

A Review of Critical Factors for Communicating With Customers on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a systematic review to gain insight into existing studies on the application of Social Network Sites (SNS). Our systematic review of studies from 1995 to 2012 examines the background and trend of research in the area and provides critical factors that organizations should consider for effectively use social networking sites to communicate with their customers. We note a huge growth in the number of academic papers on the topic since 1998. Seventeen factors were identified as a result of review, which shaped two main themes: (i) A customer-centric organizational culture, and (ii) SNS Know-How. The findings show that for a successful and effective use of SNSs, and in particular Facebook, a combination of good understanding of SNSs' tools and capabilities as well as a constant and transparent relationship with customers are essential. The findings show that for a successful and effective use of SNSs, and in particular Facebook, a combination of good understanding of SNSs' tools and capabilities as well as a constant and transparent relationship with customers are essential.

Keywords: Social networking sites, critical success factors, Facebook.

1. Introduction

With currently more than 60% of Internet users involved in social networking sites (SNSs) and three SNSs appearing in the world's top 10 visited websites in 2011, more organizations use SNSs' tools for advertisement and communication with users. Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn enhance the level of collaboration between users by allowing them to connect with friends or colleagues, recommend links, and use software applications⁵. The large number of SNS users has made these sites a great place for businesses to communicate

with their existing and potential customers in different ways.

Hence, it is important for company management to understand what factors influence on effective communication to customers through social network sites, so that they can deploy appropriate strategies. Despite the growing popularity of SNSs, and the significant role of them in business organizations, they have not yet received much academic attention and few studies have investigated factors that influence the use of these websites for business¹⁵. While previous studies have identified characteristics of social networking sites and stressed the importance of using SNSs for

businesses^{35,8}, more research needs to be undertaken to investigate critical factors that organizations need to consider to effectively communicate and interact with current and potential users and customers on social networking sites.

The objective of this study is to address this gap by identifying a set of important factors that need to be properly managed if a business wants to use SNSs to communicate with new and potential customers. Through review of the literature, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ: What drives a successful implementation of social network sites in organizations for effective communication to their customers?

2. Organizations and Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”⁶. SNSs are computer-mediated communication environments serving as new channels for communication and collaboration by individuals who are eager to share and explore resources^{22,23}. Through an SNS, people interact with each other in a common information space and participate in a variety of interactive and social activities such as posting information, photo sharing, tagging, organizing events, and so on Pallis et al.³¹.

The large number of users has made social networking sites a great place for businesses to communicate with their existing and potential customers. SNSs, such as Facebook, allow businesses to have a two-way and personal relationship with their customers, compared to the one-way and impersonal connection in other advertising methods¹⁵. These sites provide many ways for organizations to establish and maintain relationships with customers. According to Kent and Taylor (1998)¹⁹ and Taylor et al. (2001)³⁶, organizations should develop relationships with customers on online communities through three strategies:

- Firstly, organizations should use SNS to describe their history and activities, to link their profile to their website, and to provide pictures and videos to allow users to establish a connection with the organization.

- Organizations should then establish the usefulness of their social networking site profiles by posting news items and visual content about the organization and its products, services and causes, and using the message board or discussion forum to communicate with users and answer their questions.
- Finally, it is important that organizations make their SNS profile an interactive environment where they develop relationships with their users and create a space where users feel they are part of a community. For example organizations should provide a calendar of offline and online events and allow users to get involved in different ways.

While Facebook offers effective and economic advertising strategies, it also helps organizations to promote their brand, both nationally and internationally specially through viral marketing and friends’ recommendations. Since many people are already on Facebook and also a lot of competitors have a presence on this website, they increasingly expect to be able to directly interact with organizations through SNSs, which is another reason many organizations found it necessary to have an active presence on Facebook. The value for organizations comes from how a platform is used than anything else. Culnan et al. (2010)¹¹ have argued that organizations need to use platforms for additional values beyond just distribution of information for users. As Table 1 shows, a platform such as Facebook should be used to enhance relationship with customers and create a virtual customer environment, in which value is created through forming customer communities on Facebook.

Table 1. How virtual customer environments create value¹⁰

Activity Supported	Source of Value
Branding	Drive traffic, customer royalty and retention, viral marketing
Sales	Revenue
Customer service and support	Cost savings, revenue, customer satisfaction
Product development	Revenue

Despite SNSs’ advantages for value creation for organizations, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)¹⁷ have argued that organizations have not yet been able to successfully adopt social media and social networking sites. These researchers believe one reason behind unsuccessful adoption of social media is a lack of

understanding of what social media are and what various forms they can take.

