



UNIVERSIDADE CATOLICA PORTUGUESA

The Role of Social Selling in Enhancing the Market
Presence of Knowledge-Intensive Companies: A
Case Study of the APAC Region.

Maria Joana Miranda Carvalho

Católica Porto Business School

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The Role of Social Selling in Enhancing the Market Presence of Knowledge-Intensive Companies: A Case Study of the APAC Region

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by

Maria Joana Miranda Carvalho

under the supervision of
Assistant Professor Dr. Božidar Vlačić

Católica Porto Business School
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Abstract

Increasing a company's foreign market presence is a general problem that companies face, especially those operating in Knowledge-Intensive business sectors (KIBS). As many KIS companies operate in culturally diverse regions, such as the Asia-Pacific region, it can be challenging to understand which tool to use to increase awareness and market presence. With the rise of social media and its use to engage with B2B customers, a growing approach is social selling. The objective of this thesis was to understand how KIBS companies can leverage social selling to increase their market presence in APAC. As such, critical stakeholders from two companies – a service provider and its customer - that operate in KIBS in the Asia-Pacific region were interviewed. This qualitative analysis was complemented by secondary data. It was possible to understand that companies in these sectors can benefit from the use of social selling to increase their market presence, but for it to be so, they need to be attentive to their customer's cultural habits and need to allocate resources for content facilitation and training. The use of social media was seen as an enabler for awareness and interaction with possible customers.

Keywords: Foreign Market Presence, APAC Region, Knowledge-Intensive Business Services, B2B Marketing, Social Selling, Social Media

Resumo

Aumentar a presença no mercado externo é um problema geral que as empresas enfrentam, especialmente para as empresas que operam em setores de conhecimento intensivo. Como várias destas empresas operam em regiões com diversidade cultural, tais como a região da Ásia-Pacífico, pode tornar-se desafiante perceber que ferramenta utilizar para aumentar o conhecimento e a presença no mercado. Com o crescimento das redes sociais e consequente uso para interagir com clientes B2B, uma abordagem que surge é o Social Selling. O objetivo desta tese é perceber como as empresas em setores de conhecimento intensivo podem utilizar social selling para aumentarem a sua presença de mercado na região da Ásia-Pacífico. Assim sendo, foram entrevistados intervenientes críticos de duas empresas - um prestador de serviços e um cliente – que operam em setores de conhecimento intensivo na região da Ásia-Pacífico. Esta análise qualitativa foi complementada por dados secundários. Foi possível compreender que as empresas nestes setores beneficiam do uso de Social Selling para aumentarem a sua presença de mercado, mas, para que tal aconteça, têm de ter em atenção os hábitos culturais dos seus clientes e precisam de alocar recursos para a facilitação de conteúdo e sessões de formação. O uso das redes sociais foi visto como um possível estímulo para o reconhecimento da marca e interação com os possíveis clientes.

Palavras-chave: Presença no Mercado Externo, Região da APAC, Empresas de Conhecimento Intensivo, Marketing B2B, Social Selling, Plataformas de redes sociais

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1. Introduction

Knowledge-intensive business (KIBS) companies face many challenges regarding the marketability of their services and increasing their (foreign) market presence is one of the most prominent concerns of managers. Depending on its sector, size, and business model, each company requires different strategies and tools to be the most effective and get the most return on its investment. As such, analyzing the market and industry surrounding the company is detrimental to fully comprehending how to best interact with the company's customers and how to gain market share or increase one's market presence effectively.

However, which marketing tools are deemed the best to use when it comes to strategic business units operating in different environments is an aspect that requires more depth in the literature (Mora Cortez & Johnston, 2017). As outbound Business-to-business (B2B) marketing tools become obsolete, researchers have been trying to understand which path can lead companies to success. With the rise of social media and the more digital and inbound approach to business and marketing, the constant study and furthering of the literature is key to helping companies in these situations to continue to succeed and create the most useful and effective marketing plans possible.

In KIBS companies, knowledge is at the core of their practice, directly through consultancy (engineering consultancy firms) or by indirectly combining it with the services and products provided (Bolisani et al., 2016). The integration between the talents and the companies' knowledge with the needs and specifications of customers characterizes KIBS's outputs and services (Bolisani et al., 2016; Cabigiosu & Campagnolo, 2019; Siahtiri et al., 2020). As such, establishing trust with their customers and brand legitimacy becomes fundamental to improved performance and increased brand awareness of these companies.

In an era where B2B buyers are increasingly relying on referrals and peer recommendations (Hada et al., 2023; Minsky & Quesenberry, 2016), Social Selling has become a tool studied to adapt to new needs of B2B buyers (Ancillai et al., 2019). Social Selling is a way for the salesperson to engage with their customers and educate and influence them while using social and digital channels (Ancillai et al., 2019). This is particularly important to respond to customers' increased access to information and preferred channels. Moreover, Mora Cortez & Hidalgo (2022) mentioned most empirical studies revolve around the developed and industrial economies, with interest towards emerging economies and their behaviors and needs only slowly growing in recent years - a bigger emphasis given to India and China.

According to a market analysis conducted by the Everest Group, the APAC engineering market has shown great resilience, growing at a faster rate than the global engineering market in 2023. This shows the importance of studying how KIBS firms can capitalize on this growth to increase their market presence and the validity of using social selling as a tool.

While it has been studied the importance of trust in B2B relationships, KIBS marketing approaches have been characterized as very relational (Bolisani et al., 2016) which brings forward the question of how to better interact with customers to increase market presence. Social selling, based on its deeply interactional basis, can be an option for KIBS firms to explore.

