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**SARA FRACCASTORO**

**Social media use in  
international  
entrepreneurial  
ventures**

An international network and sales perspective

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## **ABSTRACT**

International entrepreneurial ventures often face financial and organisational resource limitations when conducting business in foreign markets. These liabilities are exacerbated by the lack of existing relationships with foreign partners and customers. Previous research shows that building a position of insidership within relevant networks and establishing international sales are important achievements in the battle to overcome resource scarcity and grow in international markets.

Research on international entrepreneurship shows that ever more firms rely upon the innovations brought by the development in the information and communications technology sector. Among these, during the last decade, social media platforms have arisen as important communication methods owing to their characteristics of global online reach and the possibility of improving interaction among users. Internationally-located firms leverage these characteristics for many of their business functions. Nevertheless, previous research does not provide sufficient understanding on how internationally-located entrepreneurial ventures use social media for their internationalisation and sales management processes.

This dissertation is positioned at the intersection of the international business and sales management fields of research. It seeks to contribute



knowledge on how and why international entrepreneurial ventures use social media during their internationalisation and sales processes. The study places particular attention on how entrepreneurial ventures leverage social media to build the network connections needed when entering international markets and expanding their penetration. Furthermore, this study investigates how entrepreneurial ventures integrate social media with existing sales communication methods during international sales processes carried in business-to-business markets. Therefore, the study builds on the premises of network literature and sales process literature and uses internalisation theory to discover the governance mechanisms affecting social media use within international entrepreneurial ventures. The study consists of three essays and adopts a qualitative methodology that is used consistently throughout the thesis in order to generate new theoretical understanding. Accordingly, the three essays follow a single case-study, a multiple case-study, and a grounded theory method conducted on firms from Brazil, Finland, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, and Sweden.

The research contributes to the field of international entrepreneurship in several ways. The findings suggest that social media platforms can be perceived and used as important channels to assist firms' internationalisation. Entrepreneurial ventures leverage social media platforms as part of their internationalisation due to those platforms' characteristics of being cost-efficient and providing global visibility and use them in connection with traditional internationalisation methods. Using social media helps firms overcome liabilities connected to their smallness, newness, and foreignness. By linking the use of social media to network literature, the study shows how social media platforms assist entrepreneurial firms in building a position of insidership within emerging and strategic networks and allow them to acquire important learning about foreign markets. Moreover, by conceptualising social media use as a firm-specific capability, this study contributes to the field of international entrepreneurship by bringing in concepts drawn from internalisation theory (such as firm-specific advantage) that have not yet been applied to this field of research. Accordingly, this dissertation advances cross-pollination of different fields of research. From a sales literature perspective, the study shows that given the needs of

dynamism, flexibility, and cost-reduction faced by internationalising firms and the challenges related to technological advancement, business-to-business sales processes focus on three main phases: identification of new business opportunities, persuasion, and relationship management. The research shows that international entrepreneurial firms seek diverse combinations of social media tools integrated with digital and traditional sales communication methods to reach a wider scope of business in terms of geographical reach and adaptation to customers' needs. Accordingly, the study offers research examining the sales processes of internationally operating entrepreneurial firms.

The dissertation has practical implications for entrepreneurs leading firms operating internationally and for their sales managers. The study shows that the use of social media integrated with traditional networking methods and sales communication methods can facilitate the internationalisation and the sales management processes of international entrepreneurial ventures.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship; International Business Enterprises; Social Media; Networks; Internalization; Sales Management.



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Sosiaalisen median hyödyntäminen kansainvälisessä yrittäjyydessä.

Kansainvälisten verkostojen ja myynnin näkökulma.

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## **TIIVISTELMÄ**

Kansainväliset yrittäjävetoiset organisaatiot kohtaavat usein kansainvälisessä liiketoiminnassaan rajoitteita taloudellisiin ja organisationaalisiin resursseihin liittyen. Tilannetta pahentaa kansainvälisten kumppanuuksien ja asiakkaiden puuttuminen. Aikaisempi tutkimus osoittaa, että verkostoposition rakentaminen relevanteissa verkostoissa sekä kansainvälisen myynnin vakiinnuttaminen ovat keskeisessä tärkeässä roolissa resurssipuutteen ja kansainvälisen kasvun näkökulmasta.

Kansainvälisen yrittäjyyden tutkimus osoittaa, että yritykset ovat yhä enemmän riippuvaisia informaatioteknologian tarjoamiin innovaatioihin. Näistä innovaatioista sosiaalisen median alustat ovat viime vuosikymmenen aikana nousseet tärkeiksi kommunikaatioväyliksi johtuen niiden ominaispiirteistä globaaliin tavoitettavuuteen ja mahdolliseen käyttäjien vuorovaikutuksen parantamiseen liittyen. Kansainväliset sijoittuneet yritykset hyödyntävät näitä ominaispiirteitä monissa liiketoiminnoissaan. Tästä huolimatta aikaisempi tutkimus ei tarjoa riittävää ymmärrystä siihen, miten kansainväliset yrittäjävetoiset organisaatiot hyödyntävät sosiaalista mediaa kansainvälistymis- ja myynnin johtamisen prosesseissaan.

Tämä väitöskirjatutkielma sijoittuu kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan ja myynnin johtamisen tutkimuskirjallisuuden risteyskohtaan. Väitöskirja

pyrkii lisäämään tietoa siitä, miten ja miksi kansainväliset yrittäjävetoiset yritykset hyödyntävät sosiaalista mediaa kansainvälistymis- ja myyntiprosessiensa aikana. Tutkielma keskittyy erityisesti siihen miten yrittäjävetoiset organisaatiot hyödyntävät sosiaalista mediaa verkostokumppanisuhteiden rakentamiseen kansainvälistyttäessä ja kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan laajentamisessa. Lisäksi tämä tutkimus tarkastelee miten kyseiset yritykset integroivat sosiaalisen median olemassa oleviin myynnin kommunikaatiomenetelmiin kansainvälisen, yritykseltä yritykselle tapahtuvan (B2B) myyntiprosessin aikana. Siten tämän väitöskirjatutkielman lähtökohtana toimivat verkostotutkimuksen- ja myyntiprosessitutkimuksen kirjallisuudet, ja tutkielmassa käytetään kansainvälistymisteoriaa sellaisten johtamisenmenetelmien löytämiseen, jotka vaikuttavat sosiaalisen median käyttöön kansainvälisissä yrittäjävetoisissa organisaatioissa. Väitöskirjatutkielma sisältää kolme esseettä ja laadullista tutkimusmenetelmää käytetään johdonmukaisesti väitöskirjan läpi uuden teoreettisen ymmärryksen luomiseksi. Näissä kolmessa esseessä hyödynnetään tapaustutkimusta (yhden tapauksen tapaustutkimus, ja usean tapauksen tapaustutkimus). Lisäksi käytetään ns. Grounded Theory -menetelmää. Tutkittavien yritysten joukossa on yrityksiä Brasiliasta, Italiasta, Suomesta, Puolasta, Ruotsista ja Uudesta-Seelannista .

Tutkimuksen kontribuutio kohdistuu monipuolisesti kansainvälisen yrittäjyyden tutkimusalueeseen. Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että sosiaalisen median alustat voidaan ymmärtää ja niitä voidaan käyttää tärkeinä kanavina yritysten kansainvälistymisessä. Yrittäjävetoiset organisaatiot hyödyntävät sosiaalisen median alustoja kansainvälistymiseen alustojen ominaispiirteiden vuoksi: kustannustehokkuutta ja globaalia näkyvyyttä käytetään perinteisten kansainvälistymismenetelmien kanssa. Sosiaalisen median käyttö auttaa yrityksiä ylipääsemään kansainvälistymisen haasteita, jotka liittyvät yritysten pieneen kokoon, uutuuteen ja ulkomaalaisuuteen. Yhdistämällä sosiaalisen median käyttö ja verkostotutkimuksen kirjallisuus, tämä väitöskirjatutkielma osoittaa miten sosiaalisen median alustat auttavat yrityksiä keskeisen verkostoposition rakentamisessa nousevien ja strategisten verkostojen osalta, ja tarjoavat tärkeää tietoa kansainvälisistä markkinoista. Lisäksi väitöskirja käsitteellistää sosiaalisen median käytön osaksi yrityskohtaista kyvykkyyttä, ja siten rakentaa kontribuution

kansainvälisen yrittäjyyden tutkimusalueelle tuoden alueelle kansainvälistymisteorian käsitteitä (kuten esimerkiksi firm-specific advantage), joita ei ole aikaisemmin hyödynnetty kyseisellä tutkimusalueella. Siten tämä väitöskirjatutkielma edistää eri tutkimusalueiden rajat ylittävää tutkimusta. Myynnin tutkimuksen näkökulmasta tarkasteltuna tutkimus osoittaa, että kansainvälistyvien yritysten tarvitsema dynaamisuus, joustavuus ja kustannusten vähentäminen, sekä teknologian kehittymiseen liittyvät haasteet B2B-myyntiprosesseissa keskittyvät kolmeen vaiheeseen: uusien liiketoimintamahdollisuuksien identifiointi, suostuttelu ja suhteiden johtaminen. Yrittäjävetoiset organisaatiot etsivät erilaisia sosiaalisen median tarjoamia työkaluja integroituna digitaalisen ja perinteisen myynnin kommunikaatiomenetelmiin laajentaakseen liiketoimintaa maantieteellisen tavoitettavuuden ja asiakastarpeisiin mukautumisen näkökulmasta. Siten, tutkimus tarkastelee kansainvälisesti operoivien yrittäjävetoisten organisaatioiden myyntiprosesseja.

Väitöskirjatutkielma tarjoaa käytännön havaintoja kansainvälisten organisaatioiden yrittäjille ja myyntijohtajille. Tutkimus osoittaa, että sosiaalisen median käyttö integroituna perinteisiin verkostoitumistapoihin ja myynnin kommunikaatiomenetelmiin voi edesauttaa kansainvälistymistä ja myynnin johtamisen prosesseja kansainvälisissä yrittäjävetoisissa organisaatioissa.

**Avainsanat:** Kansainvälinen yrittäjyys; Sosiaalisen median alustat; Verkot; Kansainvälistyminen; Myyntiprosessin johtaminen



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September 2020

Sara Fraccastoro



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# 1 Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of the dissertation content. By introducing the background of the research and the practical relevance of the phenomena, this introductory chapter justifies the importance of pursuing the research goals. Based on existing literature, the research aim emerges, and the themes of the research are highlighted. Accordingly, three main research objectives are formulated and then mirrored in the three research essays comprising the dissertation. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates the expected theoretical contributions and presents a brief overview of the recurrent terminology connected to the key concepts and definition of the dissertation. The chapter ends with an overview of the process of the research and thesis structure.

## 1.1 Research background

Statistical data regarding the use and adoption of social media platforms show that European firms have increased their use of social network sites from 28 % to 51 % in the time period spanning 2013–2019 (EUROSTAT). However, from the same European-level statistics, it appears that only the 48 % of small and medium-sized firms have a social media account and use it for business purposes. This is striking, given that larger firms (employing more than 250 employees), almost double this percentage. These trends are the red flags of a major problem that lays hidden behind the misunderstanding and the uncertainty that firms face when trying to adopt social media sites in their business processes.

