given that B2B organizations have started migrating to value-creating business models to improve value for customers, salespeople—as the key conveyors of corporate strategic initiatives—are required to internalize value-creation into their sales process and social media practice. While we acknowledge that social media influencers and B2B salespeople have different organisational functions, we find

that there are parallels in how they utilize social media, in terms of their use of persuasive power and attention capital, to direct customer outcomes. Therefore, we look to the social media influencer literature to aid the conceptualisation of the social media strategies employed by B2B salespeople.

Because buyers have different information needs depending on their stage in the buying process, salespeople offer different types of informative content to match these needs (Chaker *et al.*, 2022; Habel *et al.*, 2016). This leads to six distinct sales tasks that salespeople perform to provide different information to prospects at various stages of the buying process, namely prospecting, opening relationships, qualifying prospects, presenting sales messages, closing sales, and serving accounts (Paschen *et al.*, 2020; Diba *et al.*, 2019).

The effectiveness and efficiency of the sales task partly depend on the communication medium employed (Chaker *et al.*, 2022). For example, during prospecting, salespeople attempt to generate awareness to attract prospects, which might be cost-effectively achieved by using impersonal media, such as advertising; in contrast, when closing sales, salespeople usually require a more direct approach such as personal selling. B2B marketing scholars explore the application and effectiveness of more specialized marketing communication tools (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021) such as trade fairs, sponsorship, websites, social partnerships, and social media. Yet, there is scant research on how salespeople should integrate social media in their value-creating selling interactions with customers in the sales process and how B2B salespeople use strategies similar to those of social media influencers. Specifically, this article seeks to explore the following two research questions: (1) How do B2B salespeople emulate social media influencers in their use of social media strategies to create customer value? (2)

Which B2B sales tasks are best suited to these strategies?

In exploring these questions, this article makes a substantive contribution to the literature. First, we summarize the B2B sales literature on social media and integrate recent insights from the social media influencer literature. Second, this article empirically identifies how B2B salespeople use social media to create value. Empirical insights from 28 semi-structured interviews not only validate findings from previous B2B social media research (see Table 1), but, more importantly, comprehensively extend understanding to all sales tasks by offering a set of six theoretical propositions. Third, this article delineates B2B salespeople's social media practices into 11 value creation strategies that are critically explored for their place in the sales process. These propositions provide fertile ground for new research that examines value creation using social media in B2B contexts. We close with some limitations and a future research agenda for a fresh perspective on B2B social media research, and offer managerial guidance.

B2B SALES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Over the past decade, the rapid adoption of social media has brought about significant transformations in almost every facet of society, including the way B2B salespeople communicate with (Bill *et al.*, 2020), engage (Hollebeek, 2019), advise (Hebel *et al.*, 2016), and sell to (Cartwright *et al.*, 2021) buyers. Buyers use social media to acquire new product or service information from various sources, including salespeople, competitors, third-party reviews, and other buyers. This advanced knowledge enables buyers to close the buyer-seller information gap, thereby aligning the balance of power in a buyer-seller relationship more equitably, meeting increasingly broad and demanding customer requirements (Chuang, 2020). Witnessing this shift, many B2B organizations have further invested in

developing social media marketing capabilities in order to match competition both in terms of products or services, and also in terms of the information publicly available about their brand to create enhanced customer value perceptions (Rapp *et al.*, 2013).

Similarly, from a seller's perspective, social media have also shifted power from organizations (firms, brands) to individuals (marketers, salespeople), as individuals create and disseminate brand content to improve customers' perceived value, as well as interact with customers through their own channels (Alavi *et al.*, 2019; Bowen *et al.*, 2021). In response, B2B scholars have recently researched many social media marketing practices, including social media adoption (Schendzielarz *et al.*, 2022), social selling (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2015), gathering social intelligence (Itani *et al.*, 2017), and brand equity implications (Pitt *et al.*, 2019). Yet, the salesperson's social media presence as an individual has received limited attention. The following sections first discuss how B2B marketers are using social media, then investigate B2B social media research in the sales process, and close by exploring research into how individual B2B salespeople use social media.

Social media in B2B marketing

While often slower than their B2C counterparts, B2B firms have now widely adopted social media to perform many sales and marketing tasks (Kumar and Sharma 2022; Rose *et al.*, 2021). Andzulis *et al.* (2012) define social media in B2B marketing as "the technological component of the communication, transaction, and relationship-building functions of a business which leverages the network of customers and prospects to promote value co-creation" (p.308). Research highlights the positive impacts of social media use on marketing communication (Swani *et al.*, 2014), advertising (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021; Vieira, 2019), buyer-seller relationships

Table I. Selected literature on the sales process tasks and social media

Study	B2B sales process tasks on social media						Summary of key contributions
	Prospecting	Opening relationship	Qualifying prospects	Presenting sales messages	Closing sale	Servicing accounts	
Marshall <i>et al.</i> (2012)	x	x				x	Instructs how to use social media for B2B sales
Rodriguez <i>et al.</i> (2012)	X	x			x	x	Documents the impact of social media on B2B sales performance
Schultz <i>et al.</i> (2012)	x	x					Assesses the impact of social media usage and customer-oriented selling on sales performance
Rapp <i>et al.</i> (2013)	x	x					Illustrates the positive contribution of social media to sales performance and buyer loyalty
Swani <i>et al.</i> (2014)	x	x			x		Identifies B2B vs B2C Twitter marketing differences (e.g., appeals, cues, links, hashtags)
Moore <i>et al.</i> (2015)	x	x	x	x	x	x	Indicates the use of social media to handle objections before presenting sale messages
Järvinen and Taiminen (2016)	x	x	x	x	x		Demonstrates benefit of combining content marketing and marketing automation tools.
Agnihotri <i>et al.</i> (2016)	x	x				x	Finds that B2B salespeople can gain greater responsiveness and enhance satisfaction using social media
Wang <i>et al.</i> (2016)	x	x					Shows how salespeople's social media presences can impact buyers' willingness to co-create
Itani <i>et al.</i> (2017)	x	x					Documents salespeople's actual use of social media depends on perceived usefulness and learning orientation
Bowen <i>et al.</i> (2021)	x	x	x	x	x	x	Demonstrates the impact of B2B salespeople's social media usage on prospecting and proactive servicing.
Rangarajan <i>et al.</i> (2021)	x	x	x	x	x	x	Assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on salespeople's interaction with customers and with B2B organizations
Chaker <i>et al.</i> (2022)	x	x	x				Identifies social media strategies employed by inside salespeople
This paper	x	x	x	x	x	x	Identifies strategies employed by B2B salespeople that are similar to those employed by social media influencers

(Singaraju *et al.*, 2016), satisfaction (Habel *et al.*, 2016), customer acquisition (Schendzielarz *et al.*, 2022), and sales performance (Terho *et al.* 2022; Rangarajan *et al.*, 2021). This article relies on the well-known and established B2B sales process to unpack and structure the B2B social media literature's insights in the next section.