Hence, a systematic review of literature published in 1995 – 2012 has been conducted to find factors that can help organizations to attract and retain customers on their SNS page, and in particular on their Facebook business page.

3. Methodology

The objective of this study was to conduct a systematic review, which would assist companies to consider factors impacting the successful and effective use of social networks in communication with their customers. For this to happen, we customized the guidelines for systematic reviews laid by⁴² Kitchenham (2004) and applied in several reviews⁴³. Kitchenham proposes four steps to carry out a literature review (a) Identification of Resources (b) Selection of Studies (c) Data extraction and synthesis (d) Data analysis.

3.1. Identification of Resources

The first step towards resource identification was recognizing the relevant keywords. This was carried out following an experimental method⁴³. We conducted a broad search on Google Scholar using the term ‘social network site’, ‘social media’, and ‘customer relationship management’. The first 250 search results were scanned and ‘social networking website and customer’ and ‘social media and customers’ were found to be the most relevant related keywords for the objective of this paper.

Once the keywords were determined, four databases – IEEE Xplore, Science Direct, Springer Link, and Google Scholar – were searched to find relevant studies in the field. For the initial screening, only titles, abstracts and keywords were considered and the search was limited to studies published between the years 1995 and 2012, both inclusive.

The following search phrases were used while querying each database – e.g. the second search indicated that the article should contain the word ‘social network sites’ along with any of ‘customer’ or ‘stakeholder’, or ‘visitor’ in its title, keywords or abstract.

- ‘social network sites’ AND ‘customer’
- ‘social network sites’ AND ‘stakeholder’
- ‘social network sites’ AND ‘visitor’

The articles were searched over multiple subjects and returned a total of 5849 articles. A full list of

databases, subjects and number of articles is provided in Table 1. In the process of the searching articles, we have found 918 papers have been duplicated.

3.2. Selection of Studies

In this step, the objective is to filter relevant papers from the initial list and exclude the ones not related to the use of social network sites in communicating with customers. This process is carried out in three iterations as presented in Figure 1.

Table 2: The Online Databases and Subjects

Database	Number of articles
SpringerLink	1308
ScienceDirect	108
IEEE Xplore	116
Google Scholar	4317
	5849

The first iteration involved searching for the selected keywords over 4 databases and excluding papers based on titles, keywords, abstracts and full texts. This removed articles that have one of the following exclusion criteria:

- Did not focus on application of social network sites for communicating with customers
- Did not discuss factors for effective communication with customers through Social network sites
- Were in languages other than English
- Were not in the relevant fields or could not be applied to relevant fields
- Were not peer reviewed
- Were not available online

The second iteration had two sub-iterations; (I) searching on references of the papers found in the first iteration, and (II) searching on papers, which had cited the found papers in iteration 1. This was done using Google Scholar. In each of these two sub-iterations, we ran the exclusion process and excluded papers based on the above criteria. As a result, Iteration 2 found 26 relevant papers (22 papers from searching on the references and 4 papers from searching on the citing papers).

In iteration 3, we have repeated the above process on the papers found in iteration 2. This added 8 papers to the final list, which 5 papers were identified by searching on the references and 3 were from citing papers. As such, the final archive had 34 papers, which confirms the claim stated in Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)¹⁷ and Berthon et al. (2007)⁴ for the lack of enough studies in the area of adopting social network sites for organizations.

3.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis

In the data extraction and synthesis step, the key details from the selected papers were obtained. In this review, the information extracted was divided into two groups (1) critical factors, where the different factors impacting the successful application of social networks for communication with customers are synthesized and (2) Demographics of the published works, e.g. the year of publication.