Social media are increasingly used by diverse users and businesses across the world. It is evident that the possibilities of global online reach at inexpensive rates offered by these platforms can be leveraged by firms to develop the company's image, to advertise products and services in different markets, and to obtain customer opinions and feedback on the firm's value offerings. The implications that social media characteristics carry, are



then heightened in the context of doing business internationally. It is clear that internationally operating firms can leverage social media in many of their functions to improve their operations in foreign markets. Building business relationships in international marketplaces represents a way that firms have to increase their sales revenues and to grow steadily, by avoiding the risk of selling only into home-markets. This is particularly relevant for those firms coming from countries where the internal market is small, such as Finland (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson, 2006), or that commercialise niche products; for them the firm's survival often relies upon internationalisation. Accordingly, acquiring knowledge on how and why to use social media during internationalisation and sales processes, could help small internationalising ventures that are often led by entrepreneurs to overcome some of the difficulties caused by their lack of financial resources or knowledge of foreign markets. Therefore, social media platforms can be seen as means that small entrepreneurial ventures can leverage in their active pursuit of international business opportunities and when approaching foreign partners and customers.

Entrepreneurship is based on individuals' actions to constantly evaluate the sources and processes of the discovery, examination, and exploitation of opportunities to create future goods and services that lead to their firm's growth (Shane & Venkantaram, 2000). Accordingly, the definition of international entrepreneurship by Oviatt and McDougall (2005) translates these characteristics in an international context. While pursuing international business opportunities, international entrepreneurs are challenged with resource limitations that that literature refers to as liabilities of smallness, newness, and foreignness (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004).

To make up for their uncertainty about foreign markets, their lack of financial resources, or simply to be able to compete with existing players in international markets, earlier literature shows that building networks with different national and international players can be seen as resource that the firms can leverage to successfully internationalise (Coviello, 2006). A growing stream of research has analysed how international entrepreneurial ventures build networks during internationalisation and

how they leverage them to make up for their lack of skills, knowledge, and relationships into foreign markets (Harris & Wheeler, 2005; Sharma & Blomstermo, 2003; Ojala, Evers & Rialp, 2018). Accordingly, international networking has emerged as a key approach for internationalising firms aiming to build a position of insidership within relevant networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). More recently, research in the field of international entrepreneurship has advanced the knowledge of how these firms build network connections at the beginning of internationalisation with the help of social media platforms (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). From this research it is evident that the use of social media can help these firms building network ties in international markets and also fosters early international market expansion. Nevertheless, knowledge of how the implementation of social media tools evolves during the internationalisation process of entrepreneurial ventures remains scarce, despite earlier calls for research looking at the introduction of internet-based applications for the internationalisation process of the firm (Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Jean, 2013).

Being successful in international sales processes is a further important achievement that can safeguard firms' survival. Sales process activities such as prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close, and follow-up (Dubinsky, 1980/1981) depict the core of salespeople's activities when in contact with customers. Since this original conceptualisation, representing one of the most accepted views (if not the most accepted view) in the sales discipline, salespeople's tasks and sales process phases have evolved (Marshall, Moncrief & Lassk, 1999; Moncrief & Mashall, 2005). Sales as a field is increasingly considering relationship-based approaches (Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj, 2007; Terho, Eggert, Haas & Ulaga, 2015; Viio & Grönroos, 2014, 2016) and the integration of innovations within the information and communications technology domain (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Recent literature has considered the introduction of social media as a further sales communication method (Andzulis, Panagopoulos & Rapp, 2012; Dixon & Tanner 2012) that can be implemented during the sales process (Salo, 2017). However, extant research has mainly focussed on firms operating in consumer markets and

selling in national contexts (Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016; Kumar, Choi & Greene, 2017). This is surprising, given that extant research dealing with the implementation of social media within business-to-business sales has established that the use of social media improves firm performance (Rapp Beitelspacher, Grewal & Hughes, 2013). Accordingly, these positive effects have potential to be extended to international entrepreneurial ventures that face uncertainty in social media implementation when interacting with geographically dispersed stakeholders.

Therefore, this dissertation is positioned at the interface of international business and sales literature; as its unit of analysis it adopts international entrepreneurial ventures. All the investigated firms also fall under the European Commission definition of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs -EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2013). These firms represent 99 % of all businesses in the European Union (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2019a), and since they are the main source of economic activity in the Union, their internationalisation and growth is supported by the European Union's governmental bodies (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2019b). As the existing knowledge of social media use in the internationalisation and sales processes of these firms stays scant, the investigation of these phenomena can bring interesting theoretical development that enhance academic and practical understanding of an ever-growing trend.

## **1.2 Research gaps**

Studies at the interface between international business and entrepreneurship have started to analyse the use and the effects of social media implementation for business purposes. For instance, the study by Fischer and Reuber (2011) enhances our understanding of the effects of the adoption of a social media such as Twitter on entrepreneurial effectual decision-making logic. In addition, by analysing entrepreneurial communication via Twitter, the same authors (2014) show that online communication via social media helps firms to differentiate themselves from

competitors with similar value offerings and to reduce the uncertainty potential buyers feel towards the products and services being offered by the firm. By focussing on entrepreneurs active in international markets, Sigfusson and Chetty (2013) show that using social media such as LinkedIn helps firms communicate with different stakeholders and build the weak network ties needed to internationalise. However, from an international business angle, there seems to be a dearth of studies looking at the use of social media as a platform during internationalisation. Only recently have scholars started to investigate the implications of social media adoption within internationalising firms. For instance, Alarcón-del-Amo and colleagues (2018) highlight the implications for business performance of significant managerial involvement with social media use. However, studies combining international business and entrepreneurship, and therefore looking at the use of social media in internationalising entrepreneurial ventures remain scarce. In fact, research has yet to investigate how entrepreneurial ventures use social media when approaching foreign markets; why these tools are preferred when targeting specific countries or junctures of the internationalisation process; and how entrepreneurs leverage them to discover international business opportunities and sell into international markets.

Moreover, social media platforms have been found to help firms in their sales efforts (Andzulis, Panagopoulos & Rapp, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies investigating the use of social media by the marketing and sales functions of international entrepreneurial ventures. Studies in the field of marketing offered an overview of the changes brought by the introduction of digital, social media, and mobile marketing from the beginning of the 2000s (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Research in the field of multichannel marketing and integrated marketing has investigated the synergistic effects of the integration of social media with traditional marketing methods. Nevertheless, extant studies have tended to focus on firms operating in business-to-consumer and mainly domestic markets and pay particular attention to large firms (Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016; Kumar, Choi & Greene, 2017). This is problematic because we lack a clear understanding of the integration of social media tools into

the sales function of internationally operating entrepreneurial ventures selling into business-to-business markets.

I argue that enhancing the current knowledge on the above-mentioned topics could bring important theoretical advancement to the field of international entrepreneurship and have implications for sales process literature. Moreover, investigating these phenomena could have important practical relevance for entrepreneurs leading firms operating in international markets and that understand the potential brought by the use of social media for international business and sales activities, but who are still uncertain about its usage. In fact, enhancing this understanding could help them face resource limitations such as lack of financing and knowledge of foreign markets, which often lead these ventures in having to choose between investments in resource and development or marketing (Haapanen, Juntunen & Juntunen, 2016), however both important to build dynamic capabilities central to reach competitive advantage in internationalisation (Haapanen, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Hermes, 2018). This dissertation aims at enhancing theoretical and practical understanding of how international entrepreneurial ventures use social media tools in internationalisation and how they leverage them for sales process management activities.

### **1.3 Research questions and objectives**

To achieve its broad research aim, this study builds on three main research objectives that translate into three research questions guiding the structure of the thesis.

First of all, there is a need to theoretically clarify how social media are used during the internationalisation process of entrepreneurial ventures. Despite researchers making progress towards understanding the use of social media as communication tools for entrepreneurs (Fischer & Reuber, 2011, 2014), we still need to improve the knowledge regarding the effects of these tools on firms' internationalisation. Though scant, earlier research suggests that a way to look at this phenomenon is through the

lens of network literature (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). In fact, by attaining embeddedness in relevant networks, entrepreneurial firms can effectively internationalise. However, conducting research on the internationalisation process of firms and the way they build networks through social media suggests the adoption of a temporal perspective, which can be achieved through the use of data spanning the entire firm history and that bring insights into the dynamism of the phenomenon. Conducting research on time-related aspects of this process, such as speed of internationalisation (Chetty, Johanson & Martin, 2014), not only at the inception of the firm, but over time may reveal how social media is used by such firms (often referred to as international new ventures – Oviatt & McDougall, 1994–) and help them overcome the challenges of internationalisation. Therefore, the first research question of this dissertation is defined as follows:

Research question 1:

How are social media platforms used during the growth of an international new venture's operations in international markets?

Secondly, earlier research on the internationalisation of entrepreneurial ventures and business practice show that these firms suffer from liabilities connected to smallness, newness, and foreignness (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). In addition, they experience the liability of outsidership that can exacerbate the negative impact (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). These limitations jeopardise the success of the international expansion and the firms' survival. Therefore, empirical and theoretical development is needed to better understand how firms leverage social media when trying to enter and expand into foreign markets. During the internationalisation process, network partners and other channels of internationalisation are still being used. Thus, there is a need to understand how the firms explore and exploit their own capabilities and resources (including social media) and combine them with those of foreign partners. Hence, this study challenges the current international entrepreneurial view that internationalisation theory cannot be applied in the context of fast internationalising ventures

(cf. Verbeke, Zargarzadeh & Osiyevskyy, 2014; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018). It is important to understand the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial ventures leverage and bundle social media to enter relevant networks, overcome resource liabilities, and learn about the foreign markets into which they expand. The research objective is best achieved through a theory-building multiple case-study design based on the comparative analysis of three entrepreneurial ventures coming from countries having small internal markets and commercialising products directed to consumers, but whose buyers are businesses. The choice is motivated by the fact that firms from small and open economies tend to suffer from great difficulties and internationalisation is crucial for their survival given the limited size of internal markets; this is exacerbated when the firms commercialise niche products (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson, 2006; Chetty, Ojala & Leppäaho, 2015). Therefore, the second research question of this thesis is outlined as follows:

Research question 2:

How does the use of social media enable entrepreneurial ventures to enter foreign networks, overcome liabilities associated with their foreign expansion, and extend penetration into foreign markets?

Lastly, succeeding in international markets entails applying effective sales processes. The advent of social media has not caused the disappearance of other communication tools in the international sales process, hence, there is a need to understand how social media can be integrated into existing communication methods such as inperson sales and email exchanges. Specifically, academic research on the integration of social media during business-to-business sales processes of internationally operating firms is scant. Existing research does report the synergies generated when social media is integrated with other marketing tools into sales processes in business-to-consumers transactions (Kumar et al., 2016; Kumar, Choi, & Greene, 2017). Nevertheless, we also lack information from firms operating in international markets and with different cultural, administrative, and geographical characteristics, and diverse economic backgrounds (Ghemawat,

2001). Given the research in this area remains in its infancy, the current research adopts a grounded theory method based on data drawn from internationally operating small and medium-sized firms from Brazil, Finland, Italy, and Poland. Investigating whether there are boundary conditions to the integration of social media into existing communication methods opens important avenues for future research. Therefore, the last research question of the dissertation is:

Research question 3:

How are sales communication tools including social media used and integrated within the sales process of international firms operating in business-to-business markets?

The thesis responds to the three research questions through three research essays. These become the structure through which the research aim develops and research attention concerning specific issues is directed. The dissertation brings together the findings coming from the research essays and responds to the overall research problem. An overview of the three essays, their aims, and the theoretical lenses they build upon is presented in Table 1.