Social media and the B2B sales process

Social media offer salespeople the ability to publicly or privately engage current and potential customers in a two-way, meaningful dialog both synchronously (e.g., LinkedIn's chat feature) or asynchronously (e.g., Twitter) (Iankova *et al.*, 2019). Such social media dialogs often lead to interpersonal disclosure initiated by customers that can be very valuable to salespeople in outlining customers' ideal requirements while building connections and relationships (Schmitz *et al.*, 2020; Koponen and Rytsy, 2020). For example, LinkedIn profiles assist salespeople in identifying the names of decision-makers within an organization, while Twitter dialogs offer salespeople the opportunity to start or enter a conversation with prospective customers (Itani *et al.*, 2017). While the B2B sales process is well-established in the marketing literature (i.e., prospecting, opening relationships, qualifying prospects, presenting sales messages, closing sales, and servicing accounts), social media can potentially and dramatically impact most of the tasks involved in this process (see Table 1).

Although the impact of social media on the B2B sales process has received some attention in the sales literature, however, as illustrated by Table 1, the focus of this work has been largely on the early stages, namely prospecting, opening relationships, and qualifying prospects. These studies focus on how social media contributes to the sales process through acquiring customer information or sharing information to achieve communication goals (Singaraju *et al.*, 2016; Chaker *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, a few recent empirical studies (Bowen *et al.*, 2021; Rangarajan *et al.*, 2021) examine

social media's roles in generating additional sales by enhancing customers' perceived value in the later sales tasks, namely presenting sales messages, closing sales, and servicing accounts. However, these studies present mixed conclusions with regard to the extent to which social media can be applied in later stages. For example, Bowen *et al.* (2021) find a non-significant relationship with presenting sales messages and closing sales in contrast to Rangarajan *et al.* (2021) who report that the application of digital communication tools to all sales tasks was a key success factor in the context of the pandemic. Therefore, there remains a critical lack of understanding on how and when social media (e.g., Twitter) can be a valuable tool to engage and enable customers at various points of the sales process.

Social media and B2B salespeople

Salespeople in B2B contexts act as boundary spanners who are engaged in linking the organization to its industrial customers (Bill *et al.*, 2020; Alavi and Habel, 2021). The increasing use of social media to engage B2B buyers (Itani *et al.*, 2017) is a consequence of this. These salespeople are charged with selling the organization's products or services whilst maintaining a high level of professional integrity, exceptional customer service, and satisfaction (Schendzielarz *et al.*, 2022). Social media enables salespeople to generate content (e.g., blogs, microblogs, videos, commentaries, and white papers) and then disseminate this content to a wide but targeted audience to proactively communicate the value of offerings. While achieving simple communication goals such as raising brand awareness and increasing potential leads (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012; Bill *et al.*, 2020) is relatively easy using these platforms, social media also enables social listening where salespeople receive real-time data on what is being said about their own brand and those of competitors (Singaraju *et al.*, 2016). More importantly, however, the two-way communication between salespeople and

their customers afforded by social media provides a high level of immediacy and responsiveness. This can create positive interactions that may increase trust and commitment (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Cron *et al.*, 2021). Social media may extend the influence of salespeople and provide them with opportunities to boost not only their interaction, but also their connection to customers, thus enhancing their performance.

Many salespeople have adopted social media to develop or widen their social network presence in the effort to accomplish their sales goals (Marshall *et al.*, 2012; Rapp *et al.*, 2013). Much research illustrates how the role of B2B salespeople changes over the course of the sales process, yet the extent to which social media can act as an aid throughout this process remains unclear. Some early conceptual papers (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012; Andzulis *et al.*, 2012) direct salespeople to certain social media practices depending on the sales process stage. Given that each stage of the sales process has different objectives that require a particular set of skills and abilities (Chaker *et al.*, 2022), it is imperative to evaluate how specific social media platforms can best be employed by salespeople in each of these sales stages. Recent research (c.f., Chaker *et al.*, 2022) has looked deeper at the specific tactics that B2B salespeople use on social media in early sales tasks to leverage social media communities by constructing digital personas, developing customer listening capabilities, and creating indirect discursive channels with customers. While there are many practical and conceptual uses for this line of research, there still remains a lack of understanding of B2B salespeople's social media practices when it comes to presenting product messages, closing sales, and servicing accounts. Thus, this paper empirically explores salespeople's Twitter practices in order to more deeply understand how these platforms can most effectively be used to maximize sales performance. The next

section looks to the emerging literature on social media influencers in the B2C context for insight into how salespeople can employ strategies used by social media influencers.

EXPLORING B2B SALESPEOPLE PRACTICES FROM A SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER PERSPECTIVE

Although B2B salespeople often look to B2C contexts to discover innovations related to the use of social media (Schouten *et al.*, 2020; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021), the recent trend towards the use of social media influencers has not been explored or mapped in the B2B literature. Social media influencers represent a new type of independent third-party endorser that can be used to shape customer attitudes (García-Rapp, 2017; Campbell and Farrell, 2020). They accumulate relatively large numbers of followers on social media through knowledge and expertise demonstration on a specific topic, and frequently interact with followers in both digital and physical spaces (Hudders *et al.*, 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019). Successful influencers typically construct idealized images of themselves to appeal to followers and prospective brand partners through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyle (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020). Through these idealized portrayals, they can attract and hold followers' attention (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020) by communicating relevant and privileged information (Smith and Fischer, 2021; Hudders *et al.*, 2020), and thus monetize their social influence (Giraldo-Luque and Fernández-Rovira, 2021; Hughes *et al.*, 2019). Social media influencers possess similar abilities and skills as successful B2B salespeople when performing sales tasks (i.e., prospecting, opening relationship, qualifying prospects, presenting sale messages, closing the sale, servicing accounts) over digital channels. The following sections chart recent findings from the B2C influencers literature

onto the B2B context using these sales tasks.

Prospecting

When prospecting, B2B salespeople need to initiate interest from prospects, which is similar to what social media influencers do when they attract engaged attention from the audience. Social media influencers are typical ‘grassroots’ individuals that have specific domain expertise, such as, for example, in fashion, travel, food, or healthy living (García-Rapp, 2017; Schouten *et al.*, 2020). They achieve high visibility among their followers by calling attention to their expertise by posting intriguing, useful, or entertaining content to encourage viewers to consume additional content, share that content, or become followers.