This thesis aims to understand the link between the aforementioned aspects by analyzing the specific case of a global B2B company, Apex Solutions, and its particular need to increase the external awareness of the company's engineering capabilities in its Strategic Business Unit in APAC. A client with longstanding relations with Apex Solutions was also analyzed to solidify the results.

The research question that will guide this thesis is "How can social selling be leveraged by Knowledge-Intensive companies to enhance market presence in APAC?".

This thesis revolves around a global engineering company case study, understanding which tools can be employed to concretize the company's objectives for the APAC region, particularly increasing its market presence. An extensive market and company analysis was conducted, from which conclusions on the best course of action were extracted.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Importance of Trust and Referrals in Business-to-Business Marketing

With the new technological advances, customers start to have access to an increased amount of information (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Ahearne et al., 2022). This is the case in the Business-to-Business (B2B) market segment, where horizontal referrals (Hada et al., 2023) and customer references (Boyd et al., 2023), as well as autonomous research, have become increasingly important.

While information has become more readily available, especially for consumers in the business-to-consumer (B2C) sectors, in the B2B markets most services require a level of experience to fully understand their value. Thus, B2B companies need to establish trust with their partners, customers, and suppliers through their sales representatives to be able to create and extract value from them (Itani et al., 2023; Rangarajan et al., 2021).

Regarding trust, there is a phenomenon called horizontal referrals, which mainly implies that suppliers recommend other suppliers (Hada et al., 2023). By continuously working on building the trust of their customers and suppliers, companies can get better referrals (Hada et al., 2023), increasing their awareness and overall growth. Referrals are influential when it comes to B2B buyers (Godes, 2012), both be it from other suppliers or customers. They allow potential new customers to gather insights about quality, credibility, and the overall value proposition of a business (Godes, 2012).

In B2B marketing there is also another important case of referrals: customer references. Boyd et al. (2023) studied the importance and the effect of customer reference

depth (the richness of information) versus customer reference breadth (the number of customers in referrals). Different authors have proposed the influence of customer referrals on credibility (Boyd et al., 2023; Godes, 2012) which can lead to a higher market presence. Even so, Boyd et al. (2023) cautions marketers that, while tempting to have as many customer referrals as possible, this can have a negative effect, as customers value the depth of references versus the quantity.

Particularly, in the engineering sector, many of the services provided by engineering companies that need to be marketed require added knowledge that marketing specialists might not have, specific to the area in the case (e.g., software engineering) (Lilien, 2016). While marketers might be able to draw from previous experiences to market consumer goods in the B2C sector, this is not the case in the B2B sector (Lilien, 2016; Mora Cortez & Johnston, 2017). This highlights the importance of recommendations from clients and horizontal referrals, paramount to so many businesses with a B2B business model.

2.2. Social Selling

The role of social media in B2B marketing has increased in importance (Cartwright et al., 2021; Mauder, 2018; Schmitt et al., 2021), impacting the interactions between companies and their respective stakeholders. Digitalization and social media have also impacted the sourcing of and accessibility to information (Agnihotri et al., 2016), increasing audience reach, the number of potential leads, and conversations between the sales force and potential clients (Itani et al., 2023). Social and digital marketing have also been proven to be a great conduit for brands to increase their brand awareness and sales at a lower cost (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Researchers have been looking into the combination of social media use and performance. This prompted Ancillai et al. (2019) to attempt to define a concept that would be relevant and comprehensive. Thus, social selling is defined as the “selling

approach, which leverages social and digital channels for understanding, connecting with, and engaging influencers, prospects, and existing customers at relevant purchasing journey touchpoints for building valuable business relationships” (Ancillai et al., 2019, p. 303). Ancillai et al. (2019) argued that social selling is fundamentally implementing digital marketing principles at the individual salesperson level (p. 303).

Rather than being used on an organizational level, social media in the B2B sector is being popularized on an individual level through social selling, allowing sales representatives to generate content and expand their networks (Itani et al., 2017). Even so, the role of the organization in facilitating social selling is crucial by supplying firm content, knowledge about social media strategy and tools as well as overall support to the sales force (Terho et al., 2022).

Moreover, social selling comes as a response to the increasingly challenging communication between companies, customers, and prospects, in social media and other digital channels. Ancillai et al. (2019) concluded that social selling allows B2B companies to better understand and deal with the constant increase in digitalization and consequent trends and evolution of behaviors, especially at the sales force level.

Social Selling at the sales force level becomes a way to gain insights into prospects and existing customers, a way to engage and communicate with them with valuable content at different touchpoints and different stages of their customer journey (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Itani et al., 2017). The use of social media by the salesperson has been proven to positively impact information communication as well as increase awareness and directly impact customer satisfaction (Agnihotri et al., 2016).

Using social media at the sales force level can also be used to increase Social Capital (Itani et al., 2023). Social capital refers to the relationships and resources that, in this case, salespeople can gather through their social networks. At the same time, social capital has been shown to increase Competitive Intelligence (CI) (Hughes et al., 2013). CI refers to gathering, analyzing, and using information obtained on the companies’ environment

(including competitors, clients, and others) to shape and plan their actions (Hughes et al., 2013). By being active participants in the market through social selling, the sales force can better acquire this information and help companies shape their actions according to market needs.