**Table 1.** Overview of the research essays

|   | <b>Essay 1</b>   | <b>Essay 2</b>   | <b>Essay 3</b>  |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Research objective</b>                                     | To gain initial an understanding of the ways entrepreneurial firms leverage social media during their internationalisation process and at particular junctures. Attention is focussed on the time dynamics of the use of social media and their relationship with the speed of internationalisation. | To understand the mechanisms through which international entrepreneurial ventures leverage and bundle their social media with those of their business partners during their internationalisation efforts. Also, to grasp what this means for the internationalisation process. | To understand the integration of social media in international sales processes of geographically and culturally distant firms. To grasp whether there are boundary conditions to the use of social media during international business-to-business sales processes. |
| <b>Research question</b>                                      | How are social media platforms used during the growth of an international new venture's operations in international markets?   | How does the use of social media enable entrepreneurial ventures to enter foreign networks, overcome liabilities associated with their foreign expansion, and extend penetration into foreign markets?   | How are sales communication tools including social media used and integrated within the sales process of international firms operating in business-to-business markets?   |
| <b>Research design</b>  | Single case-study  | Multiple case-study  | Grounded theory   |
| <b>Literature domains and theoretical lenses of the study</b> | International entrepreneurship<br>Network literature<br>Social media literature  | International entrepreneurship<br>Network literature<br>Internalisation theory<br>Social media literature  | International entrepreneurship<br>Sales process literature<br>International marketing literature<br>Multichannel marketing literature<br>Social media literature  |

## **1.4 Positioning and contribution of the study**

The main goal of this thesis is to understand how international entrepreneurial ventures use social media when entering and extending their penetration into foreign markets and when managing international business-to-business sales processes. Investigating international entrepreneurs means the main tenets will be international business and entrepreneurship.

This research looks at the use of social media during the internationalisation process of entrepreneurial firms mainly through a network approach (e.g. Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). In particular, through Essay 1, the study shows how entrepreneurs attain network embeddedness through weak and strong network ties (Granovetter, 1985), built by using social media platforms. In Essay 2, network literature is used to investigate how social media can be leveraged to attain structural embeddedness (Uzzi, 1997) and achieve a position of insidership within emerging and strategic networks (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Möller, 2013). In addition, internalisation theory is applied as a tenet to explain the governance mechanisms standing behind the use of social media during internationalisation. Accordingly, in Figure 1 that outlines the positioning of the study, international entrepreneurship is placed in the overlapping area between the International Business context and network literature.

In addition, the research looks at the use of social media when managing sales processes and the customer relationships generated from them. These phenomena are investigated in Essay 3 by accessing sales process literature. Moreover, the international context of the research – referring to the nature of the business sales transactions conducted in international markets by the investigated firms, which originate in geographically dispersed countries – accounts for the application of an international business context. Therefore the current research is also positioned in international marketing, that is, at the intersection of international business and sales literature.

The dissertation is therefore positioned at the junction of the three main literature domains: international business literature, network literature,

and sales process literature. Accordingly, in this dissertation I use constructs derived from the research domains of internationalisation (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), internalisation theory (Verbeke, Zargarzadeh & Osiyevskyy, 2014; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018), network literature (Granovetter, 1985; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009), and sales process literature (Dubinsky, 1980/1981). Literature dealing with social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) is constantly referenced throughout the three essays.

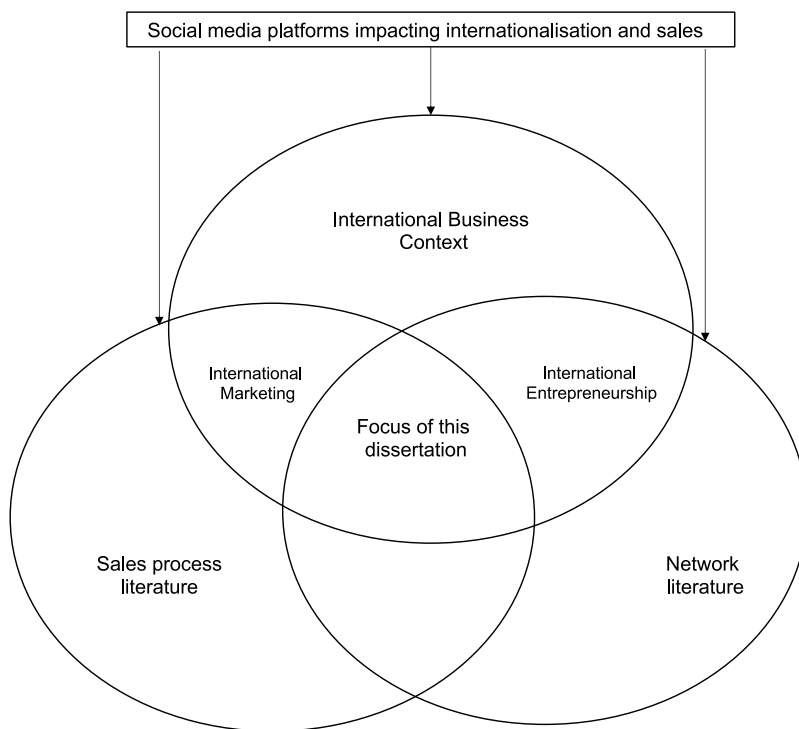
By analysing the use that entrepreneurs make of social media during their internationalisation processes and management of international sales, this study contributes to the field of international entrepreneurship (Oviatt & McDougall, 1995). Research looking at this phenomenon is still nascent, and the lack of studies thus justifies an approach that aims at responding to existing research gaps. In fact, previous studies have looked at the use of social media in the communication and marketing functions of entrepreneurs (Fischer & Reuber, 2011, 2014); however studies investigating their use during the internationalisation process are yet to be developed (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). The approach adopted in the current study means it can be embedded and therefore contribute to the existing stream of literature highlighting the importance of the use of internetbased technologies for the internationalisation of entrepreneurial firms (Moen, 2002; Arenius, Sasi, & Gabrielsson, 2005; Loane, 2006; Servais, Madsen & Rasmussen, 2007; Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Jean, 2013). Furthermore, by using internalisation as a theoretical lens through which to examine the governance mechanisms of social media use over time, the thesis challenges previous literature claiming classic international business theories (such as internalisation) are inappropriate to explain phenomena related to international entrepreneurial ventures (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Verbeke, Zargarzadeh & Osiyevskyy, 2014; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018). The approach extends research in international entrepreneurship and aims to expose avenues for further research on the blending of different theoretical standpoints, such as the implementation of the internalisation school in international entrepreneurship. Accordingly, there seems to be an opportunity for further theoretical development.

Secondly, this study contributes to the international entrepreneurship field of research by accessing network literature. By using theoretical constructs specific of network research, such as network embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), the study explains the ways through which entrepreneurial firms build weak and strong network ties along the internationalisation process with the help of social media platforms (Cf. Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). The study also highlights the supportive role that social media plays in helping firms become embedded in relevant networks of connections (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). In addition, by outlining how entrepreneurial firms use social media to build insidership within emerging and strategic networks in foreign markets (Möller, 2013), the study explains the mechanisms of social media use to derive learning from international partners and overcome liabilities connected with internationalisation (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004).

Thirdly, this research expands on sales process literature by examining the integration of social media to existing communication tools within the sales process of firms (Marshall, Moncrief & Lassk, 1999; Moncrief & Mashall, 2005; Moncrief, Marshall, Rudd & Lee, 2012). Moreover, by investigating firms operating in business-to-business markets, and that integrate social media into digital and traditional communication methods, the study complements literature on multichannel marketing and integrated marketing (Naik & Raman 2003; Naik & Peters 2009; Wiesel, Pauwels, & Arts, 2011), that has so far been unable to explain the integration of communication tools into business-to-business sales processes.

Finally, by looking at the use of social media during internationalisation and sales management processes, this study adopts a temporal approach, typical of investigations into phenomena that are dynamic over time, such as processes (Van de Ven, 1992; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). In doing so, the study adopts longitudinal data from firm-generated content over various social media platforms. This type of evidence represents a secondary source of information that is exempt from recall bias, is added on a real-time basis and is rich in nature. Therefore, by suggesting textual content coming from social media as a further source of empirical evidence, this dissertation enriches methodological approaches when collecting data in qualitative studies.

From a practical and managerial standpoint, the dissertation supports firms that are confronted with internationalisation needs and aspirations. Given the rapid changes in the infrastructures and habits of information and communication technology adoption, firms are constantly challenged with the implementation of social media tools. However, they are also often uncertain about their implementation when approaching and growing into international markets, as well as during international sales activities. Building on real-life empirical evidence, the dissertation aims to inform firms on the manner of social media implementation over time.



**Figure 1.** Positioning of the study

### **1.5 Description of the key concepts of the thesis**

In order to provide a clear understanding of the recurrent terms used in this study, this section defines the constructs and the abbreviations used for them. The key concepts of thesis are international entrepreneurs, the

internationalisation process, social media platforms, business-to-business and business-to-consumer transactions, and small and medium-sized firms.

*International entrepreneurs* are those actors characterised by exhibiting a strong degree of international entrepreneurship, defined by Oviatt and McDougall (2005, p. 540) as "... the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities across national borders to create future goods and services". This definition combines aspects of entrepreneurship theory, such as the firm's growth being the basis of entrepreneurial action (Shane & Venkatraman, 2000) and internationalisation.

*Internationalisation process.* The Uppsala school sees internationalisation as the process of a firm increasing its operations into foreign markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). A further definition is that from Welch and Luostarinen (1988) who conceptualise internationalisation as the outward movement of a firm (or multiple firms) in international markets. Besides being conceptualised as a process, internationalisation has also been intended through a stepwise approach, where the activities in international markets are intensified over time (e.g. Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Research dealing with fast internationalising firms such as born globals or international new ventures shows how some of the phases of the internationalisation process may be leapfrogged and therefore it demonstrates how the speed of internationalisation at inception for these firms is faster than in traditional internationalisation approaches (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; Madsen & Servais, 1997; Gabrielsson & Kirpalani, 2004).

*Social media platforms.* In this thesis the definition provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) is used, according to which social media are "a group of internetbased applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". Examples of commonly used social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Twitter.

*Business-to-Business (B2B).* Business-to-business refers to the nature of commercial transactions involving two businesses rather than a business and a consumer (e.g. business-to-consumer). These transactions usually happen at the wholesale level, rather than at the retailer one. Generally speaking, transactions within business markets are understood to have

higher dollar value since the nature of the transaction usually involves more highly priced goods and services, and purchases happen more frequently (Cf. OECD, 2000).

*Business-to-Consumer (B2C).* Business-to-consumer refers to the nature of commercial transactions involving a business organisation and a consumer. These transactions usually happen at the retailer level (Cf. OECD, 2000).

*Small and Medium-Sized firms (SMEs).* Many definitions of SMEs have arisen in the last years. In this study, the unifying definition provided by the European Commission is used at the time of data collection. The definition clarifies that small and medium-sized firms are those employing between 10 and 250 people and having a yearly turnover that does not exceed 50 million euros (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2013).