Beyond displaying domain expertise, social media influencers typically nurture perceived similarity—the perceived comparability of the influencer’s personality, lifestyle, or situation to the viewer—to their followers to become psychologically closer to them (Zogaj *et al.*, 2020). Sharing detailed accounts of their routines, interests, beliefs, preferences, values, opinions, attitudes, or behaviours, social media influencers carefully establish and manage consumers’ feelings of perceived similarity (Zogaj *et al.*, 2020). This is similar to what B2B salespeople aim to establish with their customers, namely incidental similarity. Incidental similarity refers to the chance similarities between individuals that provide little relevant information (e.g., a shared birthday with another individual). Previous research (c.f., Jiang *et al.* 2010) shows the persuasive role of incidental similarity in customer outcomes in sales contexts, suggesting that an incidental similarity between a salesperson and a potential customer can result in more favourable customer outcomes. Hence, like social media influencers, B2B salespeople can establish their domain expertise while still maintaining incidental similarity to their prospects.

Opening relationship

Similar to B2B salespeople’s relationships with customers, social media influencers’ success depends on the relationship with followers that enables their ability to influence followers’ opinions, actions, and decisions (Abidin and Ots, 2015). As a web 2.0 technology, social media facilitates bi- or multilateral dialogs between consumers, brands, or influencers (Okazaki *et al.*, 2020; Melumad *et al.*, 2019) that can lead to both recognizability and reputational capital for the influencer (Kay *et al.*, 2020), and also the fulfillment of social connection needs for followers (Ryu and Park, 2020).

Through these dialogs, social media influencers can open and strengthen connections with their followers and then develop para-social relationships, which entails a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with them (Lou *et al.*, 2019). Para-social relationships with these influencers also increase trust towards that individual (Audrezet and Charry, 2019) and perceptions of their authenticity (Moulard *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, social media influencers that are perceived to be motivated by intrinsic reasons and self-gratification to create content may have enhanced perceptions of authenticity (Moulard *et al.*, 2016; Audrezet *et al.*, 2018). These influencers further enhance their relationships with their followers by sharing their personal opinions outside of their roles as brand ambassadors (Ki and Kim, 2019). Thus, B2B salespeople acting as social media influencers may seek to develop a para-social relationship with prospective buyers through interaction on social media, which could lead to the development of a good rapport.

Qualifying prospects

When qualifying prospects, B2B salespeople attempt to identify prospects’ needs, issues, and problems (Paschen *et al.*, 2020; Diba *et al.*, 2019): this is similar to how social media influencers typically curate the latest relevant trends and craft content (Ki *et al.*, 2020). These influencers

attract attention by continually posting updates, wherein they offer tailored information specific to their expertise domain and encourage their audience to share, interact, and contribute (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Argyris *et al.*, 2020; Smith and Fischer, 2021). If successful, this active interaction often leaves their audiences with a feeling of connectedness (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019) that identifies the audiences' further information needs (Smith and Fischer, 2021). This, subsequently, may allow social media influencers to provide the specific information sought by audience members in a more tailored way (Kim and Kim, 2020). Thus, B2B salespeople can qualify prospects using social media influencer strategies by curating information trends and discovering prospects' needs.

Presenting sales messages

When presenting sales messages, B2B salespeople need to market their products and illustrate the benefits of their products or services to prospective buyers (Paschen *et al.*, 2020; Diba *et al.*, 2019; Alavi *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, when endorsing products or services, social media influencers typically demonstrate the offerings' value by creating appealing content specific to the sponsoring brand (Ki and Kim, 2019; Lou *et al.*, 2019). This content often illustrates potential benefits and shows how they fit the audiences' needs rather than focusing on prices (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). By viewing this content and reading others' reactions (e.g., likes, shares, and comments), audience members are likely to obtain more confidence in generating their own (positive) evaluation due to 'value for money' demonstrations that help rationalize the purchase (Casaló *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, because of an advanced para-social connection, audiences may wish to emulate these influences by adopting the endorsed products or services that are presented in content (Casaló *et al.*, 2020). When presenting sales messages, B2B salespeople can employ social media influencers' strategies that focus on

creating content that demonstrates the value that may lead to prospective buyers' rationalizing purchases.

Closing sales

Similar to B2B salespeople, social media influencers "close sales" by adding extra value and further satisfying needs that bring their audience closer to making a purchase decision (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). Because audience-influencer rapport together with favourable evaluations of endorsed products or services have likely been already established, as reasoned above, these influencers work to simplify the path to purchase by attempting to both remove barriers to purchase (e.g., shoppable media; Plangger *et al.*, 2021) and adding further incentives (e.g., time-sensitive discounts, limited-edition offers; Hudder *et al.*, 2020). However, most of these influencer actions that attempt to close sales point to places outside of social media, whether that is brand- or retailer online or offline presence. Thus, B2B salespeople acting as social media influencers might also close sales by simplifying the purchase process and adding incentives to purchase quickly.

Servicing accounts

After securing a purchase, B2B salespeople aim to provide after-sales services to enhance buyers' experiences with products or services (Paschen *et al.*, 2020; Diba *et al.*, 2019), which is similar to how social media influencers attempt to inspire earned eWOM from satisfied consumers (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). Because positive earned eWOM is an essential aspect of the purchase process for most individuals in the digital world, earned eWOM is a prime motivation for the use of social media influencers in B2C marketing (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). These influencers are able to detect satisfied consumers and encourage them to share their positive experiences with others, even across different communication channels (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). Regardless of whether the earned eWOM is positive or negative (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018), social media influencers typically respond personally in

a timely manner to show that they care about their audiences and their hard-won relationships (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). Thus, this suggests that B2B salespeople could also attempt to stimulate buyers to generate (positive) eWOM about their purchase decision and by following up in a personal way to any feedback.

The need for empirical exploration

This section has examined how the B2B salespeople's sales tasks could potentially map onto the various strategies that social media influencers use to draw consumers' interests and drive traffic to brands' offline or online retail presences. However, duplicating B2C strategies directly may not result in similar outcomes because the two contexts differ enough to justify dedicated investigations and distinct approaches (Swani *et al.*, 2014). Collaborating with social media influencers as content distribution channels or advocates might result in limited contribution, because B2B salespeople need to nurture buyers through a long-winded B2B sales process, which is often recursive when buyers are satisfied (Singh *et al.*, 2019; Bongers *et al.*, 2021). However, as reasoned in this section, these influencers' strategies perhaps do offer insight into how salespeople can emulate them across the B2B sales process. This inspires our empirical investigation into B2B salespeople's practices on Twitter.

METHOD

Consistent with the exploratory nature of our investigation (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Glaser and Strauss, 2017), we undertook semi-structured interviews that explore the research questions to develop deep insights into how salespeople emulate social media influencers. We specifically chose to interview salespeople currently using social media because this indicated that they already possessed at least a baseline level of knowledge and experience related to social media and its role in their sales process. We believed this meant they would be better able to articulate the

techniques and strategies they use on social media.