Knowledge-intensive companies, in particular, engineering service firms, can be characterized by knowledge-intensive work, their autonomous employee base, project-based approaches to work, and complex business processes (Sheikh & Lim, 2011; Zhang et al., 2018). As such, Sheikh and Lim (2011) reference the importance of corporate branding, for internal and external communication. There are four elements deemed important when “engaging in corporate branding – namely personal brands, incorporative activities, corporate branding conduct, and technical expertise” (Sheikh & Lim, 2011, p. 1129). These authors have concluded that personal brands can undermine corporate brands, possibly leading to misconceptions, showing, therefore, the importance of corporate branding and training. This increases the complexity of using social selling techniques in these companies once personal brands are important for salespeople to establish themselves on social media. The authors specify that technical expertise and corporate branding activities are complementary, acknowledging their combination to communicate the brand values to internal and external stakeholders. Sheikh and Lim (2011) emphasize that initiatives like value and mission statements should rely more on the engineering language, thus showcasing their technical expertise, rather than only relying on the marketers, or branding consultant’s words. The authors have also contended that employees’ cynicism referring to corporate branding can provide insights on how to improve corporate communications, especially in male-dominated fields such as engineering.

3. Methodology

The Asia and Pacific (APAC) region is constituted of different countries, including Australia, China, India, Japan, Singapore, among others. Each country has its own culture, values, and beliefs. This region has developed countries as well as emerging economies and as such, companies must pay special attention when designing their action plans for the countries in which they operate.

Due to differences among value systems across countries, social information is obtained, encoded, and exploited in different manners (Samaha et al., 2014). Culture has been proven to shape individual perceptions, beliefs, and requirements when it comes to the information they consume and the relations they form (Samaha et al., 2014).

While the APAC region is constituted by many developed countries, emerging economies such as India and China are included in this region and likely to be focused on. Studies on emerging economies have shown that B2B buyers and sellers prefer owned media rather than relying more on earned and organic media (the preferred type of media in developed economies) (Piskorski & McCall, 2010). Particularly in China and India, customers have grown to use more social media channels by engaging and creating content in a way that is far superior to their counterparts in developed countries (Piskorski & McCall, 2010). Vieira et al. (2019) recognized that there is an emergence of a digital echo verse in the B2B context, the O-I-E-O model, relating Owned, Inbound, Earned, and Organic search. The use of these different types of media may allow companies to effectively apply account-based marketing (ABM) – a go-to-market strategy that capitalizes on customized content to target, market, and manage specific customer accounts or prospects in a personalized way (Vieira et al., 2019). The innovative media following trends to showcase the company's values and story have had an increasing presence in companies' marketing strategies and plans, especially in emerging markets.

Mehmet & Clarke (2016) studied Fairtrade Australia, demonstrating how interactions between companies and their customers through social media allow the creation of communication material, the leveraging of mutually beneficial relationships, and the fostering of an online community. It is also important to take note that despite fostering cooperation, social media allows its users to challenge and contradict the message and objectives of companies' campaigns. Mehmet & Clarke (2016) also highlighted the importance of choosing and having deep knowledge regarding the spaces in which the companies engage with their stakeholders.

To better understand the impacts of social selling as well as how to leverage it in the Asia-Pacific region, a qualitative approach was used. The qualitative methodology is typically the chosen approach when trying to delve into the complex interplayed factors that shape the organizational behavior of corporations worldwide (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

To be able to extract a first-hand perspective, a case study approach accompanied by purposeful interviews was implemented, given its qualitative nature it allows for a less constricted approach. According to Creswell (2013), a case study refers to the qualitative approach the investigator implements to explore a case (a real-life contemporary bonded system) over time. The data collection in case studies can involve a variety of sources, requiring an in-depth analysis to be made (Creswell, 2013)

Furthermore, to enhance the perception of the use of Social Selling throughout the customer journey in the B2B context of knowledge-intensive companies, relevant stakeholders – marketing department employees, and sales teams' employees – of both a service provider and one client were interviewed and studied.

3.1. Case selection – Case of Provider

As for the Service provider, Apex Solutions was chosen due to its high recognition within Europe and America. This company is a subsidiary of a big group with more than

50 years of existence and that has grown over the years, being present in more than 50 countries.

The company in this case employs over 62 thousand highly skilled workers worldwide and, while being one of the most relevant companies in the industry, in Asia-Pacific it still fails to achieve that standing. Since one of the company’s objectives is to continue to grow its position within this region, one of the possible approaches looked into to achieve this is using social selling. As such, this is a company representing an outstanding case for assessment as it enables accompanying and recording approaches to penetrate the APAC market and establish market share.

A selection of relevant individuals within the company, from the different countries of the region where the company operates, were interviewed. The interviewee's group is represented by top-of-the-company individuals, with international experience and that, within their scope, have the visibility of how the cultures of different countries within APAC influence the behavior of salespeople both on and off social media spaces. This was done to ensure that despite the number of interviews, there was a broader scope of analysis. Within Table 1, the characteristics of the interviewees are described.

Table 1: Overview of Interviewee's Information - Apex Solutions

	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Interviewee 5
Interviewee’s role	Head of Sales Operations APAC	APAC Talent Manager	Head of Marketing and Communications APAC	Chief of Staff of the MD of APAC	Managing Director of SEA and Head of Automotive
Country of Operations	India	Japan	Australia	Australia	Singapore
Experience (years)	15	10	14	15	17

	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Interviewee 5
Experience in the Group (years)	2	3	8	6	8

3.2. Case selection – Case of Purchaser

Regarding the client company, Beta Knowledge, the company was chosen due to its prevalence as one of the most revolutionary firms pushing for digital transformation. This company has a longstanding partnership with Apex Solutions that extends itself across the globe, including in APAC where the relationship between companies has begun to grow strongly.