## **1.6 Research process and dissertation structure**

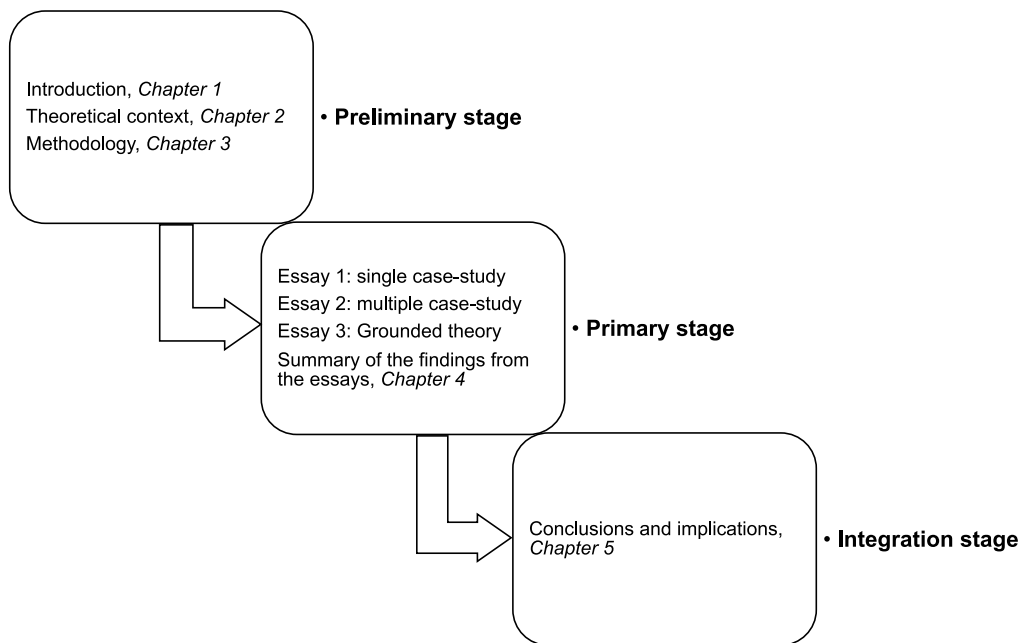
This study is structured into a process that involves three main stages: the preliminary stage, the primary stage, and the integration stage. Figure 2 illustrates the progression of these stages in detail.

The preliminary stage involves the preparation of the research process and includes the first three chapters of this dissertation. Chapter one introduces the research process by outlining the research background and the research aims; it formulates the research questions and objectives of the dissertation, and it explains the position of this research and the intended contributions. In chapter two, the main literature streams used in the dissertation process, including international entrepreneurship, network literature, sales process literature, and use of social media for business purposes are explained in detail. Chapter three explains the philosophical standpoints adopted when undertaking the research process and justifies the research methodologies adopted. Moreover, the empirical course of the research is explained by outlining techniques connected to data collection, data analysis and assuring the quality of the research.

The primary stage of the dissertation involves the collection of the three research essays and it provides a summary of the main research findings.

Essay 1 is single case-study research that approaches the first objective of the research process and opens avenues for continuation of the research in the field. Essay 2 and Essay 3 adopt different methodologies to pursue the research objectives and deeply investigate the research phenomenon. Chapter four collates the findings of the dissertation drawing from the empirical and theoretical implications of the three research essays.

The last stage of the thesis process is the integration stage. In this section, outlined in Chapter 5, the theoretical contributions of the thesis are discussed alongside the practical implications for practitioners. Lastly, the limitations of the study are outlined and opportunities for future research stemming from the analysed phenomena are suggested, which leads to the conclusion of the thesis.



**Figure 2.** Research process and structure of the dissertation



## 2 Theoretical context

### 2.1 International entrepreneurial ventures

Scholars of international entrepreneurship work at the intersection of international business research and entrepreneurship. Those scholars have observed that mainstream international business research is inappropriate to explain the behavioural traits of fast internationalising firms (Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018).

By anchoring their postulations on the observation of firm behaviour deviating from the traditional internationalisation patterns observed by early scholars of the phenomenon (see Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975; Johanson & Vahlne 1977; Luostarinen, 1979), Oviatt and McDougall developed the concept of the international new venture (INV) in 1994 and defined it as a "...business organization that, from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sale of outputs in multiple countries (1994: 49)". Since their seminal article, an increasing body of research has dealt with the internationalisation characteristics of these firms and has expanded the topic further (Coviello, 2006; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). Among the wide range of definitions referring to the same phenomenon, the born global firm is another commonly used term (Rennie, 1993; Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; Madsen, Rasmussen & Servais, 2000; Moen, 2002; Gabrielsson & Kirpalani, 2004). Besides behaving differently from traditional internationalising firms (Madsen & Servais, 1997), a distinctive characteristic of these ventures is to have a strong degree of international entrepreneurship, defined by Oviatt and McDougall (2005, p. 540) as "... the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities – across national borders – to create future goods and services". Thereby, the interchanging term of International Entrepreneurial Ventures.

International entrepreneurs leading INVs are characterised by being innovative, proactive and riskseeking (McDougall & Oviatt, 2000). When trying to pursue opportunities for early internationalisation and sustained

business performance in foreign markets, these entrepreneurs however often face limitations due to the smallness, newness, and foreignness of their enterprises (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). This means that when trying to sell products and services in foreign markets that are very different or far from their home ones, INVs experience a series of obstacles usually due to their lack of financial, technological, physical, and intangible resources because of their smallness (see Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Morris, 2001), their lack of reputation and legitimacy because of their newness (Stinchcombe, 1965), and their lack of understanding and information about the business environment of the target market because of their foreignness (Zaheer, 1995, 2002).

Earlier literature identifies networks as a way for international entrepreneurs to deal with such liabilities, and to succeed in international markets (Coviello, 2006; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). Another important factor determining the survival of international entrepreneurial ventures is the successful establishment of national and international sales. Investigations of their sales channel strategies report these firms either directly rely on their salesforce or deploy different channel partners (e.g. sales agents or international partners such as wholesalers or retailers), and the internet to various extents (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2011).

More recently, researchers in the field of international entrepreneurship started to pay attention to the role that the internet plays in sustaining the internationalisation efforts of the firm (Moen, 2002; Arenius, Sasi, & Gabrielsson, 2005; Loane, 2006; Servais, Madsen & Rasmussen, 2007). With the advance of innovations within the information and communications technology (ICT) domain, social media platforms have emerged as central tools that ever more businesses rely upon to support many of a firm's functions, such as marketing and sales, and in various business contexts (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). However, despite the increasing reliance of internationally operating firms on social media platforms, international business literature still lacks the theoretical development and empirical understanding that could advance the understanding of how international entrepreneurial ventures use social media to enter and expand in international networks and how they might be leveraged during sales activity.

This study therefore lays at the broad intersection of international business and sales literature. It investigates the phenomenon of the adoption of social media tools by international entrepreneurial ventures for purposes such as international market expansion and sales process management. Given the potential of social media tools to assist the internationalisation and sales processes of international entrepreneurial ventures (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013; Salo, 2017), international networks and sales process are used as literature streams to build further theoretical understanding on the topic of social media use by entrepreneurial ventures. The following two sections review extant research on networks and the sales process in international entrepreneurial ventures. These constitute an important baseline from which to investigate how social media is used by entrepreneurial ventures to become embedded in international networks during internationalisation and how the social media platforms are used during sales management processes.

### **2.1.1 International networks**

The concept of networks appears in diverse streams of research, uses different methodological analyses, and thus leads to a variety of definitions within social sciences. It is therefore complex to provide a single and universally accepted definition of networks that would bridge all the academic subareas in which networks are used as conceptual point of departure. Since this study uses networks as a perspective through which to analyse the use of social media in international entrepreneurial ventures, I adopt the approach that international entrepreneurship scholars have derived from the intersection of international business studies looking at social and industrial networks, and entrepreneurship studies looking at the role of the entrepreneur as a member and manager of network relationships (Jones & Coviello, 2005).

Accordingly, consistent with the view adopted by various international marketing (and purchasing) scholars, this thesis conceives of business networks as a bundle of relationships intertwining between a firm and its external partners, often embodied by suppliers, agents, customers, and similar connections (Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Chetty

& Agndal, 2007; Zhou et al., 2007). In this view, networks are seen as a set of nodes – represented by business units, their suppliers and buyers – and threads, embodied in the sets of relationships and business interchanges happening between them (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). In such a conceptualisation, the structure of the network becomes central, as well as the typology of the business relationships built between the various actors within the network (e.g. Uzzi, 1997; Gulati, 1998; Rowley et al., 2000).

Various actors present different levels of interaction among themselves, which has implications for the typology of relationships existing among several network members. The degree to which these actors are involved in a network is referred to as embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985). The level of embeddedness within a network can be high or low and it is referred from previous literature to as entailing strong or weak network ties. Close social relationships among network members with a high frequency of contact are depicted by strong ties; these links are represented by often pre-existing and almost historic relationships between the international entrepreneur and his/her social partners. Weak ties, on the other hand, involve relationships entailing lower volumes of time and emotional commitment among the network members (Granovetter, 1973, 1982; Larson & Starr, 1993; Walker, Kogut & Shan, 1997). Strong and weak ties have been found to improve a firm's ability to gather important resources that enable performance improvement (Batjargal, 2003).

Embeddedness is classified by Zukin and Di Maggio (1990) with respect to the social constructs underlying the phenomenon and to the degree to which social relations are related in the territory, which they refer to as structural embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). Internationalising firms particularly benefit from structural embeddedness, as it allows them to access important knowledge, opportunities, and linkages in foreign markets (Uzzi, 1997) and also enhances knowledge transfer and learning (Larson, 1992).

In international business and international entrepreneurship literature, network embeddedness is seen as a resource that firms can leverage during their foreign market expansion. The association of network theory with the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) is common in these fields as firms

tend to leverage network relations as valuable resources that help them to overcome constraints associated with their newness (Stinchcombe, 1965), size (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), and foreignness (Hymer, 1976; Zaheer 1995, 2002) in international markets. The relevance of network embeddedness for internationalising firms is particularly high when trying to gather knowledge on foreign markets and to identify and develop business opportunities (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Forsgren, Holm & Johanson, 2015; Forsgren, 2016).

In the revised version of the Uppsala internationalisation process model, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) explain how the barriers to internationalisation are associated with the firm's insidership or outsidership position within foreign business networks. The authors theorise that when a company attempts to enter a foreign market where it does not have a "relevant network position, it will suffer from the 'liability of outsidership' and foreignness, and foreignness presumably complicates the process of becoming an insider" (2009:1415). To overcome this further liability, it is thus crucial for internationalising firms to become embedded in foreign networks that earlier literature refers to as emerging, and to maintain a position of embeddedness within strategic ones (see Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Möller, 2013). Emerging networks refer to a new foreign set of relationships for the firm, which are also difficult to manage. Firms trying to embed themselves in emerging networks face a situation where the roles and tasks of the different organisations are not yet agreed upon or distributed. On the other hand, strategic networks are intentionally planned and tend to appear in more mature phases of the internationalisation process (Möller, 2013).

Network embeddedness, a theoretical construct originating in network literature, thus becomes key to international entrepreneurial ventures because it can explain firms' success during internationalisation. However, this centrality needs to be evaluated by scholars in tandem with ICT and web innovation. In fact, the web infrastructure typical of the internet provides online users, and therefore firms, with new tools and mechanisms through which it is possible to build and extend business relationships. Therefore, owing to web-based communication and social interactions that are typical of social media platforms, international entrepreneurial firms

have the possibility to attain network embeddedness (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of academic research that looks at the mechanisms of social media use by entrepreneurial ventures to generate and strengthen their insidership position within their international networks.

The next section outlines the second main literature stream used in this dissertation: the sales process literature, which will be followed by an overview of social media platforms literature and its application within the international business and sales domains.

### **2.1.2 Sales process**

Although there is an overall need to analyse sales processes within internationally operating firms, researchers need to enhance their understanding of sales process management especially within international entrepreneurial ventures, which are known to face various limitations. In fact, in these firms, a delay in overcoming liabilities of newness, size, and foreignness and the difficulties faced in initiating sales can create negative consequential effects that snowball and threaten the firms' survival in the long run (see Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Knight & Liesch, 2016). The current research on the use of social media as sales channels for international entrepreneurial ventures is scarce, and particularly fragmented when it comes to business-to-business sales transactions. Therefore, this dissertation integrates sales process literature and business sales literature within the international business domain to advance the underdeveloped research area of social media as sales tools for international entrepreneurial ventures operating in business markets.