Responding to calls for empirical studies of social media and sales (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2015), this article explores salespeople's use of Twitter throughout the B2B sales process. Frequently, the B2B literature mentions "social media" without further definition when conceptualizing the various opportunities or threats rather than focusing on a single platform. The broad array of social media offers a wide variety of features, all of which may have different or unique functionalities (or challenges) that may influence the effectiveness of that platform in different ways (Andzulis *et al.*, 2012). This suggests that there is a need for more studies focusing on a single, specific platform in exploring and measuring the role it plays in the B2B sales process. Thus, while there may be other useful platforms for B2B salespeople (e.g., LinkedIn), we focus on Twitter for three reasons: (1) research shows the platform is used by salespeople and customers to create business opportunities (Rapp *et al.*, 2013); (2) the platform is very popular with B2B companies and their salespeople (Juntunen *et al.*, 2020); and (3) because of the general ease with which information can be searched on the platform, thereby facilitating our research.

Three research assistants developed an informant database of salespeople active on Twitter (i.e., more than 200 tweets and 300 followers) by searching the platform using sales keywords including, for example, "salesperson," "sales," "representative," "business-to-business," "B2B," or "assistance." Twitter was chosen because it is one of the platforms commonly used for sales prospecting. The platform is also more text-based, which enabled easier searching of the terms mentioned above. This resulted in a set of 542 potential informants based in North America. Then, using an account purposefully created for this project, the research assistants manually contacted all 542 salespeople via

direct message on Twitter to establish contact. This resulted in a set of 28 informants who agreed to be interviewed. Given that our requests were unsolicited, and respondents were not compensated for their involvement, we believe that our response rate of 5.2% is reasonable.

The informants represented a wide range of roles including sales directors as well as junior and senior salespeople from firms of different sizes. Of the 28

informants, 15 were male and 13 were female. Informant ages ranged from mid-20s to mid-60s in age, with most respondents in their mid-30s to mid-40s. Most informants rated their social media experience as being intermediate to advanced. The industries represented included property management, automotive, management consulting, and healthcare (see Table 2 for details).

Table II. Informant sample

No.	Age	Gender	Social media experience*	Industry
1	Early 30s	Male	Intermediate	Fashion/Textiles
2	Mid-30s	Female	Intermediate	Property Management
3	Late 20s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
4	Early 50s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
5	Mid-30s	Male	Intermediate	Hospitality
6	Early 30s	Female	Intermediate	Publishing
7	Late 40s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
8	Mid-40s	Female	Intermediate	Property Management
9	Mid-50s	Female	Intermediate	Property Management
10	Early 20s	Male	Advanced	Retail Management
11	Late 30s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
12	Late 40s	Male	Intermediate	Management Consulting
13	Early 30s	Female	Beginner	Healthcare
14	Late 30s	Female	Intermediate	Events Management
15	Early 40s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
16	Late 30s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
17	Prefer not to say	Male	Advanced	Management Consulting
18	Early 50s	Male	Advanced	Automotive
19	Early 30s	Male	Advanced	Property Management
20	Early 30s	Male	Intermediate	Management Consulting
21	Prefer not to say	Female	Advanced	Management Consulting
22	Mid-60s	Female	Intermediate	Property Management
23	Mid-60s	Female	Advanced	Property Management
24	Prefer not to say	Male	Beginner	Management Consulting
25	Late 30s	Female	Advanced	Property Management
26	Mid-20s	Female	Advanced	Publishing
27	Early 30s	Female	Intermediate	Property Management
28	Early 20s	Female	Advanced	Financial Management

* Self-reported

All interviews followed a semi-structured approach that enabled interviewers to probe informants to reveal insights to the research questions, but also allowed informants flexibility to discuss related matters that may yield additional insight (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Interviews began by giving informants an

overview of the study and its purposes in line with ethical clearance guidelines for informed consent. Once consent was obtained, informants were first probed on their use of Twitter in general, then specifically in the context of their sales work and as a vehicle to interact with existing and potential customers. Next,

informants were asked to reflect on their Twitter use in different B2B sales tasks, as well as to critically analyze the effective use of Twitter compared with more traditional sales channels. Interviews ended with some basic questions about their use of technology and social media in general, as well as on some basic demographics.

In total, 28 interviews were conducted with an average length of 64 minutes. These were professionally transcribed. Analysis of the resulting data proceeded in three stages. First, each researcher independently open coded all of the transcripts. They then compared and reconciled any differences in discussion (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This resulted in a common understanding of the codes present in the emerging data. Themes that emerged from the data were compared with existing literature throughout the process in order to both ground and situate our results (Spiggle, 1994).

The second stage, axial coding, occurred with each researcher independently looking both within and between each of the different interviews. In contrast to the open coding process that occurred on each interview individually, this comparison between cases enabled identification of patterns and themes that emerged and resulted in the creation of an initial set of findings. Researchers then met to compare and refine their findings, updating their coding guides in light of new understandings and insights. In the final stage, each researcher then reviewed each of the interviews to update their coding and confirm that theoretical saturation was established. Findings were compiled and refined into a list of 11 strategies that were then matched with six stages of the sales process. We discuss these findings next, drawing on quotes from the interviews to add insight and depth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports and discusses the interviews' findings and puts forward six

propositions on how salespeople can successfully emulate social media influencers. The findings and discussions are broken down into six subsections associated with the different phases of the sales process.

Prospecting

In prospecting, as noted above, salespeople stimulate brand awareness by calling attention to their expertise and knowledge (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012; Chaker *et al.*, 2022). However, while not entirely exclusive to the social media context, B2B salespeople using social media perform this task using strategies to demonstrate their domain expertise and establish incidental similarity. Similarly, B2B salespeople establish their domain expertise by making their social media content (i.e., Twitter posts) a source of informative and professional content; as Informant 10 states: “*social media is a more casual atmosphere, but professionalism is still a must.*” While most salespeople have social media profiles that detail their own and their companies' biographies and expertise, those that regularly and consistently tweet exclusive, informative, and relevant content about their industry, company, or products on Twitter stand out as reliable experts and sources of information—as Informant 9 advises: “*A good [Twitter] marketing [strategy] means you have – you are contacting, and you are getting in front of people in variety of ways.*” For example, salespeople generate additional exposure and visibility by initiating industry-relevant, non-sales discussions based on their domain expertise; as Informant 5 advises, “*Get enough people talking about something and then all of a sudden it becomes like a big thing.*” Thus, Twitter allows B2B salespeople to establish domain expertise from online knowledge creation and sharing using social media influencer strategies, such as, for example, providing thought-provoking comments to topical subjects (Informants 15, 4), ensuring the professionalism and domain relevance of their Twitter presence (Informant 10), and

moving offline experiences online through interesting content creation that includes conference or event hashtags (Informant 1). However, Informant 4 warns,

You have to have some authority and you basically, like, everything else in the world of the Internet, you know, you create authority by proving to search engines that you're not spam.