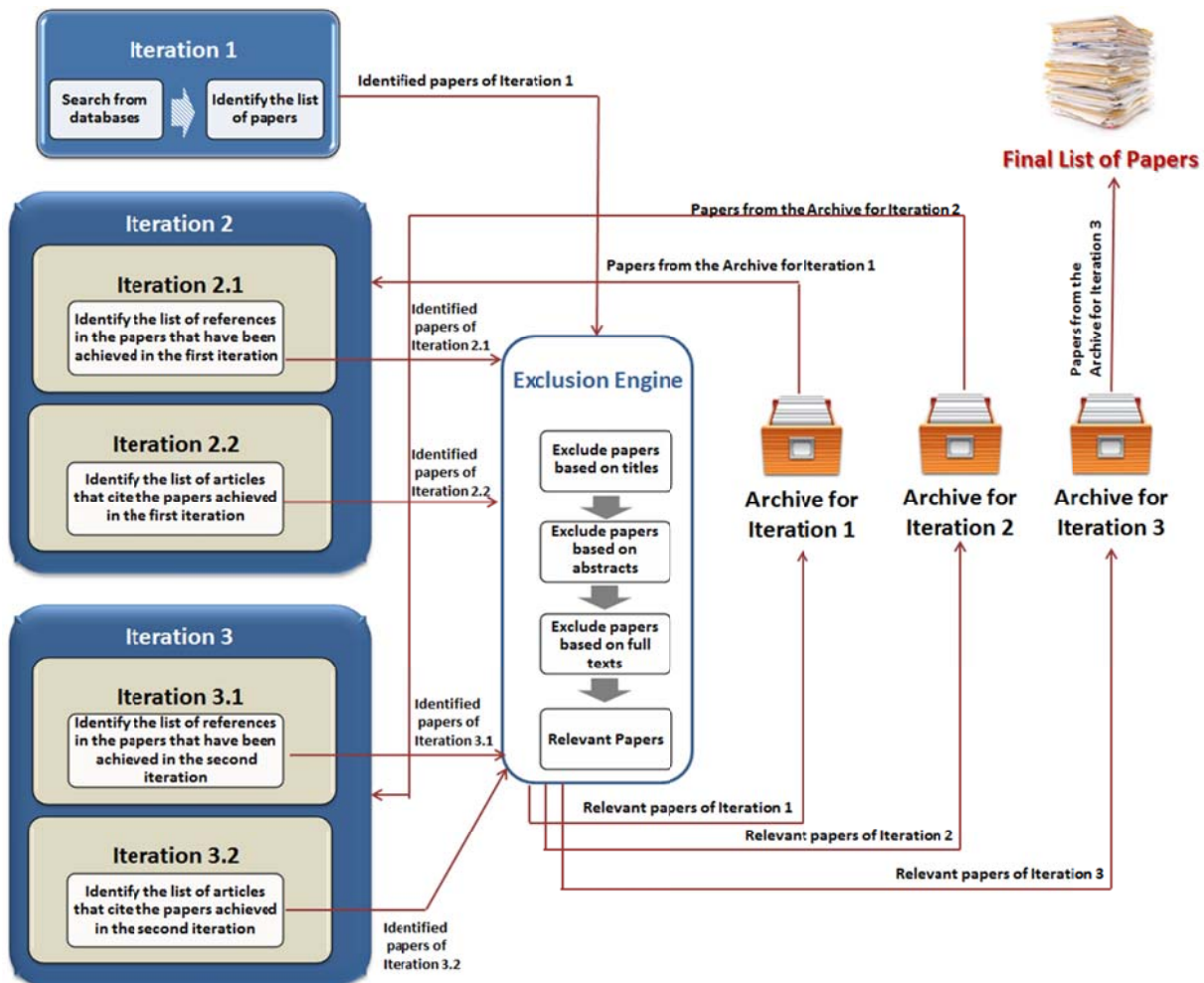


Figure 1 Selection Process

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis stage involved extracting the terms and definitions used in the final list of selected papers,

eventually forming the primary list of factors used in these studies. The analysis process is depicted in Figure 2.