The conceptualisation of the sales process has its roots in the definition provided by Dubinsky (1980/1981) and its seven steps of selling: prospecting, preapproach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, closing, and follow-up. These phases have become a paradigm of the sales discipline and highlighted firmlevel issues and sales force tasks. However, over the years, researchers emphasised relationship selling approaches that elevate the centrality of sellers and buyers over the act of selling per se (see Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Such an approach is particularly relevant in

business-to-business selling, where the collaborative nature of the relationship is stronger and there is a general increase in the adaptation of sales offers to customer needs (Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj, 2007; Terho, Eggert, Haas & Ulaga, 2015; Viio & Grönroos, 2014, 2016). In firm-to-firm sales, those prospects that are potential buyers are converted into paying customers through business negotiations. After the sales have been closed, the firm tries to retain customers through post-sales activities. According to sales literature, there are two customer typologies: the transactional when the business relationship yields single and sporadic sales or the strategic when repeated sales result. The latter type of customer are also often referred to as key accounts and are customers with whom the firm sees the potential of future business relationships. It therefore behaves strategically so to offer quantifiable improvement of products and services or provides assistance perhaps even through the employment of dedicated personnel such as key account managers (McDonald, Millman & Rogers 1997; Rogers, 2011; Homburg, Schäfer, & Schneider 2012; Davies & Ryals 2014).

The range of selling activities implemented daily by salespeople can be improved by the use of digital technologies and digital communication tools such as emails, internet, voicemails, fax, websites, newsletters, and audio-video conference tools, among others, that directly influence a firm's performance. These tools are juxtaposed with existing sales communication tools involving person-to-person interaction that does not involve technology. Accordingly, the innovative tools found within ICT are transformative factors having the power to catalyse change to the traditional seven steps of selling elaborated by Dubinsky (see Marshall et al., 1999; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). In a recent article, Paschen, Wilson, and Ferreira (2020) outline the changes brought by the use of artificial intelligence on the business-to-business sales process.

However, despite recent literature urging the need to revise and progress the sales process phases and their conceptualisation, by taking into consideration technological evolution, information on the topic remains scant. This is particularly true when considering the innovation and changes brought by social media tools within the sales function of firms

(Andzulis, Panagopoulos & Rapp, 2012; Dixon & Tanner 2012; Rodrigues, Ajjan & Peterson, 2016).

Specifically, given the potential that social media implementation has on the entire sales process and on a firm's performance, research still needs to advance the theoretical understanding of how these innovative communication tools can be integrated into traditional sales communication methods to benefit the entire sales process (Rapp et al., 2013; Salo, 2017). Research is particularly urgent within firms operating in international business-to-business markets, which have been found to be slower to adopt social media tools than business-to-consumer companies, due to the typically large deals involved and greater asset specificity of the products, which call for highly involved sales people (see Palmatier et al. 2008; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011). Accordingly, such understanding merits deeper analysis especially in consideration of the positive effects that social media has on overcoming small firms' financial liabilities, and bearing in mind the impact that selling in an international context may have on the process itself.

## **2.2 Social media platforms**

Social media has been studied in many research fields including those of information systems, media and communication, and political relationships. Such a variety of contexts of adoption and streams of research is mirrored in a proliferation of definitions. However, in this thesis I use the currently most referred and all-encompassing definition provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61), who conceptualise social media as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content."

Practical examples of popular social media platforms currently used are Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. What makes social media different from traditional technologies based on Web 1.0, such as emails and websites, is mainly its interactive, participatory



and public nature based on mobile and web-based platforms, where the content is generated, amended, and co-created by users (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi & Mäläskä, 2015). Accordingly, with Web 1.0 digital technologies the communication is static, and information is initiated and transmitted to the web audience by the page owners, without the possibility of interaction with its users. On the other hand, communicating via social media entails the creation and channelling of information being reciprocal. A more participatory and democratic nature characterises social media as the form allows users to interact, exchange opinions, review and recommend products and services, and modify content (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

From a business perspective, these characteristics have strong potential implications. Firms have an unprecedented opportunity to reach a diverse audience both in terms of gender and age, but also in terms of national or international geographical distance. These platforms are constantly available to a global audience, usually costfree or inexpensively, and are readily intelligible to the users, who are empowered by expressing opinions, liking, sharing with other users and recommending various sites. Moreover, the users' virtual engagement and interaction can be accessed by companies in a non-intrusive way, and firms have the opportunity to promote themselves without investing large sums as is generally required with advertising on non-virtual media (Andzulis, Panagopoulos & Rapp, 2012; Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd & Lee, 2012; Dehghani & Tumer, 2015). This is particularly relevant for internationalising SMEs, which when facing limited financial resources need to make tradeoffs between investments in research and development and marketing, which often yield to save on marketing costs (Freeman, Edwards & Schroeder, 2006; Haapanen, Juntunen & Juntunen, 2016). Studies in entrepreneurship showed how social media enhances opportunities for entrepreneurial firms to engage in social interactions and to communicate product characteristics, therefore helping them to reduce audience uncertainty about the firm and differentiate themselves from competitors (Fischer & Reuber, 2011, 2014). Overall, the firm's frequent social media use and its presence on numerous platforms are likely to trigger microblogging word-of-mouth through which companies can acquire

referrals for future sales and that supports early product adoption and improves profitability (Godes, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz & Feldhaus, 2015).

In the business-to-business context, social media are used as communication tools to reach different groups of stakeholders, increase interaction with customers, support sales and build firms' brands, and have been found to affect the overall communication and business performance of SMEs (Wang, Pauleen & Zhang 2016; Andersson & Wickström, 2017).

However, despite the great potential that social media characteristics of affordability and global online connectivity have on many of a firm's functions, research has yet to investigate their implications with respect to foreign market expansion and the business-to-business sales process of international entrepreneurial ventures. I believe this is of interest to current theoretical discourse within international business and sales literature, as digital technology innovations have the potential to rebuild internationalisation and sales processes.

### **2.2.1 Social media platforms in sales**

Business practice shows how firms are increasingly implementing social media tools in many of their internal and external functions. Scholars within the marketing and sales discipline have recently tried to advance theoretical knowledge on the topic and have established the centrality of these tools in different business contexts (Lamberton & Stephen 2016). For instance, Hollebeek (2019) shows how industrial marketing practitioners use social media to engage their business customers. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) map out the mechanisms through which content marketing done through social media effectively creates sales leads and wins sales opportunities for business sales professionals. In a study looking at the new product development performance of manufacturing firms, Chirumalla, Oghazi, and Parida (2019) outline the social media engagement strategies that facilitate improved marketing and research and development interfaces.

Despite being widely used, social media methods are still implemented in tandem with traditional sales communication methods such as person-to-person sales, and with digital technologies based on Web 1.0 (e.g. emails and newsletters). This means firms experience fragmentation in the

selection of sales tools when trying to engage with prospects and create value for the firm. Scholars in the marketing and sales discipline have tackled this issue mainly by investigating firms operating in business-to-consumer markets. In this domain, particular attention has been paid to the integration of the marketing content generated by firms on social media, in television advertisements, and email communications and the possible effects on various customer metrics (Kumar et al., 2016). Another study by Kumar, Choi and Greene (2017) has extended the awareness of the synergistic effects of social media and traditional marketing methods on brand sales, and revealed their effectiveness is time varying. Nevertheless, despite light being shed on the potential impact of social media on brand building and customer acquisition, and the thorough examination of the consumer's path to making a purchase (Srinivasan, Rutz & Pauwels 2016; de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang 2017), researchers have yet to extend the understanding of the integration of social media tools within the sales process of firms operating within business markets.

A first attempt to fill that gap is represented by a study comparing firms operating in business-to-consumer and business-to-business markets that showed how practitioners operating in business markets tend to demonstrate a professional use of social media tools during some of the sales process phases (Moore, 2013). Researchers have also focussed on the analysis of this usage in distinct phases of the sales process, such as key account management, for customer segmentation purposes (Lacoste, 2016; Müller, Pommeranz, Weisser & Voigt, 2018), and with respect to the sales-tasks and job function of salespeople (Itani, Agnihotri & Dingus 2017).

Scholars have also found social media directly benefits the sales performance and overall firm performance of business-to-business ventures (Rodriguez, Peterson & Krishnan, 2012; Rapp et al., 2013); particularly of organisations with a large sales force (more than 500 employees) (Rodriguez, Ajjan & Peterson, 2016). The extant theoretical and empirical evidence testifies for the advantages brought by social media use in the sales function of business firms. Nevertheless, knowledge of how these firms integrate social media into existing sales communication methods during the sales process is limited and calls for further conceptual and empirical

studies. Studies looking at how social media are deployed by small and medium-sized internationally operating firms is scarce and the topic warrants further academic attention.

### **2.2.2 Social media platforms in the internationalisation process**

As mentioned above, despite a growing body of literature looking at social media use in many of a firm's functions, knowledge of how such use affects the firms' internationalisation process and consequential growth into foreign markets remains patchy.

The performance of Spanish export-oriented firms has been found to improve when managerial teams are highly involved in social media use in business operations (Alarcón-del-Amo, Rialp-Criado & Rialp-Criado, 2018). Moreover, by analysing the use of LinkedIn by international entrepreneurs, Sigfusson and Chetty (2013) show how the use of social media can facilitate entrepreneurs becoming part of a wide online network, and how thanks to an improved communication, it allows entrepreneurs to become recognised by network members and to build trust with them. This research is of fundamental importance as it represents a bridge between literature dealing with social media and international networks. Owing to the thorough analysis of the strength of the ties (Granovetter, 1973) built when using social media to enter virtual online networks, the authors disclose how international entrepreneurs acquire relevant capabilities and resources to effectively use when entering new foreign markets and subsequently overcome the liability of outsidership. Although this abovementioned research increases our understanding of how firms identify opportunities and bridge relationship gaps with potential international business partners through social media, knowledge on how this position of insidership is built within national and foreign networks throughout the internationalisation process is still lacking.

Accordingly, this dissertation undertakes research to obtain a deeper and better understanding of how international entrepreneurial ventures use social media when approaching foreign market entry and development challenges. I pay particular attention to how firms deploy social media tools to become embedded in international emerging networks and to the mechanisms standing behind the further embeddedness within strategic networks.

# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Philosophical considerations

When approaching and initiating the research process, I set my research philosophy and the research paradigms to which I intended to adhere. This is an important step in research as it constitutes the baseline for the researcher to perceive reality. Research paradigms are the researcher's basic belief systems that guide the formulation of research questions and the research process itself. Guba and Lincoln (1994: 107) refer to paradigms as axiomatic systems of beliefs, meaning that they are "accepted simply on faith (however well-argued)" based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Ontology refers to the relationship between the real nature of the world in terms of how things are and work in reality, and their perception in the eyes of the researcher and what can be known about them. Epistemology refers to the relationship between the reality and the researcher who attempts to gather knowledge about it. Methodology refers to the techniques through which the researcher can obtain knowledge of the reality he/she believes can be known and its interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bryman, 2004).

Positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism represent the four conflicting paradigms described by Guba and Lincoln (1994: 109). In positivism, the main ontological premise is naïve realism and it means that reality exists and is driven by natural laws and cause-effect mechanisms. The epistemological standpoint in this paradigm is represented by objectivism and it views the researcher and the reality as independent identities that cannot be influenced by the other. The methodology is experimental, and is based on quantitative techniques aiming to state and verify questions and hypotheses about reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In post-positivism, the ontological stance is critical realism. This entails reality being only partially understood by the researcher who has limited intellectual capabilities that do not match the complex reality. This translates in research results that are probably true and subject to falsification.