This informant is advising salespeople on Twitter to also become information filters as much as social media influencers (Ashman *et al.*, 2018) to not only maintain their domain expertise versus unfocused or 'noisy' content, but to also keep audiences consuming content.

While sharing domain expertise is very important on Twitter, like social media influencers, B2B salespeople must also nurture incidental similarity with their audiences. Much evidence (Montoya *et al.*, 2008; Ki and Kim, 2019) indicates that perceived similarity leads to attraction in general, and we validate these findings here when B2B salespeople engage in prospecting. For example, Informant 4 shows how they nurture this similarity when they say,

I engage people on a personal level as often as I'm posting things that otherwise, might apply to the local economy. I'm tweeting things of interests that would apply to anybody who lives in [city] or [region]. It doesn't necessarily have to be [industry] related.

This informant is actively trying to establish incidental similarities to their audience. Research reports (Jiang *et al.*, 2010; Pitt *et al.*, 2021) also confirm the persuasive influence of incidental similarity in a sales context. Thus, the more incidental similarities shared between a B2B salesperson and an audience member, the more likely they are to adopt the salesperson's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

In sum, in the initial prospecting stage, B2B salespeople on Twitter need to establish domain expertise and incidental similarity to secure prospective buyers' attention and perhaps the possibility of future relationships. Formally:

Proposition 1: When prospecting, B2B salespeople encourage prospective buyers to consume digital content on social media by (a) displaying domain expertise and (b) projecting incidental similarity to buyers.

Opening relationship

Built on trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), B2B salespeople and prospective buyers' relationships are opened differently on traditional sales channels (e.g., lead nurturing and need discovery) than on social media channels. Similar to many social media influencers, the informants report frequent interactions with their prospects and their content can be key to opening and strengthening relationships. As Informant 9 states:

I have been in sales and marketing for a good portion of my career, but I have never considered myself as a salesperson because I am a relationship builder. And that's exactly what Twitter allows me to do in a manner that's convenient to me.

Thus, B2B salespeople on social media earn their followers and influence by looking for signals that can serve as an open door to inviting a conversation, generating robust engagement, and building relationships.

Twitter provides two-way synchronous and asynchronous methods to communicate with prospects, allowing salespeople to actively and frequently interact with their audiences to generate additional connectedness and relatedness, including, for example, retweeting others' posts, comments, or links. Reflecting on these practices, Informant 6 (serving the fashion industry) says, "*Anybody who subscribes to our Twitter feeds, ideally they'll be informed about lifestyle and*

fashion. So, we tweet ourselves, obviously. But we also use it as aggregate total of other people's content that will be relevant to our viewers." Similarly, Informant 14 also shares,

When I did a giveaway on the blog in December and where I asked people to reply to questions on Twitter I think and my guest contributors to be a part of the blog is very helpful because they will—whenever they're featured on the blog they will—retweet my announcement as opposed to just going up on the blog. So, then I'm reaching their audience as well and a lot of people will begin to follow the blog and follow me on Twitter after that.

Furthermore, successful relationships take time to build and require efforts to maintain; social media influencers invest time and resources to keep the relationship strong by continuously posting informative content (e.g., How-To videos) to solve potential customers' problems. Providing help to others is an effective way to build trust and open relationships with prospects on Twitter (Rapp *et al.*, 2013). As Informant 15 indicates:

I'm always retweeting people and [competitors] – it's always [industry] related, you know like I said, [prospects might read my] last 20 tweets and go, 'This guy's into [the industry]'.

These informants develop closer relationships by not only offering expertise, but also by connecting prospects with other Twitter contacts in the industry that may be able to provide other solutions.

To develop good rapport and trust with their audiences, like social media influencers (Ki and Kim, 2019; Casaló *et al.*, 2020), B2B salespeople on Twitter communicate with integrity, even outside their roles as brand ambassadors, to earn high levels of audience-perceived

authenticity and reliability. This point is evidenced by Informant 15's remarks, "*in Twitter you can prequalify anybody, but anybody can prequalify you, so you better be tweeting out stuff that is relevant to you.*" Informant 15 mirrors this advice on how to nurture a following,

If you're one of these salespeople who if you're likeable and you love what you do and you're happy and you're grounded and you know, you're not an idiot – you're just going to get more and more people following you and more and more people recognizing you and you're going to become more and more of a leader.

Informant 19 suggests the importance of timely follow-up to interactions. These informant suggestions show the need to build salespeople's reputations of being approachable opinion-leaders in their industry on Twitter that tweet with integrity and respond in a timely fashion. However, Informant 24 warns that, "*people hate being sold to on social media. They consider that spam and spammers get blocked.*" Thus, this quote reinforces the notion that salespeople operating on Twitter need to focus more on reputation development as opposed to hard selling.

In sum, B2B salespeople on social media that are seeking to open relationships with prospects need to use prospect interaction and rapport-development strategies to encourage prospects to follow their Twitter account. Thus, we propose:

Proposition 2: When opening relationships, B2B salespeople engage buyers to follow their social media accounts by (a) interacting with prospects and their content and (b) establishing a good rapport.

Qualifying prospects

Unlike sales using non-social channels that use contact identification and classification of sales leads (Moore *et al.*, 2015; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016), B2B salespeople on social media qualify prospects by

uncovering their needs and wants by curating social media trends and conducting buyer surveillance. Informant 10 reflects on their practices of following others in their industry,

On my work account, I follow people whose business cards I've received, other tech companies as well as important 'know-it-all's' in the industry. I follow the business card people because it's courtesy, I follow other tech companies because I want to know what the competition is doing, and know-it-all's because it's always good to know how the trends are being shaped.

These comments indicate the need to keep up to date on not only industry trends, but also the competition. This mirrors Informant 5's comments, "*the majority wins. So once people start doing a lot of things, your business better be involved in it, or you're missing the boat. Once people leave a certain area, you have to go get in the area where everybody is.*" This suggests that although content curation is a key success factor, trends are fast-moving and frequently change, necessitating constant vigilance to remain current. As trend curators, B2B salespeople emulating influencers' strategies provide valued-added content, such as reasoned thought-leading pieces (Informant 1), reactions to current developments (Informant 1), opinions regarding emerging topics (Informant 5), profiles of leading industry figures (Informant 15), or even links to other industry-relevant (Informants 2, 4). These points are summarized well by Informant 2:

I'm getting information and news a lot faster than I ever did. So, when I find pieces that I think my clients might see as valuable, you know, so show that I know what's going on, maybe before someone else might know.

Thus, B2B salespeople active on social media, like these informants, begin qualifying prospects by assessing prospective buyers' reactions to their content (e.g., tweet posts, hearts, lists, retweets).