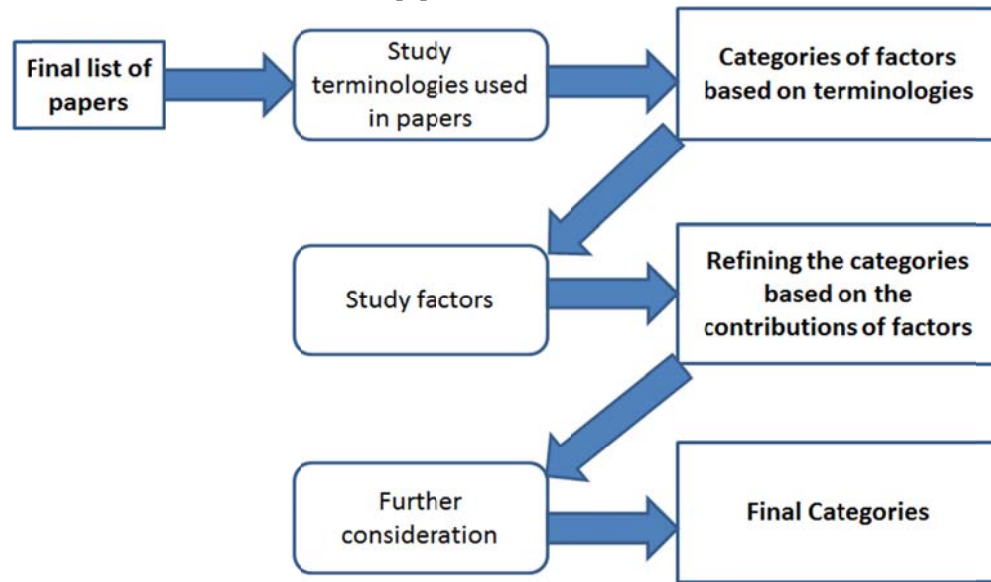


Figure 2. Data Analysis Process

4. Critical Success Factors

We use the notion of critical success factors to identify key factors that have to be properly managed by an organization to be able to successfully achieve business objective(s). This study is looking for factors that are important for organizations to go well to ensure success for an organization, and need to be given particular attention to bring about high performance⁷. This approach has been used to determine the important issues for organizations to succeed in offline and online marketing and advertisement plans¹². For example, Kim et al (2009)²² investigated virtual communities as a marketing channel and analyzed critical factors related to using this channel for advertisement.

This current study uses Rockart's (1979)³⁴ guidelines for developing and identifying critical factors for communicating with customers on SNSs. According to Rockart, identification of critical factors requires determination of the level of analysis as well as the techniques to be used in identification. Among different levels of analysis, the current study uses the firm specific level. This level utilizes an emphasis on the

firm's internal matters to provide the link to possible factors. Amongst different techniques, this study uses review of the literature as the identification technique; that is, the technique captures important factors from previously published papers by experts who have a comprehensive knowledge of the business and its SNS activities.

Since many people are already on Facebook and also a lot of competitors have a presence on this website, customers increasingly expect to be able to directly interact with organizations through SNSs, which is a key reason many organizations found it necessary to have an active presence on Facebook^{33,36}. Gu et al. (2011)¹⁴ examined customer loyalty for social network sites and found that perceived value, satisfaction, and consumer knowledge are important factors for maintain customer loyalty. Kietzmann et al. (2011)²⁰ stress that the power is now with individuals, who share information, pictures, and videos related to products with or without organizations' permission. While customer relationship management on Facebook has many advantages for organizations, such as effective

advertising strategies and brand promotion through viral marketing and friends' recommendations, Baird and Parasnis (2001)¹ have argued that SNS websites such as Facebook are game changer tools. According to these authors, while traditional customer relation systems were in control of organizations to manage relationships with customers, with SNSs organizations are no longer in control of this relationship. Instead, customers have now the power to drive the conversation. Baird and Parasnis (2001)¹ have suggested that organizations need to use new strategies to recognize the importance of SNSs by addressing social aspect of customer relationship management on SNSs.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)¹⁷ investigated the use of social media by organizations. They suggested 10 pieces of advice for companies to consider when deciding to use social media. These are: 1) choose the right social media based on the group target to be reached and the message to be communicated, 2) analyse and decide whether it is more beneficial to join one of the existing social media applications or to make your own platform, 3) make sure that all social media activities are aligned with each other, 4) integrate the social media activities, 5) give right access to the employees of the company to be able to contribute to company's social media activities, 6) be active in giving fresh content and in engaging with customers, 7) be interesting, 8) be humble, 9) be professional, and 10) be honest.

Berman et al. (2007)³ encouraged nonprofit organizations to use social networking sites in various ways, such as online causes, and to be transparent in communication with their users. According to Berman et al., organizations should provide a description of their business, tell stories about their activities, provide videos and pictures to establish connection with users, and make available contact details of the individuals who are responsible for maintaining the social networking site. Carrera et al. (2008)⁸ also reported similar findings and stated that it is important that social networking sites properly manage distribution of information in the form of posting links to external websites and news content, provide information about the organization and its activities, post added value information such as videos and pictures, and create discussion forums or spaces to answer users' questions and post announcements. Furthermore, Waters et al. (2009)³⁹ analyzed the content of 275 nonprofit organization profiles on Facebook to examine how these

new social networking sites have been used to manage organization's mission and programs in relation to communicating with their stakeholders. The results of this study found that having only a Facebook business page in itself does not increase stakeholders' attraction and participation. As also stressed by Huang et al., (2010)¹⁵, organizations need to effectively plan their presence on SNSs and develop social networking relationships with their stakeholders.