The epistemological standpoint is based on modified objectivism, in which the ideal relationship between the researcher and the reality would be one of independence; however, this is hard to achieve. The methodological part is then reflected in a natural setting such as experiments, and it aims to reject more than verify hypotheses through falsification. In post-positivism both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are used (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The ontological standpoint of critical theory is historical realism. This suggests that the reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values into structures that researchers consider to be real. Hence, the epistemology of this paradigm resides in subjectivism, and it entails the vision and the values of the researcher influencing the findings, establishing the origin of valuemmediated knowledge. Given the interdependence between the reality and the researcher, qualitative methods entailing dialogue such as interviews are generally used (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

When approaching my research process, and the research questions driving it, I believe that the paradigm on which this dissertation is based, is the fourth form described by Guba and Lincoln (1994) and referred to as constructivism. In fact, given the novelty and the lack of both empirical and theoretical knowledge regarding the use of social media tools in the internationalisation and sales processes of international entrepreneurial ventures, this thesis aims to build theory and extending the existing knowledge on the topic. The ontological standpoint of constructivism is relativism that implies that local and specifically constructed realities exist, and that reality is socially constructed by the individual. The epistemological standpoint is transactional and subjectivist, which means that there is an ongoing interaction between the phenomenon being investigated and the researcher. This is reflected in the adoption of qualitative methodology such as grounded theory, where results are generated during the research process, interpreted through hermeneutical techniques, and are compared, contrasted, and verified through dialectical interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this thesis, I accumulated knowledge according to the constructivist paradigm, meaning through the creation of informed

constructions and the transfer of detailed information regarding phenomenological experiences (e.g. information gathered through interviews). I intended to seek and unveil a detailed understanding of the phenomenon of social media use in international entrepreneurial ventures in different contexts and to interpret the results from the respondents' perspectives, rather than trying to reveal cause-effect relationships in the phenomena analysed.

### **3.2 Research approach**

Research in business is based on three main logics of inference: deduction, abduction, and induction. The core difference in these research approaches lays in the linkages between empirical observations and theory, and which of these is the main driver of the research process (Bryman, 2004).

The deductive logic of inference is mainly used by researchers adopting the positivist and post-positivist paradigms and carrying the research process through quantitative methodologies. Deduction is based on the assumption that an existing theory is strong and aims to validate it through the formulation of hypotheses. These are then tested through quantitative data. The generation of findings validates or rejects the initial theoretical framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bryman, 2004).

In the abductive logic of inference, the starting point is the understanding of existing theories which represent the basis for the data collection. The researcher leverages indepth information drawn from diverse and rich data sources and gathers evidence about the analysed phenomenon and its context. This step enables the development and expansion of the existing theory. Therefore, data and theory are continuously combined through iterative processes aiming at providing the best explanation of existing and accepted facts. This approach makes it possible to match theory and reality, and then to develop new theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Inductive studies relate to the purpose of generating new theory from practice. Accordingly, they start with a set of cumulative empirical observations, and the analysis of the emerging patterns of behaviours, facts, and

events intending to formulate theoretical assumptions or propositions. Qualitative studies based on the constructivist paradigm progress through an inductive logic of inference (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

This dissertation and the essays in it follow an inductive research approach adhering to the constructivist paradigm. All three essays, in fact, attempt to explore and develop theory on the underresearched phenomenon of social media use in international entrepreneurial ventures. In Essay 1 and Essay 2, the inductive nature of the research is presented in an exploratory single case-study and an exploratory multiple case-study respectively. When undertaking case-study research, my aim is to use rich and detailed empirical evidence dealing with a nascent and therefore overlooked phenomenon, to build new theory, rather than to test it, and to provide a holistic view of the phenomenon under analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1989, 2009; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). In Essay 3, I use the grounded theory method to build new understanding to bridge sales process and social media literature, thus offering a theoretical framework capable of guiding future studies looking at social media use within entrepreneurial international small and medium-sized firms.

### **3.3 Research methods and design**

When selecting the methodology driving the development of this dissertation, it was important to look at the nature of the research questions and the available knowledge regarding the topic. Social media tools are web-based platforms that have been integral parts of the world for over a decade (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, despite recent research attempts looking at their usage in the marketing function of firms in particular, knowledge of how and why these tools are used in the internationalisation and sales efforts of international entrepreneurial ventures is lacking.

Accordingly, following the articulation of the research questions of this thesis (see sub-chapter 1.3), I consistently followed a qualitative approach that tackled all the relevant sub-questions related to my PhD research. My qualitative approach mainly aims to assemble empirical evidence to develop



new theoretical insights on the research topic, rather than to test hypotheses or propositions. In fact, I believe that given the scarcity of theoretical understanding on the use of social media in international entrepreneurial ventures, it would have been premature and therefore risky to trying to analyse causal relationships between entrepreneurial ventures and their use of social media within different contexts before having developed a sound theoretical understanding of the phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore, the adoption of a qualitative methodology during all the phases of the research process helped me to achieve the main purpose of this research that was to understand how and why social media tools are used during the international expansion and for the international sales of international entrepreneurial ventures. By adopting case-study research in Essay 1 and Essay 2 and a grounded theory method in Essay 3, I explored the phenomena through a dialectical approach with the main informants, which allowed me to build theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989). In the next section, I examine in detail the case study and the grounded theory research designs.

### **3.3.1 Case-study research design**

The case-study approach is a qualitative research method that involves the empirical investigation of phenomena and situations embedded in real life contexts through the use of multiple sources (see Robson, 2002). When gathering empirical evidence, various methods such as interviews, observations, and archives can be used to collect data.

A case study is particularly appropriate to answer how and why questions, so providing a holistic view of the investigated phenomenon (Yin, 1989, 2009). Furthermore, the case-study approach is appropriate for the examination of new topics, given its likelihood of resulting in theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, using a case-study research design, it is also possible to provide systematic descriptions and theory-testing, alongside theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989).

As a matter of fact, and in spite of an increased academic interest in social media adoption, there is little research on how social media tools are used by international entrepreneurial ventures in their foreign market expansion. Overall, by adopting an exploratory case-study method, I was able

to capture the complex nature of network relationships between firms and their international partners and the use of social media to build network embeddedness over time (Yin, 1994; 2004). Therefore, this thesis mainly uses a case-study research design to build new theoretical insights in this under-researched area.

Given the novelty of the phenomenon and the exploratory nature of the research question, in Essay 1, that is the first of my PhD and academic career, I use a single-case study approach. This helped me establish the role of social media and other networking methods during the internationalisation process of an INV (Yin, 2009). Choosing a single-case study looking at the internationalisation process of the firm shows relevance laying in the possibility of capturing dynamism and revealing the very dynamic nature of the evolution of firms' relationships during time (Yin, 1994, 2004; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Single case-studies have also been found to be helpful in acquiring an improved and deeper understanding of organisational processes (Doz, 2011; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & Van de Ven, 2013). The case-study approach provides retrospective and realtime data, which fit the description of firm internationalisation well. In fact, studies stemming from process theories, such as the internationalisation process of international entrepreneurial ventures, should include process data (Welch & Paaivilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014).

For Essay 2, I chose an exploratory multiple case-study relying on diverse and rich data sources drawn from interviews and directly from information generated from social media platforms. The choice of this method in this research setting allowed me to gather evidence about the phenomenon analysed and to account for contextual and country-specific characteristic, in fact I conduct a cross-case analysis in firms from different countries (Yin, 1994; 2004; Ghauri, 2004).

### **3.3.2 Grounded theory research approach**

Since qualitative studies have been found to be particularly useful in researching new topic areas within the domain of international marketing (Sinkovics, Penz & Ghauri, 2005), in Essay 3 I adopted a grounded theory approach.

The baseline of grounded theory is that in order to theoretically enrich a research area where knowledge is not yet fully developed, and the topic is relatively new, the researcher can obtain data from informed respondents who have experience in the field (Goulding, 2002). Through the dialectical interchange that the researcher has with the informants, he/she reaches a deeper understanding of the subject of enquiry that helps add to existing literature and concepts or provide new theoretical understanding in newer research areas, where theory is yet to be developed. Glaser (1994) describes the generation of grounded theory as being: (i) discovery-based, in the sense that it is founded on the blending of the review of previous literature, the researcher's own standpoint, and the interviews with the knowledgeable informants; (ii) based on a broad classification of ideas and concepts reflecting the state of the art in the research field under investigation; (iii) reliant on the continuous comparison of research ideas, empirical evidence, and existing theory. This final step particularly highlights the characteristic of grounded theory being based on an iterative process between theory and data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **3.4 Data collection and analysis**

The empirical data collected for this dissertation include qualitative interviews with different informants and datasets of secondary data. I believe the data to be unique as the essays do not report overlapping cases. The design of the study is longitudinal. Interviews with staff from the 12 firms were collected over three years spanning 2016 until 2019, whereas I tried to gather information from knowledgeable informants on more than one occasion when possible, and let time pass between one interview and the other so to understand whether dynamism in the internationalisation process had manifested together with change in the adoption of social media platforms over time

In the following two sub-sections, I present an overview of the data collection and data analysis processes for the three essays contained in this dissertation. For confidentiality reasons and following agreement between

the firms' representatives and myself, the original names of the firms have been coded in the essays and in the thesis. In the dissertation, I refer to them as Firms 1–12.

### **3.4.1 Essay 1 and Essay 2**

I collected data for Essay 1 and Essay 2 separately. In both single and multiple case-studies, the firms were purposefully selected on the basis of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), according to criteria and groundings that are described in detail below.

In Essay 1, in order to capture the time dynamics of the use of social media, I followed Guesalaga (2016) who recommends analysing the phenomenon in one company, rather than in many. Therefore, I tried to gather indepth knowledge of the processual nature of time dynamics by designing a single case-study that examines the same case firm at different moments in its internationalisation process (Yin, 2009). The firm for this study was selected from an international database listing internationally operating firms according to their country of origin and foreign markets served. I chose a firm from Italy, as in this country the propensity towards the adoption of web-related technologies seems to be lower compared to that of other European countries (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/desi>). Through this selection, I aimed at possibly gathering counterintuitive findings to my initial speculations. Besides being Italian, the firm had to be an INV according to the definition by Oviatt and McDougall (1994:49); it had to be somewhat advanced in its internationalisation process, to facilitate gathering data on different stages of the firm's development and to reveal the processual nature of internationalisation; it had to use social media, online applications and traditional networking means during its foreign market expansion; finally it had to be a firm commercialising a software-based service, so to connect the research to other studies in the field (Coviello, 2006; Sharma & Blomstermo, 2003; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). The selection process ended with the identification of Firm 1. I provide a brief description of all the firms under analysis in this dissertation in the sub-chapter 3.4.3).

The data collection involved the integration of primary information harvested through a personal interview and repeated communication with the CEO and founder of the firm with extensive secondary data coming from the company's website, various posts on social media platforms, and the company's blog. As a whole, the dataset covered the entire history of the firm. During the interview, I sought to thoroughly examine the topic the main unit of analysis being the use of social media to access and activate network connections in order to accelerate the speed of international growth of the firm.