With over 40 years of spearheading innovation in the digital world, Beta Knowledge has relied on partnerships with different KIBS companies to ensure the best practices are conducted and that they stay on top of the innovation game. One of the partnerships that have been developed throughout the years was with Apex Solutions. While this partnership is sustained in different regions, particularly in Europe where both companies have their headquarters, each country or region, in the case of APAC, needs to establish processes to ensure that it is carried out in their country. As such, Beta Knowledge was chosen to be the second focus of this case study approach, to get a better understanding of how companies in the Knowledge-Intensive sector interact with one another and if social selling could be a determinant factor in increasing market presence as well as the establishing of operating relationships and conducting business together. Similarly, from this company were interviewed strategic members, who deal with strategic decision-making or are tasked with gathering information.

Table 2: Overview of Interviewees’ information – Beta Knowledge

	Interviewee 6	Interviewee 7
Interviewee’s role	Senior CSI Alliance Executive, Asia Pacific South	Senior Marketing Manager
Country of Operations	Australia	Australia
Experience (years)	45	24
Experience in the Group (years)	7	2

3.3. Data Collection

To enhance the perception and depth of the current study, semi-structured interviews were conducted (interview guide is provided in appendix). The questions used to guide the interviews were semi-structured and accompanied by information gathered through secondary data analysis. The importance of using interviews as a data collection method lies in the interaction they provide, allowing for nuance and subjectiveness, understanding human experiences as well as contextual cues that might be more difficult to gather from other methods (Patton, 2014).

The interviews were conducted between February and April 2024, using Microsoft’s Teams app, and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed within 24 hours of the interviews. Additional information regarding both companies was obtained through deep research of their websites, as well as the analysis of their social media accounts, specifically the ones about the countries in APAC where the Apex Solutions most actively pursuing the increase of their market presence. Thus, this qualitative research relies on multiple data sets to better enrich the conclusions to be drawn.

3.4. Data Analysis

By combining both inductive and deductive methods (Makadok et al., 2018) in this paper, it was possible to draw critical conclusions (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Gerring, 2012). For the analysis of the transcript interviews, a three-stage technique was employed (Gioia et al., 2013). By conducting a rigorous analysis of the interviews' transcript, it was possible to recognize individual thought units – statements that capture an idea, thought, or experience relevant to the study at hand. Afterward, these thought units were categorized into a larger category, about second-level themes/processes (i.e. Observed experience, information gathering and analysis, networking, relationship building, company facilitation, and content creation). In the final stage, each thought unit was aggregated into a more encompassing dimension (i.e. social media strategy, content strategy, and customer engagement).

Table 3: Data Structure

First-level theme	Second-level theme	Aggregate dimensions
Statements that mention initial ideas from experience, observation, and the different characteristics of the social media platforms	Observed Experience	Social Media Platform strategy
Statements that mention the frequency of use and engagement on social media platforms	Relationship Building	Customer engagement
A statement referring use of social media to gather information, and insights and understand customers and their journey	Information gathering and analysis	
Statements referring to using the social media platform to connect with industry players before/during/after industry events	Professional Networking	

First-level theme	Second-level theme	Aggregate dimensions
Statements mentioning the content created by the company for employee usage	Company Facilitation	Content Strategy
Statements that mention thought leadership, personal branding, and social advocacy	Content Creation	

4. Results

4.1. Social Media Platform Strategy

From what was observed before the interviews, LinkedIn is the preferred social media platform of Apex Solutions to communicate with the clients. While there is a presence within other platforms in APAC, like Facebook and X, as was regarded by all the interviewees, for “[Interviewee 3] B2B communication, especially on IT and technology (...) LinkedIn (...) is the most important network” and “P1” [Interview 4] in terms of the priority platforms.

This also seems to be a pattern followed by their clients and partners, “[Interviewee 7] LinkedIn is far and away the primary. (...) We do use more (...) social media platforms as well (...) but LinkedIn is the go-to in this part of the world.”

Companies in B2B markets in APAC, particularly in knowledge-intensive markets, present a preference for LinkedIn: [Interviewee 6] I find for us in the corporate world, that's where it all happens (...) so I will post stuff in LinkedIn, or I will repost.”.

Looking over the usage of LinkedIn in terms of countries in APAC, this platform is described by Interviewee 5 as the preferred social media channel for communication in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as Australia. Most

interviewees state that Australia adheres to Western standards and practices regarding the usage of this channel, having a very high LinkedIn penetration with the typical personas (Interviewee 7).

The preference for LinkedIn is not observed in China due to political tensions, as referenced by Interviewee 4. Apex Solutions, in this country, opts for the Chinese counterpart that is most preferred by the inhabitants of this country – WeChat. The We are Social's "Digital 2023" report regarding the social media habits of China reflects the preference for communication to be conducted through this platform.

As emphasized by Interviewee 3, "the company should be where their target is", and as such, it was clear that companies, in the B2B sector, mainly prioritize being present on LinkedIn to increase their brand awareness and presence, especially when it comes to future employees or industry players like clients or competitors.

From their perspective standpoints, Interviewees 1 and 2, see Instagram and Line¹, respectively, as platforms used with more frequency for the personal side, not so much

4.2. Content Strategy

After understanding which platform the company should be on, the following decision should be on the content strategy. When it comes to this, there are two ways companies can follow: a steady presence within their platforms of choice through their corporate platforms, and the content pushed by their top executives, CXOs, sales teams, and employees. A more combined approach is what Apex Solutions has chosen to follow, specifically on LinkedIn.

Each platform has its specificities and LinkedIn's algorithm takes preference for posts made through personal accounts rather than corporate ones:

¹ One of the preferred social media platforms in Japan according to the *We are Social's* report, Digital: 2023.