Combined with trend curation strategies, like successful social media influencers, B2B salespeople can further qualify prospects by conducting buyer surveillance—collecting, acquiring, using, and storing buyers' private data (Plangger and Montecchi, 2020; Plangger and Watson, 2015). This buyer surveillance can inform their understanding of the market, the buyer, and the drivers behind purchase decisions. For example, Informant 5 says, "*It's like you need to find out about who you're talking to before you start doing ridiculous stuff, you know?*" This shows the need to gain a better sense of prospects' challenges, goals and agendas. Similarly, Informant 15 specifies the personal data they seek on Twitter,

How? Who are they? Are they really interested in buying? How much money do they really have and what is really motivating them? Do you want to ever find out what a person's like? Go read their last 20-30 tweets.

These informants are conducting buyer surveillance to find out not only how they can best approach prospects, but also if those prospects are even worthy of developing. Informant 9 explains the connection between being on Twitter and creating their own content: "*I like Twitter. I think Twitter is a blast because of the information I've gathered. I mean, I follow some related people and I get ideas for blog posts from Twitter.*" These comments suggest that these data include not only standard demographics (e.g., age, gender, and location), but also professional and personal interests, opinions, and sentiments that can be essential to crafting original content that is tailored to attractive prospects.

In sum, B2B salespeople on Twitter use trend curation and buyer surveillance strategies to qualify their prospects. We suggest:

Proposition 3: Similar to social media influencers, B2B salespeople qualify prospects on social media by (a) curating relevant trends and (b) conducting buyer surveillance.

Presenting sales messages

B2B salespeople present sales messages much like social media influencers in that they both demonstrate specific value propositions relevant to prospective buyers. While informants report that they often present sales messages using other channels, we find evidence that B2B salespeople sometimes utilise social media to interact with prospects as they have already built discursive channels and relationships using Twitter. Moreover, informants construct attractive sales messages using verbal and visual aids that help prospects rationalize potential purchases. For example, Informant 6 says,

So it's just like anything else. If you see a beautiful display in a store, you're more prompted to buy the shirt, just the tie, the pair of shoe, just the lighting is just right. So we realize that with Twitter, if we make it visibly appealing, aesthetically appealing and people more likely to wonder what it is or engage it, if they see something they like they'll start reading the feeds. So we intentionally made it very artistic and colourful, and very female centric. We're going after very pink things like that thinking about our audience.

These sales messages on Twitter assist prospects in understanding complex products or service features (Informant 1) and forming realistic expectations of how the product or service will perform (Informant 5). Furthermore, personal endorsement can provide assurance to prospects; as Informant 5 says, “I’ll

endorse [my company's products] by using my own [personal] Twitter account.” Similar to a social media influencer endorsement, this informant is using the trust and credibility they have established with their prospects. However, prospective buyers often seek advice from other buyers on Twitter to gather information pre-purchase (Swani *et al.*, 2014), thus prompting Informant 8 to reflect on their social media practices: “*I do save the good comments that I get in social media about me personally, or about my business.*” In doing so, B2B salespeople like this informant build social proof as this content comes directly from previous buyers and in their own words. These salespeople can then direct prospects to (favourable) buyer reviews, comments, and testimonials on social media platforms to decrease customer uncertainty.

Beyond value demonstration, B2B salespeople need to assist prospective buyers in rationalizing their purchases instead of only focusing on the features and prices. Informant 10 advises,

Twitter isn't the right venue to push 'low low prices!!!' or anything like that, rather, it's an avenue to let the world—aka, your followers and their networks—that you're transparent, ready to talk, converse, and open to ideas from the [customer] base.

Therefore, after qualifying prospects using prospects' needs and preferences, B2B salespeople can use Twitter to present their sales messages in a more tailored and transparent way. While specific tactics employed to present sales messages vary, many informants report using rationalisation strategies that evidence cost minimisation and quality optimisation to aid the justification of potential purchases. For example, Informant 1 indicates that they use Twitter as a window to display added value to customers, “*we can announce certain things that we think might be exciting, like this high profile designer*

just arrived or a TV crew from ‘This Media Outlet’ is at the show to generate some buzz.” Furthermore, beyond the current potential purchase, informants show how they can be sources of information that might solve other issues. For example, Informant 6 illustrates this by saying,

So, [we found] some people who follow us are fitness experts and we have – and we tweet about a lot of fitness things that are on our magazine or it’s something that might – or someone else’s magazine that relates to them.

This informant not only shows how they display that their product or service solves prospects’ needs, but also shows how they deepen their relationships with prospective buyers by understanding adjacent issues.

In sum, B2B salespeople use value demonstration and purchase rationalization strategies to present sales messages that result in prospects’ evaluation. Formally:

Proposition 4: When presenting sales messages, B2B salespeople use social media to solicit buyers’ evaluation of sales claims through (a) demonstrating value and (b) rationalizing purchases.

Closing sales

Different from other strategies employed in attempting to close sales (e.g., sales negotiation, overcoming objections), but like social media influencers, B2B salespeople using social media attempt to integrate different communication channels to direct prospects to close sales. Many informants confirm that Twitter can be a staging ground for closing sales because of the ease of communication with prospects. For example, Informant 7 says, “I guess the opportunity to communicate with them on a different level other than picking up the phone or just mailing them something in the mail or meeting them face to face.” Furthermore, communication on Twitter can be a gateway to other sales channels, as Informant 2 reports,

Since I have been active on Twitter, my website traffic, I have Google analytics on my own [corporate] website. My website traffic averages about 40% more hits prior to Twitter. So, just that alone is reason enough for me to continue using Twitter. I have got, I would say, in the last year, let us say, I have had two leads directly from Twitter that have turned into a sale.

This informant uses Twitter as a staging medium to close sales; however, the actual sale is performed on a different channel (i.e., corporate website). This integration of channels can move beyond digital communication into offline or physical meetings with prospects. Informant 10 illustrates this by saying,

In person service will always be better with respect to credibility. Who wants to trust someone behind a name and logo? People would much rather meet the person who they’re giving money to.

Similarly, Informant 2 says,

So, my first response to anyone who would always be to meet so that we can, you know, figure out exactly what they’re looking for. It’s more always, you know, phone calls, meetings, that sort of thing.

These informants lament that it is essential to use other channels to close sales as these other channels often provide a richer, more personalized method of communication that can be key to persuading a prospect to close a sale. Thus, while many informants report Twitter as being an essential communication platform, many also indicate that Twitter’s role in this sales task is to be a staging platform for deeper discussions in a more direct and personal way. Formally:

Proposition 5: When closing sales, B2B salespeople on social media persuade buyers to interact either offline

or using more direct channels by integrating sales communication channels.