In Essay 2, I followed a multiple-case study method, where I purposefully selected three international entrepreneurial ventures that also accorded with the definition of an INV. When selecting the firms, the main driver was the desire to gather empirical evidence from small and open economies (SMOPECs), where internationalisation is essential for growth given the limited size of the internal market (see Luostarinen & Gabrielsson, 2006; Chetty, Ojala & Leppäaho, 2015), hence the selection of three firms from Finland, New Zealand, and Sweden. In this study, I focussed on a single manufacturing context (gin distilleries) to control for industry effects and offer a detailed understanding of the phenomena. This choice connects the study to previous research in the field, but it extends the scope to firms producing tangible goods, whereas earlier research has generally put the spotlight on firms commercialising services and intangible goods (Coviello, 2006; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013; Chetty, Ojala & Leppäaho, 2015). Moreover, by choosing those very countries, I introduced variations in the characteristics of the firms. In fact, a notable difference in the firms selected was the legislation in their home country relating to the sale and consumption of alcohol, in that Finland and Sweden have stateowned alcohol monopolies. This could have led to different findings when looking at social media use and online advertisement. The peculiar traits that the firms had to show in order to be included in the study were: being entrepreneurial in nature, according to the definition of entrepreneurship by Shane and Venkataraman (2000); they had to aim at international expansion and at extension of their operations into foreign markets, therefore showing a continuous pursuit of international business opportunities aiming for growth (Oviatt

& McDougall, 2005; Fischer & Reuber, 2014); lastly, I wanted the founding entrepreneurs to be actively involved in the firms' business. The selection process ended with the choice of Firm 2, Firm 3, and Firm 4 whose description is included in the sub-chapter 3.4.4.

The data collection process for Essay 2 involved gathering information from primary and secondary sources. Face-to-face interviews with the CEOs, who also represented the founding entrepreneurs of each firm were my primary sources of information. As they were involved since the foundation of the firm, I believed these would be the most knowledgeable informants to interview to understand and explore the use of social media for the internationalisation of entrepreneurial ventures. In addition, in Firm 3 and Firm 4, the informants were the only people directly involved with the use of social media; the situation was different in Firm 2 that had hired a marketing manager, who I also interviewed. I conducted two rounds of semistructured interviews, which lasted 110 minutes on average. However, when in the case of Firm 4, it was not possible to have a second interview, I clarified uncertain issues through an extended exchange of emails with the CEO. A period of three months separated the first and the second rounds of interviews and this helped the researcher to understand whether there was any change in the analysed phenomena. During the interviews I was supported by an interview guide that outlined macro-topical areas and made sure that the information was consistently covered across all the case-firms. The secondary sources of information for Essay 2 constituted a collection of all the firm-generated textual communication over Facebook and Instagram, the social media platforms most frequently used by these three companies. The collection of secondary data yielded a total of 3908 social media posts, resulting in 229 single-spaced pages once transcribed. This body of empirical evidence helped to illuminate the firms' use of these platforms over time and its approach to international markets, by providing longitudinal examples of the dynamism of the internationalisation process.

In the data analysis of Essay1 and Essay 2, I followed a qualitative content analysis approach as in Miles and Huberman (1994), and structured the analysis into three main phases: (i) data reduction, (ii) data displays,

and (iii) conclusion-drawing/verification. I reduced data coming from different sources of information (primary and secondary) until the main themes and constructs under investigations in the two essays emerged (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). Following Corbin and Strauss (2014), I used open thematic content analysis to code the data coming from the interviews. As both Essay 1 and Essay 2 looked at the history of the firms in a longitudinal fashion through the lenses of network theory and the internationalisation process of the firm, I developed several frameworks. These graphical illustrations helped place the main events relating to the firms' foreign market entry and related use of social media tools on a timeline base. I adopted this process for all the material gathered and elicited common or diverging patterns of the use of social media during the internationalisation of the firms under investigation. Lastly, to assist drawing conclusions, I organised the findings into a final table that helped build an overall understanding of the phenomena. In the multiple case-study, I eventually conducted a cross-case analysis (Ghauri, 2004) that highlights patterns of use of social media in foreign market expansion within the analysed firms.

### **3.4.2 Essay 3**

When starting to investigate my third research question (see sub-chapter 1.3), I noticed that theoretical knowledge on the use of social media during international business-to-business sales processes was scarce. Therefore, I decided to follow a grounded theory approach to collect and analyse empirical data on the topic. My aim was to gather knowledge that I could inductively use to build a new theoretical understanding (Goulding, 2002). I started my empirical investigation by conducting two pilot interviews with two internationally operating small and medium-sized firms from Finland. Through these interviews, which I did not ultimately include in the final sample of firms analysed in Essay 3, I further clarified my research question and the main themes to be investigated during the research process.

To pinpoint the firms that would be the object of study, I used theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). I believed the study would benefit from the inclusion of entrepreneurial small and medium-sized firms, (which according to the European Commission definition have between 10

and 250 employees), operating in business-to-business markets, as studies in the field are lacking, and that used social media, digital, and traditional sales communication tools during their sales processes. In addition, I wanted these firms to operate in the service industry, as earlier studies showed that manufacturing firms are reluctant adopters of internet-based sales communication tools due to the characteristics of the product commercialised, production processes, and customer preferences (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2011). To enhance generalizability, I selected eight firms from Finland, Italy, Poland, and Brazil, following the principle of appropriateness and access to informationrich companies (see Fletcher, Zhao, Plakoyiannaki, & Buck, 2018). By following a “polar type” approach when selecting these firms (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), I sought to elicit contrasting patterns and counterintuitive findings, whereas these countries present different levels of economic development yet demonstrate a propensity for technological adoption. Moreover, by selecting firms from different countries I sought a richness from the data that would not be possible if I had selected a domestic sample.

The data collection phase started by gathering primary sources of information through a round of indepth semi-structured interviews with sales directors and marketing managers of six firms from Finland, Italy, and Poland. I began the interviews by asking general questions about the company; I then introduced more complex questions regarding the topic investigated, and I let the informants talk in an open-ended way. However, whenever I felt that the answer provided was not clear, I asked the informants for clarification. In order to cover all the relevant topics during the interviews, I relied on an interview framework that helped ensure my questioning remained consistent. I subsequently conducted a second round of interviews with the firms’ CEOs or the most knowledgeable employee available. This step allowed my research to be longitudinal (Gebhardt, Carpenter & Sherry, 2006). I further collected secondary data from different sources such as press releases, archival information, and social media content to triangulate my results (Eisenhardt, 1989). During the preliminary data analysis, I noticed that important differences appeared in the pattern of social media use during the international business-to-business



sales process of these firms, and I decided to add two firms from Brazil to the sample and expand the contextual factors influencing the phenomenon being investigated. Altogether the data collection yielded more than 12 hours of transcribed interviews with 11 different informants across the eight firms investigated.

For the data analysis, I followed a grounded theory development approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), whereas I iteratively linked the empirical evidence gathered from primary and secondary sources of information to previous literature in the field. Through this method, three main phases of an international business-to-business sales process emerged. Through repetitive contact with the informants, the second round of interviews, and the addition of the last two firms from Brazil, I was able to reach saturation of information and acquire a deep understanding related to the use of social media and other communication tools during the sales process of service SMEs operating in business-to-business markets. I was therefore able to build a theoretical framework explaining the integration of sales communication tools in the sales process of international SMEs.

### **3.4.3 Description of the firms investigated in the essays**

In this section, I provide a brief description of the firms used in the three essays. The sub-chapter ends with a table summarising the main characteristics of these firms.

#### **Essay 1**

Firm 1 is an Italian software provider commercialising a customer relationship management (CRM) program that enables the automation of the sales force through the simplification of sales networks management and sales activities. It was established in 2013 by two people with an academic background in computer science and an entrepreneur with managerial experience in a multinational ICT firm. The firm deliberately commenced international activity immediately after it was founded and now serves customers in more than 100 countries.

## **Essay 2**

Firm 2 is a Finnish gin distillery, established in 2012 by five entrepreneurs from different backgrounds and without previous entrepreneurial experience. The firm internationalised in 2014, as soon as the production process of the gin was completed. It immediately reached global markets thanks to awards won for the quality of the gin produced. Selling in global markets was nevertheless necessary given the small size of the internal market and the high taxes on alcoholic beverages imposed by the state-owned monopoly. The firm currently sells in 26 countries.

Firm 3 is a gin distillery from New Zealand. It was established in 2015 by two brothers with experience in the wine and spirits industry. The firm represents the first entrepreneurial venture of the two founders who produce a gin with particular olfactory characteristics derived from the native botanicals of New Zealand used in the distillation process. The firm has sold internationally since 2016, however its operations are limited to three foreign markets.

Firm 4 is a gin distillery firm from Sweden. The firm was established in 2011 by an entrepreneur with extensive experience in the bar industry in the UK and a passion for gin-making techniques. The firm internationalised its operations three months after the product was ready in 2012, and having won prizes for the quality of the gin. The firm currently operates in 25 countries.

## **Essay 3**

Firm 5 was founded in Finland by two entrepreneurs, one of whom had previous professional consultancy experience, and the other being a graphic designer for over 20 years. The firm offers digital banking and financial technology services to entrepreneurs. It operates in three foreign markets and is currently expanding in another two. The foreign expansion process is however limited to European countries.

Firm 6 was founded in Finland by a team comprising the current CEO and two software developers. The firm offers an app-based service that enables restaurants to dispose of food surpluses daily by offering the surplus to consumers who then have the opportunity to buy quality food from

restaurants at an affordable price. The firm internationalised immediately after its inception and it now operates in seven European countries.

Firm 7 was established in Italy by three founders: an architect having legal background, a software programmer and a sales professional. The firm delivers online advertising campaigns to international brands across a wide range of industries. The firm currently operates in more than 80 countries, where besides having branches it also relies on independent sales agents.

Firm 8 was established in Italy in 2010 by a university graduate in the arts field with previous business experience. In the first year, an incubator helped the firm launch its service, which is represented by online advertising videos, to network with other companies and to find investors. The firm was nominated as one of the most innovative entrepreneurial ventures in Europe in 2016. It currently operates in around 80 markets worldwide.

Firm 9 was founded in Poland in 2013 by two university graduates specialising in data science and with previous experience in a European high-tech research consortium. The firm started by developing promotional videos for the business-to-business sector and only later expanded to also create customised marketing solutions, including digital strategies for firms operating in business markets. It currently operates in ten countries, however the great majority of the revenues come from clients in Europe and Dubai.

Firm 10 was established in Poland by a team of three who still work in the company: one is a PhD graduate in social psychology with a higher education in economics, another a coder with experience of big data and the third a researcher with a PhD in sociology. The firm is a software-as-a-service company ("SaaS") offering a social media analytics service. It currently operates in several countries, however the great majority of sales come from the UK and Indonesia.

Firm 11 was founded in Brazil in 2008 by a software engineer, who specialises in embedded systems design, composed of hardware and software using different platforms. As the firm works on projects, the number and location of its customers varies every year, however the great majority of foreign customers are from the United States.