“[Interviewee 3] Even if you do the exact same posts via social profile or via corporate profile, LinkedIn's algorithm will jeopardize the company's reach versus the leaders or the person's reach.”

Within Interview number 3, it was also highlighted the content posted through the different channels should be addressed in different manners:

“[Interviewee 3] This environment coexists but should not be treated in the same way. So what is a corporate post using corporate language? We use jargon, using whatever this is, and should live only in the corporate world. What we should see on the social advocacy as we call it, or leaders advocacy etcetera, you should see a personal vision, a personal touch of what is the positioning of the company.”

4.2.1. Content Facilitation

Through LinkedIn statistics, we can understand that there is a great disparity between the number of current users signed in on the platform and the number of users that actively post and engage with other people's content on this platform monthly. This means that users may not feel the necessity to or find it difficult to engage through the platform.

One way that Apex Solutions seeks to remedy this is by creating in advance content that the employees can later post. In the case of this company, what is seen is the use of My Company, a tool from LinkedIn from which the verified employees have access to pre-made content created by the country's marketing team. The company also has an external platform, with more restricted access – Sociable:

“[Interviewee 4] a platform that has already content to be published. So, you just need to go there, select the content, and publish.”.

The active work by the company to create content helps ease the pressure of being present on social media platforms. This also works to unify the voices of the company, as

well as showcase the better way to plan and put out content, especially concerning the awareness stage of the customer journey.

4.2.2. Content Creation

As Knowledge-Intensive companies, particularly engineering companies, typically partake and deal with confidential information, there is also a need to correctly address how content can and should be created for an outside audience. Focusing on the corporate content, from the interviewees' point of view, this should be more focused on the facts, achievements, referrals, and case studies but in a more objective way:

"[Interviewee 3] They are normally impersonal. They represent the company, a company brand. They have a consistent corporate point of view. They are done for a fairly broad audience. They use business content, and this is major announcements."

For the advocate content, the approach of the provider company is creating a short, mandatory module, where employees learn the company's social media policy, thus ensuring that the employees understand the expected behaviors for their social media usage:

"[Interviewee 2] We have a new model of learning and social media account called social media basics (...) about the dos and don'ts."

Common through the interviews was the emphasis given to the different cultural aspects regarding the content published – while Australia and Singapore are referred to be adopting a more Western view, giving a more personal touch to the content created by the company's employees, Japan's employees "[Interviewee 2] want to separate very clearly professional and personal" life.

While the other interviewees also echo this sentiment, they mention the need to still infuse some personal branding to create a deeper connection with the clients and their audience.

“[Interviewee 3] When we talk about advocate content this is usually a personal representation of what the company content can be presented. The point of view usually is niche.”

“[Interviewee 4] My followers, they know when I share something, it's meaningful”.

4.3. Customer Engagement

4.3.1 Information Gathering and Analysis

The efficacy of social media when it comes to understanding the customers' point of view and customer journey has been increasing. Many of the platforms, besides having their special algorithms, have developed other analytics tools to help companies explore their customers' journeys. LinkedIn had the example of Sales Navigator:

“[Interviewee 4] In Asia Pacific, since the maturity is very low, respecting to market research and to sales related activities (...) we are not exploring as much as possible what we can get from LinkedIn. But I can tell you (...) the tools that LinkedIn already has available for us, like sales navigator (...) it helps to get additional insights on the client journey”.

LinkedIn was referenced as one of the many tools that are used to gain competitive intelligence by most of the interviewees.

“[Interviewee 7] From a market research perspective, it allows you to identify key players within industries, activities of those players within industries; Identify the decision makers and influencers and do (...) account mapping (...), particularly with the navigator. So that provides B2B type of intelligence.”

Because of this ability to better understand the companies that surround them, companies can use LinkedIn for more targeted approaches, identifying key elements with the hierarchy and the decision-makers involved in the process.

4.3.2 Professional Networking

Connecting with the clients and potential leads on social media platforms also increases the level of understanding about which events are relevant in each industry, as well as in which their clients might be present. Thus, it allows engineering companies to increase the level of touchpoints in which they intercept the clients.

Networking is at the core of every business, especially when it comes to the B2B sector. Social Media Platforms have become great conduits in terms of allowing a more seamless experience of networking.

Interviewees 1 and 4 mentioned the importance of using social media prior to professional interactions to gather more information about whom they are meeting and to ease the conversation, referencing aspects viewed on LinkedIn:

“[Interviewee 1] I try my very best to know them through LinkedIn: where they came from, what they have done (...) so that my engagement gets a little easier”.

“[Interviewee 4] The clients, like it when you are doing some homework before you meet them. (...) You demonstrate some boldness because you want to be connected to people that are relevant to you.”

Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of following the right network on LinkedIn to better learn from the clients, as well as engage with them. The strength of the network can equally be important to transmit the right information to the clients and people of interest.

4.3.3 Relationship Building

In the B2B environment, business deals have a more extended lead time when compared with B2C business deals, averaging from 6 to 18 months as mentioned by the interviewees. As such, it is important to be viewed as trustworthy, credible, and approachable.

“[Interviewee 5] If you do one very good post every month with some interesting insight, then I think you are building credibility and visibility among your network, and it will help.”

This can be seen as a great step to increase awareness with the clients, referenced by many as one of the most important steps in building a business relationship.

“[Interviewee 7] I think the very first step is awareness and (...) some small degree of interest. If someone sees an ad of mine and they go, I didn't know who Beta was or I didn't know that Beta did that. That's Something!”