Servicing accounts

While all the servicing of accounts (a.k.a., follow-up) needs to ensure customer satisfaction, build bonds, and gain repurchase loyalty (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Rose *et al.*, 2021), B2B salespeople on social media also use responsiveness and referral strategies to earn additional positive word-of-mouth that is essential for future sales success, similar to social media influencers. For example, Informant 14 reflects on their relationships with followers,

So, my tweets may be business related, but... if I hear that someone is not feeling well, or God forbid had a death in their family, I reply with a personal tweet that I am thinking of you or feel better soon or something to that effect. So, while they're business to me – to me they're business contacts that have become friends.

Very similar to social media influencers, this informant not only maintains their buyer relationships, but also seeks to strengthen them. Furthermore, when buyers have questions or issues with their purchases, B2B salespeople can quickly respond and address these issues directly on social media. For instance, Informant 26 says, in response to a question regarding their satisfaction with receiving feedback on social media, *“Very satisfied. Our followers like getting information passed to them quickly. So, they love the fact that they can click a link in our tweets and get the content we produce.”* Similarly, Informant 10 says, in response to a question about the frequency of buyer feedback, *“All the time! That’s what Twitter is used best for.”* This quick, near real-time responsiveness closes a service quality gap that will likely delight buyers, thus further strengthening

relationships (Nunan *et al.*, 2018; Itani *et al.*, 2017).

While social media influencers are often hired solely to generate (positive) eWOM about a client brand (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021), the role of B2B salespeople on social media is broader, as evidenced in the previous five sections. Furthermore, they also need to inspire eWOM and shape conversations about their brands. For instance, Informant 6 finds it easy to generate such eWOM on Twitter when he says, *“I use Twitter to receive feedback. To be honest with you, I really don’t have to ask for feedback. People are pretty vocal I think behind a computer.”* Moreover, Informant 4 suggests:

You know, people refer clients to their friends. They don't refer them to people to go to a cocktail party and shove a card into everybody's pocket. So, I use Twitter for personal engagement. I certainly tweet things about the industry. Obviously, that's what I'm in.

Similarly, Informant 26 reflects on the tremendous value of referrals when she states, *“In my case, most of these referrals turn into business relationships. Most of them do.”* These informants do more than merely ask for feedback—they ask for referrals to generate valuable leads to further business.

In sum, like social media influencers, B2B salespeople on social media service accounts inspire eWOM by following up with buyers on Twitter to prove quick responses to inquiries and by encouraging referrals. Formally:

Proposition 6: When servicing accounts, B2B salespeople on social media stimulate buyers to generate positive word-of-mouth by (a) providing responsive post-purchase customer service and (b) offering incentives for referrals.

CONCLUSIONS

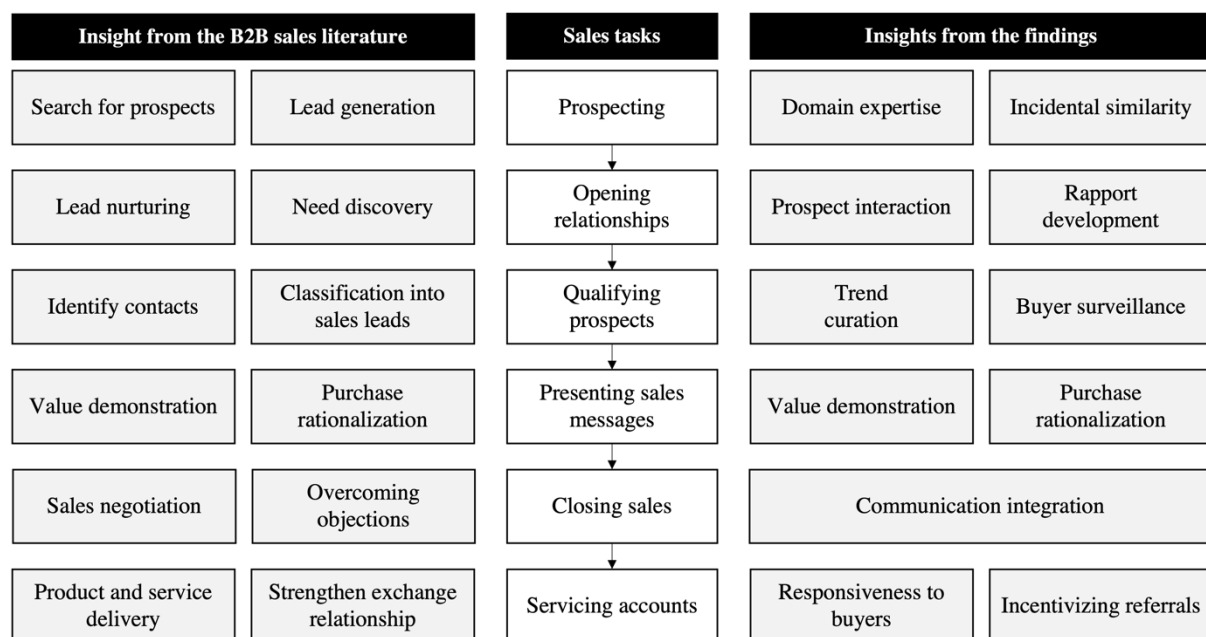
Theoretical implications

While social media use in B2B sales is well documented in past research (Moore *et al.*, 2015; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016), the current interview study’s findings illustrate how B2B salespeople are moving away from existing sales practices and embracing value-creation strategies, much like those employed by social media influencers. Using the B2B sales process as a conceptual structure, Figure 1 summarizes both the insights from the B2B sales literature and those from the interviews reflected in the six propositions that highlight this article’s contribution to the literature.

Answering the first research question, we find that some B2B salespeople use social media strategies (i.e., value demonstration and purchase rationalization) for presenting sales messages that are consistent with those reported in existing literature (Rodriguez *et*

al., 2012; Swani *et al.*, 2014). However, we also find that alternative strategies are being used for other sales tasks that are similar to those strategies used by social media influencers. For instance, instead of qualifying prospects using contact identification and sales lead classification strategies (Moore *et al.*, 2015; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016), we find that B2B salespeople on social media are using value creation strategies similar to social media influencers who curate content to not only capture prospects’ attention, but more importantly, understand their needs and preferences by observing prospects’ interaction with that curated content. Moreover, again, much like social media influencers, we find that B2B salespeople use social media to conduct buyer surveillance to direct both content creation and preparing sales messages.

Figure I. B2B salespeople value creation strategies on social media



In answering our second research question, our findings also provide a critical analysis of when social media (i.e., Twitter) are most effective and beneficial (e.g., prospecting, opening relationships,

qualifying prospects, serving accounts), and also when they are less effective (e.g., presenting sales messages, closing sales). For example, we find that when B2B salespeople are attempting to close a sale,

they attempt to transition conversations and interactions with prospective buyers to other non-social media channels, much like social media influencers offering, for example, discount codes or links to retailer websites (Plangger *et al.*, 2021; Hudder *et al.*, 2020). This article yields substantive understanding of the evolving role that social media play in B2B sales by examining B2B salespeople's value creation strategies through the lens of social media influencers' practices (Delebaere *et al.*, 2021; Campbell and Grimm, 2019).