Maurer & Wiegmann (2011)²⁶ and Denning (2010)¹² have discussed that as social media have made organizations to be more open and to be more influenced by customers and employees, organizations need to be prepared to manage opportunities and threats of this openness. Corporate openness helps organizations to learn from employees and customers, to 'dialog' with them rather than 'shouting' at them, to support them in 'real time' when they need it, and to continuously innovate based on not only ideas from within the organization but also from the knowledge that flows from customers^{11, 17}. Yet, it has been suggested that openness is not always better and organizations need to have strategies in place when they expose themselves to customers' ideas on social media¹¹.

Social marketing and advertising is growing rapidly and becoming increasingly complex^{29,27}. It has been stressed that advertisers should increasingly rely on third party experts and more advanced tools to improve the efficiency of their campaigns³². For example, third party experts can help organizations to identify the most appropriate search terms and how much to bid on them. The importance of monitoring has been highlighted and argued that organizations must closely monitor the outcomes of their online activities through using analytic tools³².

Customers increasingly use social networking sites in a similar way to search engines to search for products and services³⁹. Also similar to search engines, social network sites enable organizations to attract customers through advertisements. Laffey (2007)²⁵ assessed what managers need to know for effective communication with customers on the new media and search engines. Laffey concluded that organizations need to have competencies in keyword selection, managing and monitoring performance, realizing click fraud and integrating paid search with other forms of advertising. Laffey also found that another important factor in using

search engine advertising is commitment to constant monitor, as many organizations rarely monitor their advertising performance. Barry and Charleton (2009)² surveyed 95 companies to determine the challenges organizations encounter when undertaking search engine related marketing methods. They found that advertisers have serious difficulties in measuring achievements and outcomes of their marketing practice. They also highlighted that advertisers must analyse and measure their marketing outcomes with appropriate tools and feed them back into their strategic decision making process. A significant number of advertisers suffer from a lack of knowledge and expertise in the PPC field². Moreover, they argued that businesses must have commitment to their campaign by dedicating adequate amounts of time, budget and resources. Another finding of their research was that managing keywords has remained as a major difficulty for some companies. Murphy (2008)²⁹ identified a series of factors that acted as deterrents in achieving paid advertising success and effectiveness. These factors were poor marketing planning, lack of e-marketing expertise and competencies, lack of training, lack of commitment (not assigning enough resources), and absence of measuring and monitoring effectiveness.

Mordkovich and Mordkovich (2007)²⁷ pointed out that managing and tracking tools are playing an important role in communicating with users through search engine and social media advertisements. In particular, independent third party tools are helpful in handling the advertising campaign when the campaign becomes more complex. They also indicated that sometimes it is essential to have an expert backing up how the campaign is progressing.

Computer mediated social networks allow people to establish relationship and strong bonds through information and resource exchange^{30,31,39}. Despite the limited social presence of social network sites, people can find support, and instrumental aid through the normal course of SNSs of work and community³⁸. Providing such type of support normally does not need significant investments of time or money, which allows organizations to create long term support and relationship with their customers⁹. It is therefore important for organizations to be aware of the critical factors that help them prepare for challenges and opportunities social networking sites provide for communication and interaction with their users²⁰. In

summary, a review of the above studies has suggested a number of factors that play an important role in communicating with users on social networking sites. A list of these factors from each study was generated and similar factors were consolidated. Next, those factors that were unrelated to the SNS were removed from this list and the following factors in Table 1 are remained.

Looking at the factors and their description in this table, two themes can be distinguished:

1. A customer-centric organizational culture: factors such as 'Let the users/consumers participate', 'Being committed to SNS task', 'Regular updates on the SNS', 'Be, work, and think customer-centric', 'Try to be honest and authentic during the campaign', and 'Try to tell a story about your organization' are factors that show the organization values their customer and uses SNS to establish a transparent and regular relationship with their customer. This is very important to ensure the organization's SNS has been successful in maintaining effective relationships
2. SNS Know-How: the remaining factors in Table 1 fall into this theme which shows that the organization needs to be well aware of SNS capabilities and tools and should be able to properly use them to communicate with users.