Companies' CxOs and salespeople, by specializing in certain industry aspects, or even broader ones like Leadership, and by maintaining a frequency of engagement and posts regarding those topics, can achieve beyond the awareness, the first steps of building trust, fundamental for these deals:

“[Interviewee 3] if Person Epsilon does this consistently, they (...) will become trustworthy. Person Epsilon will become an active voice. They will become someone who, whenever I need something on this domain, there are person Epsilon talks, I will go to them.”

While social media is seen as not a way to establish a long and sustainable relationship on its own, it is regarded by the interviewees as a key step to ensure this.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Discussion

Social media platforms have become one of the most important points of contact for information for companies that have B2B business models (Cartwright et al., 2021; Gustafson et al., 2021). Particularly, knowledge-intensive companies are starting to rely more on its use to enhance their sales performance and market knowledge.

Social selling has become a tool preferred to interact through social media with potential B2B buyers, as well as gather more information and understanding of challenges, trends, and competitor behaviors in the environment (Terho et al., 2022). The insights that companies can extract through social selling can help them make better decisions regarding the strategy to follow, therefore potentiating the increase of market share.

A step towards the use of social selling inadvertently becomes understanding clients' platform preferences (Zhang & Li, 2019), as well as the culture of the country in which they intend to enhance their market presence. B2B organizations' use of social media has also been proven to be influenced by ease of use, image, and barriers (Siamagka et al., 2015). Due to the existence of different cultural preferences in the APAC region, companies are adapting their strategies accordingly. LinkedIn is regarded in the region as a corporate platform, essential to the companies' communications, but the level of adoption may differ from country to country – High levels in Australia and Singapore, Low Levels in Japan – or even not possible due to restrictions i.e. China.

As such, the first proposition becomes the following:

Proposition 1: Social media platform choice and levels of adoption are influenced by country culture.

Furthermore, through social selling, companies should not limit their communications to corporate accounts. Previous literature refers to the importance of companies' management when it comes to facilitating social selling amongst the salesforce (Terho et al., 2022). The strategy followed by the analyzed cases suggests that by incorporating the concepts of social selling and combining corporate usage with salesforce social presence, companies can maximize the positive effects of this tool. The individual presence, while still connected with the brand of the company, is seen as an integral part of establishing a deeper connection with the clients and peers (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Ancillai et al., 2019; Terho et al., 2022).

Proposition 2: A combination of Corporate and Individual Social Media presence better influences customer interaction and consequent market presence.

Companies should provide these stakeholders with the necessary support to disseminate the usage of social selling as a tool. This support can be given by proper training (Schmitt et al., 2021) to better understand objectives, and priorities and overall, showcase corporate branding values. Both companies analyzed reported that several pieces of training are made available, increasing in intensity throughout the hierarchical ladder. Mandatory training for every employee was also mentioned as an important step for companies to take. High social media training is relevant to KIBS's performance (Itani et al., 2023; Ribeiro-Navarrete et al., 2021). By better understanding how to use social selling and by receiving proper training, salespeople can better navigate the challenges between corporate and personal branding (Sheikh & Lim, 2011).

Within KIBS, the creation of content for social media can become challenging. Another step the companies analyzed have taken, besides actively showcasing internal research that can be shared, was the creation of ready-to-post content as available resources. Ensuring that salespeople feel supported by giving necessary resources is one

important step highlighted in the literature (Schmitt et al., 2021). This support can unburden their stakeholders when it comes to the developing of content, allowing them to focus on interactions with their networks, and relevant steps to maximize the effects of social selling (Terho et al., 2022). Insight generation as well as thought leadership are presented as key elements of social selling (Terho et al., 2022), thus becoming crucial for companies to ensure the proper tools and environment to support it.

It has been proven that companies can obtain brand legitimacy through “texts produced, circulated, shared, distributed, and incorporated into macro-level brand discourses through stories and narratives (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021, p. 22). Due to higher brand legitimacy being linked with increased awareness (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021), this materializes the importance of companies showcasing their knowledge, referrals, wins, and awards, which can be done through social media. As such, content facilitation should be a step companies must ensure to ease the use of social selling by salespeople, which would allow the increase of the company’s awareness and market presence.

Research has shown that customer loyalty can be affected by the salesperson’s use of social media, increasing awareness and trust among clients, which brings forward the necessity of proper training to ensure the best possible use of social media (Zhang & Li, 2019).

Proposition 3: Social media training, as well as Content and Resource facilitation positively influence the willingness to use social selling as a tool, allowing the increase of market presence through its employment.

Social media has also become a tool from which companies can gather crucial information regarding prospective and existing clients and their surrounding environment (Ancillai et al., 2019). Both Apex Solutions and Beta Knowledge referenced

that their content as well as how they target specific profiles is influenced by the information acquired using social selling. Previous literature has referenced the use of social selling and social media platforms to gather competitive intelligence as a growing strategy in B2B companies (Itani et al., 2017). This information becomes a complement to the other sources, enabling companies to have a broader perception of their environment.

Proposition 4: B2B companies can use social selling to gather competitive intelligence, which allows for a better tailoring of the strategy to gain market presence.

Another important layer to social selling, particularly at the salesperson level is the interaction with their networks, customers, and key industry players (Ancillai et al., 2019; Itani et al., 2023; Terho et al., 2022). By maintaining a consistent presence on social media platforms, and by constantly engaging with their networks as well as potential customers, salespeople enhance customers' perceptions of their ability and integrity (Zhang & Li, 2019), helping to earn customer loyalty. B2B deals rely more on trust, and establishing it is a long steady process that can be aided by the strong presence of salespeople on social media, showcasing their knowledge as well as their company's. Thought leadership also plays into action when it comes to increasing the levels of customer engagement.