Practical guidance and future research

While they frequently use social media to connect to their current and prospective buyers (Juntunen *et al.*, 2020; Koponen and Rytty, 2020), our findings illustrate how B2B salespeople employ strategies that are similar to those used by social media influencers. Table 3 outlines both guidance for salespeople and also ideas for future B2B salespeople research.

In this section, we focus on two key implications: the evolving social media sales paradigm and the strategic alignment of B2B salespeople's social media practices. First, B2B organizations, their salespeople, and B2B marketing scholars consider social media as a set of communication platforms to interact with prospective buyers in the early parts of the sales process (Itani *et al.*, 2017). However, our findings indicate that B2B salespeople use these media throughout the sales process to complete various sales tasks. Thus, in the B2B context, many social media platforms such as Twitter should be seen not merely as communication platforms, but as sales platforms to find prospective buyers and develop fruitful relationships. This new perspective on social media suggests that B2B organizations and their salespeople rethink their activities on social media and the resources that are devoted to those activities. Moreover, B2B scholars need to consider the integral nature of social media in the sales process for future studies. Furthermore, in a post-COVID world, B2B

organizations will be under pressure from employees and perhaps even their buyers to be flexible in terms of remote working, which may offer not only cost advantages but also increased sales performance from stronger relationships with buyers.

Second, Figure 1 can be used by B2B organizations to structure the training of B2B salespeople to use social media to the fullest extent by aligning specific strategies with different parts of the sales process. While many salespeople already use social media such as Twitter or LinkedIn to create awareness of the products and services they sell, we show that this is only the tip of the 'value iceberg' of social media sales investments. Training salespeople in these value creation strategies may be key to future success that will seed their relevant thought-leading content to a wide audience, interact and develop rapport with followers, identify prospects and acquire their information, and present compelling sales messages through value demonstrations and live testimonials, and provide responsive post-sales services to ensure strong and close relationships to existing buyers who will gladly refer new prospects. B2B scholars need to identify not only how sales performance changes with the introduction of more formal social media training guided by these new strategies, but also the impact on other sales outcomes that are important for creating value perceptions, such as prospect generation, sales network engagement, or buyer relationships. Moreover, as the social media influencer literature develops further, both B2B scholars and organizations should assess new and evolving strategies employed by these influential individuals.

Limitations

As with all empirical research, this study has limitations. While Twitter is a leading social media platform in the B2B marketing context, other social media platforms have different affordances. Future studies may examine other social media platforms to explore how these relate to the sales tasks

strategies uncovered above. The present study relies on perspectives and experiences from B2B salespeople in general to get an initial understanding of how and in what ways they use social media. Future research might investigate more specific marketing or sales roles to discover specific social media tactics or new strategies that might offer additional insights into how social media can contribute to sales performances.

Concluding thoughts

This study aims to investigate the sales forces' value-creating sales with social media as a support function. We introduce

a fresh perspective to salespeople's value-creating sales practices on social media, which entails the full range of sales tasks within the sales process by looking at the strategies employed by social media influencers. This integration of most of the sales process onto social media platforms requires not only further training of the sales force so they can successfully implement these new strategies, but also considerable future research into how salespeople can best use social media to communicate value in order to achieve outstanding sales performances.

Table III. Practical guidance and avenues for future research

B2B salesperson guidance		Suggested questions for future research
Do's	Don'ts	
<i>Sales Task: Prospecting</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Illustrate expertise by developing non-sales, industry relevant social media content ▪ Disclose professional or personal details to establish incidental similarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Post repetitive and uninspired content on social media without adding value ▪ Reveal audience an inappropriate number of details about your personal life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent are B2B salespeople's social media strategies more (or less) effective than traditional social media strategies (e.g., advertising, employee advocacy) in generating prospects? ▪ What social media content strategies are most effective in generating perceived domain expertise? Incidental similarity? ▪ How should B2B salespeople develop personas to attract prospects or enhance incidental similarity? ▪ Should B2B salespeople's personas be similar or distinct within a sales team or a brand to achieve high quality prospects? What are the benefits and risks? ▪ What strategies or elements of other influential individuals, such as celebrities, would also be useful in prospecting new buyers?
<i>Sales task: Opening Relationships</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interact with prospects' social media content ▪ Nurture rapport by following up on interactions to develop trust and commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ignore replies or other interactions ▪ Disregard existing connections as potential prospects ▪ Send random messages blasts to prospects solely to generate sales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What levels of direct and indirect interaction are more effective at encouraging prospects to follow B2B salespeople? ▪ How to best identify the type of social media interaction that prospects prefer at this early stage of the relationship? ▪ What is the role of third-party interactions (e.g., other prospects) in developing rapport with prospects?
<i>Sales task: Qualifying prospects</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Directly send tailored, non-sales but relevant information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Neglect sales prospect research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Under what conditions it is more effective to have a narrow versus a wide trend curation strategy to best qualify prospects?

- Solicit information on buyers' ideal requirements and situation
- Focus on posting content rather than talking about why this content is related to the audience
- How to best leverage social listening methods that reveal social media discussions concerning industry issues, own or competing brands, or other appropriate conversations to produce highly relevant and effective content?
- To what extent should prospects decide future content versus B2B salespeople's choice of relevant trends?
- What buyer surveillance strategies are effective in gaining insights while at the same time not harming relationships?

Sales task: presenting sales messages

- Provide information about the offer's value to buyers
- Illustrate how the offer fits the buyers' requirements/situation
- Go in unprepared for potential objections
- What is the role of social media versus private demonstrations of value?
- How could B2B salespeople optimize sale messages and associated content across fixed and mobile devices?
- How do B2B salespeople's strategies change when presenting sales messages in different industrial contexts?

Sales task: closing sales

- Suggest or offer to move the conversation offline for negotiations and terms definition
- Fail to consider buyers' communication preferences
- How best to identify non-social media channels that prospects prefer to negotiate terms and finalize purchases?
- What is the role of choice overload when moving to non-social media channels? How can offline experiences with prospects be best integrated with social media interactions to close sales?

Sales task: servicing accounts

- Proactively follow up with accounts to ensure quick responsiveness and consistent service quality levels
- Seek referrals by co-creating content or incentives
- Have an attitude of indifference if clients don't respond
- In what industrial contexts are different kinds of social media referral strategies most efficient? Does the brand or national culture play a part?
- To what extent do post-purchase social media interactions provide social proof to prospective buyers? Does this trump direct social media interactions with salespeople?
- What methods are most effective in encouraging buyers to generate positive word-of-mouth?

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