5. Discussion and Future Work

5.1. Key findings of the research

This study examined the literature of SNSs and sought factors that may help organizations to enhance relationship with customers and also may help attracting new users to their SNS business page. Overall, assessment of the literature revealed 17 factors that underlined two key themes: a customer-centric organizational culture and SNS know-how. These findings show that in order for organization to establish an effective relationship with customers on Facebook, or SNSs in general, they need to have an organizational culture that values customers and appreciates the importance of a close relationship with them.

If such a culture exists, organizations will then need a dedicated SNS team which updates customers with relevant products and services information and also properly addresses customers' inquires and concerns. Of course, it is also important for organizations to have a good knowledge of SNSs tools and capabilities.

Organizations need to understand that different social networking sites need separate attention, but they all need to be integrated with their website and other internal systems to provide accurate and consistent information to customers.

Table 3. Communicating with users on SNSs

Theme	Factor Name	Description
customer-centric organizational culture	Being committed to SNS task	Perceived commitment to SNS tasks
	Let the users/consumers participate	The degree to which the organization is keen to allow users to get involved in contributing to SNS activities and discussions
	Regular updates on the SNS	How often the content on the social networking website is updated
	Try to be honest and authentic during the campaign	The extent to which the organization provides true and honest information for their SNS campaign
	Try to tell a story about your organization	Whether or not the organization provides background information as well as regular updates about their activities
SNS Know-How	Be, work, and think customer-centric	The extent to which the organization values its relationship with customers
	Ability to measure and monitor outcomes	A regular way to quantitatively measure outcomes of SNS activities
	Level of knowledge and expertise about SNS	The extent to which an organization has expertise and knowledge about use of SNS for communication with users
	Company's experience in SNS	The level of past experiences with SNSs
	Using external experts	The extent to which external experts and consultants are used for SNS activities
	Integrating SNS activities with other forms of marketing	Integration with other forms of marketing such as search engine marketing, online banners, and offline marketing activities
	Connecting SNS Ads to appropriate landing page	Whether or not advertisements and other marketing information are connected to appropriate pages on the organization's website
	Ability to detect click frauds	Whether or not a specific mechanism is available to detect click frauds
	Relevancy of Ad text to search terms	The degree to which relevant terms are used for advertising on SNSs
	Provide an added value	Whether or not the

within your campaign (e.g. iPhone application, a product forum, videos)	organization uses value added services such as iPhone applications, video and/or discussion forums for their SNSs campaign
Understand that social networking channels are different from each other and need separate attention	The extent to which a separate attention and plan is available for different social networking websites
Prepare/train your employees	The degree of training provided for employees dealing with SNS activities

5.2. Research Contribution

This is one of the first studies in the literature of social networking sites and social customer relationship management which has systematically identified a set of critical factors that play an important role in communicating with customers and Facebook members. The two themes identified in this study direct practitioners and organizations to build or enhance their SNS strategy and initiatives around a more customer centric culture and to use more initiatives to strengthen their relationships with customers on SNS environments. The seventeen factors identified in Table 3 can then direct organizations to use a set of quantitative and clear indicators to develop a breakdown of their SNS strategies and objectively measure the success rates of implementing these strategies over time.

5.3. Future directions

While this study explored several factors and themes that organizations may use in communicating with customers on Facebook, future studies can further empirically investigate their effectiveness for organizations and the extent to which these tools may have been used by different organizations. Also, more research should to be done to measure and demonstrate challenges organizations may have in utilizing these factors and how these challenges can be addressed. This is an important issue, since many organizations, especially late adopters, are still unsure of how much Facebook may add value to their business and may enhance their relationship with customers. Furthermore, empirical research is needed to understand how these critical factors would be received by different industries and whether different industries need to have a different focus on different factors

5.4. Limitations

As is the case with almost any review, this paper has a few limitations that must be kept in mind.

- Dependency on quality of the identified papers.

The factors provided in this systematic review for effective use of SNSs in communication with customers are only as reliable as the relevant papers found in the study. In other words, conducting a systematic does not overcome problems that were inherent in the design of the primary studies.

- Dependency on the quality of selected keywords

Systematic reviews and accordingly this paper are limited by the keywords that are chosen. Poor key wording in the databases might lead to some studies not being identified; however, the method proposed by (Dieste 2009) was utilized to ensure the most relevant studies were included for the review.

- Lack of contextual analysis

It is commonly believed that the effectiveness of critical factors can often be dependent on the context that the project has been run. Therefore, having a systematic review and shaping critical factors may miss the point of context. However, in our selection of study we have carefully considered this issue and chosen project with similar contexts as the objective of the paper. This has been addressed in exclusion criteria.

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