Due to the relational aspect of B2B interactions, social media can also help gain knowledge on the specific customers and their decision-makers, allowing for a more targeted and specific approach to networking, both through social media and on events, as seen by the results of the interviews.

Proposition 5: Social Selling allows for an easier tool for networking and customer engagement.

5.2. Implications

The present study contributes to the understanding of the use of social media and social selling in B2B markets, an area that is still not studied in-depth.

The results and the consequent analysis become a potential guide to marketers and decision-makers who might start to view social media and social selling as potential tools to use to enhance their market presence. Particularly in knowledge-intensive companies, there is a gap between the literature and managerial decisions that are undertaken (Lilien, 2016), and as such, this study attempts to ease this process of merging information between theory and practice.

It is also important to note, that the APAC region has been at the center of exponential growth, particularly in Knowledge-Intensive Businesses, like software engineering, which ensures that it is a place that should be studied and analyzed to better understand behaviors and guide decision-makers.

From a theoretical perspective, this study complements what was previously studied regarding the use of social selling by analysing two specific cases of KIBS companies, how they leverage this tool, and their perception of their environment (Schmitt et al., 2021; Terho et al., 2022). The different decision-makers interviewed allowed for a broader perspective of the region's specificities and the different approaches that are taken. The propositions presented in the previous section help to form a better understanding of the many facets of social selling and how it can be beneficial to KIBS. By showcasing how companies can use social selling and leverage this tool to bridge the knowledge gap characteristic of these companies (Lilien, 2016), it also showcases the role that this tool might have in increasing brand awareness and consequent market presence. Through the conducted interviews, it was also possible to showcase the role that social media has in the awareness phase of the customer journey, which can be impactful in the increase of market presence.

From a managerial standpoint, this work can represent an introduction and guide for marketers and decision-makers from Knowledge-Intensive firms on leveraging social selling to enhance their market presence in APAC. This could bring to the table discussions regarding the allocation of resources – both financial resources as well as human resources. Training and content facilitation have a positive influence on both the use of social selling and performance and enhance brand awareness and market presence. As such, it could shed light on the need for proper assistance to the sales teams and top executives. For Apex Solution and Beta Knowledge, these are approaches that are already followed. According to internal research conducted by Apex Solutions, with the increase of these training programs, it was seen an uptake of salespeople using social media as a channel to interact with potential customers, which inadvertently increased their brand awareness across the APAC region. This could be the catalyst for other KIBS companies in the region to follow suit.

6. Conclusion

This work contributes to the literature regarding the use of social media platforms in the B2B market segment, particularly, in knowledge-intensive business services companies.

Based on the research done for this dissertation, we can understand the nuance of resorting to social media platforms, and more specifically, relying on social selling, when it comes to B2B market segment, and in Knowledge-Intensive industries. This becomes an even more sensitive matter when used by companies trying to increase their market presence within a region as culturally diverse as APAC.

As such, companies must first create a social media platform strategy, taking into account the specific culture they are trying to penetrate. While LinkedIn is well-regarded as the corporate social media platform of election, companies need to understand if their customers are there, and if their level of maturity in the platform is high or not. If the

country has a Western-like culture, LinkedIn has high levels of maturity and other options like Line for Japan and WeChat for China (Zhang & Li, 2019) also need to be a point of analysis.

Following those, companies should focus on what content strategy they might need to adopt. A combination of using social selling at the organizational level and the salesperson level has been revealed both by literature (Ancillai et al., 2019) and what was observed by the cases at hand to be an efficient method. The role of the company as a content facilitator as well as resource and training provider becomes clear and therefore companies should invest in these areas to allow their salespeople to have access to the necessary materials to feel motivated to use social selling.

Companies should also understand the power of using social selling to better define their targeting strategies, as well as customer needs (Ancillai et al., 2019; Terho et al., 2022). The ability to get first-hand knowledge directly from the customers can become invaluable and can be attained by constant study and interaction through social media.

Based on these, five propositions are presented regarding the process and steps that ensure that social selling can be leveraged by KIBS companies to enhance their market presence.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research Directions

As happens with the majority of studies, there are limitations associated with the present work. One of the biggest limitations relies on the fact that neither of the companies have a foothold in all the Asia-Pacific region countries, nor are they native to the region, which can reduce the scope analyzed during this research. Enlarging the number of companies analyzed might provide a more in-depth study. Studying the behaviors regarding the use of social media and Social Selling of Asian companies compared to foreign companies trying to penetrate this market might also provide a clearer guide on how companies should shape their marketing strategies.

Moreover, in terms of behaviors and dimensions, both companies analyzed are big, meaning that this research had a narrow focus on the conduct of big multinational enterprises operating in Knowledge-Intensive business services sectors. Future research on how SMEs might use social media and social selling might be appropriate.

As mentioned, APAC is a relevant region with multiple countries that despite their similarities, have significant cultural differences, which later reflect on the behaviors of their inhabitants – both personally, and in the corporate world. Analyzing how companies navigate the different countries with a clear focus on each one, and multiple interviews focusing on the approach to each country may also be a particularly interesting path to embark on.

Lastly, there are many industries within the scope that both companies operate in. The different knowledge-intensive sectors might require personalized approaches – the focus on a singular industry or sector instead of a general view could provide further details that improve businesses' performances and increase their possibilities of increasing their market presence.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE – SERVICE PROVIDER:

1. Gender (LinkedIn): _____
2. Age (LinkedIn): _____
3. Educational background? (LinkedIn): _____
4. Could you tell me more about your career path (experience)?
5. What are your company's social media platforms of choice?
6. Could you tell me more about your as well as company platform preference for communication with clients??
7. What about for information gathering and connecting with clients?
8. Based on your experience could you elaborate on any specific preference you identified for clients in terms of the platforms used for communication?
9. From your perspective, how do other companies and direct competitors use social media platforms to engage with customers?
10. Based on your experience have you seen different patterns of behaviour in APAC region versus rest of the world as for preferences in social media platforms?
11. How do you leverage social media to build timely market knowledge?
12. Could you share with me your insights on relevance of social media in addressing improvements in customer journey?
13. Based on your experience, how do you feel about using social media as a tool to gather new client and selling opportunities?
14. How does social media help you gather information on potential customers and even competitors?
15. Do you deliberately use social media as an information gathering tool? If so, how frequent?
16. From your perspective, reverting to social media to engage with your potential customer is something effective? Can you share any example or experience you might have had?
17. Could you tell me the role those social media platforms play as part of your job and day-to-day operations and job responsibilities?
18. In your experience, how do you describe the impact that social media has on building a strong professional network?
19. What do you feel is the importance of establishing a connection with relevant industry players and influencers is something you view?
20. In terms of habits, is maintaining a consistent dialogue/interaction with your professional network something you actively prioritize?

21. When meeting new people in your industry, is connecting with them through professional networks such as LinkedIn something you do regularly? Is this key to achieving better results in terms of converting leads for example?
22. Leveraging social media channels to gather a core audience of clients, industry peers, and prospects is something that you believe can establish a foundation of trust?
23. Could you tell me if you have the habit of regularly posting content that showcases your expertise on subjects related to your industries? What type of content do you believe is more important to current and potential clients?
24. Is sharing helpful content such as case studies and success stories important for you? Do you believe this helps establish a position of trusted advisor within your target audience?
25. Regarding the last question, do you also consider this would be important for potential customers search for information – the act of sharing useful content on social media?
26. How does your company facilitate access to content that you can share on social media? and what type of content is normally encouraged to be posted?
27. In terms of scheduling and social media conducts you should adopt, could you share any requirements and suggestions that your company might have in place?
28. If you have any doubts, concerns or even suggestions regarding the content and even platform usage, do you feel like you have support from the company? Do you know who to contact for support?
29. Could you tell me how does your company encourages you and the rest of your colleagues to have a more active role on social media platforms when it comes to your job?
30. In your experience, do you feel like your company sees social media platforms as a tool to gain market insights, and market share and to bring more awareness?
31. Are there any limitations imposed by your company regarding social media usage? How do these limitations impact your approach to social media in your role?

QUESTIONNAIRE – CUSTOMER:

1. Gender (LinkedIn): _____
2. Age (LinkedIn): _____
3. Educational background? (LinkedIn): _____
4. Could you tell me more about your career path (experience)?
5. What are your company's preferred social media platforms? Do you have any specific preference for any platform when it comes to communication?
6. Regarding information gathering and connecting with potential providers, what are the social media platforms you and your company typically use?

7. From your perspective, what are the social media platforms your providers are normally active on?
8. Based on your experience, do other companies and key players use social media platforms to engage with potential service provider companies?
9. Do you have international experience? If so, have you seen different patterns of behaviour in APAC as for preferences in social media platforms?
10. How do you approach leveraging social media as a tool to build timely market knowledge?
11. When using social media platforms, how do you go about understanding your potential providers' offers?
12. Could you tell me if and how do you actively search for new providers using social media?
13. Before reaching out to companies and relevant individuals, do you have the habit of using social media to gather insights about them?
14. Could you describe how and how often you deliberately use social media as an information gathering tool?
15. Can you share your experience when it comes to engaging with potential and current provider companies (their teams) on social media?
16. Considering your role, how do you perceive social media platforms? Are an essential part of your job and day-to-day operations?
17. How do you use social media to build a strong professional network?
18. From your experience, how important is it to seek to establish a connection with relevant industry players and influencers?
19. Could you tell me if and how is it important to maintain a consistent dialogue/interaction with your professional network?
20. When meeting new people in your industry, how important is to connect with them through professional networks such as LinkedIn? How do you go about connecting with them?
21. From your experience, is it important to regularly consult and engage with content that showcases expertise on subjects related to your industry?
22. Do you feel that when individuals from provider companies post regularly with helpful content that it helps build trust in them?
23. Regarding the last question, how do you think this would be important when it comes to the selection process as to what company contact and engage in order to have the best service provider?
24. In your point of view, does a stronger presence in social media platforms helps you form a stronger position for one company instead of another?
25. How important is it to you to establish trust and a relationship when it comes to the sales force of potential service provider companies? Do you feel this can be somewhat attained through social media platforms and networks

26. When a service provider regularly posts about their success stories, how does this impact the level of trust you have towards them and their services?
27. How do customer referrals impact your decision – meaning when both a company and their sales personnel post references and approvals from their customers, how does this influence your willingness to become their clients?
28. When someone from a company regularly posts content regarding the industry and what the company is doing, how does this influence your levels of trust for said company and their services?
29. If an individual from your network that works for a potential service provider does not engage with you or your peers, how does this influence your willingness to engage with their company?
30. From your experience, does your company see social media platforms as a potential tool to gain market insights, market share and to bring more awareness?
31. In your view, is it important that employees from a service provider are regarded as trusted experts on your industry problems and challenges? How does sharing their knowledge impact your levels of trust?