Firm 12 is a software house founded in Brazil by a mobile engineer with lengthy experience in a multinational corporation operating in the

technology industry. The firm specialises in customised solutions for software and the Internet of Things and develops online games. The firm currently operates in the United States and Latin American markets and it is trying to expand to the European market.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the international entrepreneurial ventures studied in this dissertation

|                |               | <b>Country of origin</b> | <b>Business sector</b>                | <b>N. of employees</b> | <b>Headquarters</b>   | <b>Social media used</b>                             |
|----------------|---------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Essay 1</b> | <b>Firm 1</b> | Italy                    | Online CRM software                   | 15                     | Treviso   | Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter           |
| <b>Essay 2</b> | <b>Firm 2</b> | Finland                  | Gin Manufacturer                      | 26                     | Helsinki, Isokyrö   | Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter           |
|                | <b>Firm 3</b> | New Zealand              | Gin Manufacturer                      | 2                      | Martinborough   | Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter           |
|                | <b>Firm 4</b> | Sweden                   | Gin Manufacturer                      | 8                      | Härnösand   | Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter           |
| <b>Essay 3</b> | <b>Firm 5</b> | Finland                  | Banking                               | 45                     | Helsinki. Digital brand   | Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, company blog |
|                | <b>Firm 6</b> | Finland                  | Application to save date-expired food | 30                     | Helsinki, Stockholm   | Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter           |
|                | <b>Firm 7</b> | Italy                    | Advertising & communication           | Over 80                | Italy (2), Paris, London, Istanbul, Dubai, India (2), Santiago de Chile, Manila | Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter                      |

|                | <b>Country of origin</b> | <b>Business sector</b>                         | <b>N. of employees</b> | <b>Headquarters</b>                                    | <b>Social media used</b>   |
|----------------|--------------------------|--|------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Firm 8</b>  | Italy                    | Promotional videos                             | Over 80                | Italy (3), London, Madrid, New Delhi, Seoul, Singapore | Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube   |
| <b>Firm 9</b>  | Poland                   | Promotional videos & communication             | 10                     | Warsaw, Dubai  | Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, website blog                            |
| <b>Firm 10</b> | Poland                   | Analytics provider over social media platforms | 26                     | Warsaw   | Facebook, GooglePlus, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Quora and website blog               |
| <b>Firm 11</b> | Brazil                   | Hardware and software design                   | 11                     | São Paulo  | Facebook and Twitter, but minimally used   |
| <b>Firm 12</b> | Brazil                   | Platforms and digital games provider           | More than 60           | São Paulo  | The company has a Facebook, Twitter, and a LinkedIn profile, but they are minimally used |

### **3.5 Quality of the research**

The trustworthiness of this qualitative research is assessed through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The credibility of the research is enhanced through data triangulation followed throughout the whole dissertation project. Data triangulation refers to the combination of different methodologies to assess the same phenomenon and it can be take the form of data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation (see Patton, 1990; Stake 1995). In Essay 1, Essay 2, and Essay 3, I undertook data source triangulation by using multiple data sources such as in-person interviews with various informants and rich secondary data coming from websites, blogs, archival data, and social media posts. These represented multiple and diverse sources of knowledge of the same phenomenon. The accuracy of primary data was enhanced by interviewing more than one person within the same firm (Ghauri, 2004; Yin, 2009). Exceptions were made when, for instance, the firm was too small to have dedicated personnel dealing with the use of social media. The investigator triangulation was supported by the inclusion of multiple investigators during the research project; in fact, all the essays are coauthored by at least one senior researcher. In Essay 1 and Essay 3 the second and third authors were not involved in the data collection phase, in order to maintain an outside perspective that have helped the research avoid biased theorising (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). However, the help of multiple investigators with expertise in different research fields was leveraged when examining and interpreting the data. Moreover, the three essays of this thesis have been presented in various workshops, seminars, and international conferences, where the authors have received direct feedback. In particular, all the essays have been subject to doubleblind peer review processes in academic journals and conferences yielding to publication. Through the use of different concepts and theoretical lenses to analyse the same overlooked phenomenon, for instance by looking at the structure of network relationships (in Essay 2) and strength of ties (in Essay 1), I managed to

ensure theoretical triangulation. Lastly, methodological triangulation that related to the use of several methods and techniques was reached through the integration of primary sources of information such as semi-structured interviews and the gathering of secondary data such as archival information and textual content coming from social media platforms.

The criterion of transferability refers to the possibility of extending the research findings to other research contexts. Despite the research being centred on international entrepreneurial ventures, it has to be noted that the data were gathered from 12 small and medium-sized firms in six different countries that were commercialising both manufactured products and a wide range of intangible services. Future research could extend the findings to different contexts and offer alternative interpretations.

Dependability refers to the principle of transparency that the researcher follows during the research process. The procedures of data access, data collection and data analysis have been recorded and tracked throughout the research process. As for data collection, all the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, transcribed verbatim and are currently stored in databases shared by the different authors of the essays. As for data access and data analysis, I keep records of contacted firms, dates of responses and email interchanges, as well as diaries containing the data analysis processes, researchers' notes and model development. The dependability of the findings was further ensured by sending the firms concerned the relevant theoretical models and frameworks for review and comment. Lastly, the research findings were compared against previous literature in the field to check the researchers' interpretations.

The criterion of confirmability that refers to the possibility of validating the research by third parties was met through various means of triangulation (see above). Moreover, the use of direct quotations from the interviews, descriptions, and cross-case analysis strengthens this criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **4 Summary of the findings from the essays**

In this chapter, I summarise the main findings of the three essays comprising the second section of the thesis. Each research article addresses a different research question that adheres to the research objectives of the dissertation. I also outline how each essay is positioned within the relevant theoretical streams of research and how it contributes to them.

### **4.1 ESSAY 1. Effects of social media usage on the speed of international growth of an international new venture**

Sara Fraccastoro and Mika Gabrielsson

Essay 1 uses a business-to-business international new venture (INV) operating in the service industry as a research context to approach the topic of the use of social media for the internationalisation of entrepreneurial firms. In this study, I use the definition of international new ventures given by Oviatt and McDougall (1994: 49), according to which these are firms that “from the inception seek to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sales of outputs in multiple countries”. The investigation starts from the standpoint that networks are a way for international entrepreneurial ventures to succeed in international markets (Coviello & Munro, 1997; Coviello, 2006; Yli-Renko, Autio & Tontti, 2002) and it adds recent literature showing how these firms leverage social media tools to enter online networks and manage different social relationships (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Driven by the above studies and acknowledging the lack of research looking at the use of social media during the internationalisation of the firm, the research question driving this study is: How are social media platforms used during the growth of an INV’s operations in international markets?

Network literature is used as a conceptual point of departure for the study. The paper looks at how an internationally operating entrepreneurial



venture leverages social media to build weak and strong network ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1982, 1985; Larson & Starr, 1993; Walker, Kogut & Shan, 1997) during its approach to and development within international markets. To study this phenomenon in-depth, I look at the processual character of internationalisation rather than focussing on individual stages of internationalisation (Coviello, 2006; Casillas & Acedo, 2013). Accordingly, I follow a single case-study approach informed by primary and secondary data spanning the entire firm's history. This allows the study to account for the dynamic nature of network relationships (Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Larsson & Starr, 1993; Laurell, Achtenhagen & Andersson, 2015). The case firm was purposefully selected on the bases of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) from an international database. The empirical findings show that the firm, which provides CRM services in the business-to-business market, used social media tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook since its inception and as it matured. During the analysis, I use the three junctures of the internationalisation process of entrepreneurial ventures conceptualised by Gabrielsson et al. (2008): the introductory phase, growth and resource accumulation, and the break-out phase. The choice reflects the ambition to suggest a timeframe to delimit the analysis of the impact of social media at distinct junctures of the internationalisation process, rather than to strictly categorise the firm according to its progress towards and within those phases.

Through an analysis of the empirical findings and comparing them against previous literature, the study advances three research propositions that shed light on how entrepreneurial ventures use social media to build various typologies of network relationships during their internationalisation. To begin with, it appeared that during the initial international market entry, the analysed firm used social media as an alternative means of internationalisation. By leveraging their characteristics of global connectivity and being low-cost, firms can use social media to quickly reach international markets and establish the attractiveness of their product, especially in situations marked by a dearth of resources. Therefore, the firm is able to exploit the visibility and the connections made available by social media to build weak network ties with potential stakeholders and customers, and

subsequently to internationalise rapidly through them. Secondly, it was clear that the firm continued to use social media to support its international activities as it matured, however social media tools were mainly useful to reach micro and small businesses. In order to enlarge the spectrum of customers reached to include larger companies, the firm invested resources into sales agents and search engine optimisation tools. At this juncture of the internationalisation process, the combination of social media with other online tools and the involvement of direct sales agents, enables firms to build stronger network ties with international customers. These allow the firm to approach more demanding and lucrative business segments, which help to enhance the speed of international growth. In the later stages of growth, the requests coming from internationally operating small and medium-sized customers increased the level of commitment in international markets of the case firm. During these more mature stages, when the firm already has a wide international market presence, social media platforms take on a supportive role. International business and sales activities are mainly led by sales personnel who build personal connections with foreign partners, identifiable through strong network ties. The strong nature of these connections allows firms to keep growing internationally.

This essay contributes to the field of international entrepreneurship by shedding light on how small entrepreneurial ventures use social media for internationalisation purposes; a research area where the current knowledge is scant and additional research has been called for (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013; Fischer & Reuber, 2014).

Particularly, by using network literature (Granovetter, 1985), the research sheds light on the role of social media in helping a firm building weak and strong network ties throughout the internationalisation process (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Moreover, by using data spanning the entire firm history, the study looks at the use of social media over time and thus accounts for the dynamism of the internationalisation process (Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014) and that of network dynamics (Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Larsson & Starr, 1993). Lastly, it sheds light on how the use of social media influences the international growth of entrepreneurial ventures in various phases of their development. This is

particularly relevant as studies looking at matters such as time and speed of internationalisation (beyond first international activity) have been called for (Casillas & Acedo, 2013; Chetty, Johanson & Martin, 2014; Jones & Covello, 2005; Prashantham & Young, 2011).

The study provides avenues for future research, in fact many are the theoretical lenses and literature streams that could be used to look at the phenomenon and therefore could benefit from the analysis of social media.

## **4.2 ESSAY 2. Social media firm-specific advantages as enablers of network embeddedness of international entrepreneurial ventures**

Sara Fraccastoro, Mika Gabrielsson and Sylvie Chetty

Essay 2 reveals how international entrepreneurial ventures leverage social media platforms to enter international markets and extend their penetration of them. Social media has been regarded as offering important tools for the development of firms' functions such as marketing and sales (Kumar et al., 2016; Kumar, Choi & Greene, 2017; Rapp et al., 2013). Recent research has also started to investigate the relevance of social media use in firms' expansion into foreign markets (Fischer & Reuber, 2011, 2014; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013); it is therefore important to explore how the tools of social media can be relevant for international entrepreneurial ventures, which usually suffer from resource constraints (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). Therefore, the research question guiding this study is: How does the use of social media enable entrepreneurial ventures to enter foreign networks, overcome liabilities associated with their foreign expansion, and extend the penetration of foreign markets?

The context of analysis of this study is that of international entrepreneurial ventures, which extant theory has found to face liabilities of smallness (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Morris, 2001), newness (Stinchcombe, 1965), foreignness (Zaheer, 1995, 2002), and that often face difficulties in

building insidership position within foreign networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). International network literature and internalisation theory are used to guide the study. Specifically, the entrepreneurial capability of using social media tools is conceptualised as a firm-specific advantage (FSA) (Verbeke, Zargarzadeh & Osiyevskyy, 2014) that international entrepreneurs can exploit and combine with social media FSAs of foreign partners. This resource combination is especially relevant for the entrepreneurial firm when trying to establish an insidership position within emerging networks in newly entered foreign markets and when trying to access relevant opportunities and important connections (Uzzi, 1997), that increase the knowledge of host country markets.

The study builds on a multiple case-study research design. Theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) is used to select three manufacturing firms producing gin from Finland, New Zealand, and Sweden. The empirical results reveal how entrepreneurial firms exploit their idiosyncratic and non-location-bound FSAs, and combine them with those location-bound FSAs possessed by foreign partners (Rugman & Verbeke, 1992; Hennart, 2009) to shape new location-bound FSAs needed to strengthen their foreign market presence during internationalisation.

The study shows that when approaching international markets for the first time, entrepreneurial ventures deploy their social media capabilities to reach internationally dispersed stakeholders (Andersson & Wikström, 2017). However, given their infancy in international markets, these FSAs have to be considered non-location-bound (Rugman & Verbeke, 1992). Deploying these capabilities, enables international entrepreneurial ventures inexpensively to attract unsolicited requests from foreign countries, and thus enables them to overcome the liability of smallness. Once the initial foreign market presence is established, entrepreneurial ventures forge partnerships with foreign distributors and retailers, and they rely on their location-bound social media FSAs, such as the ability to communicate through social media in the local language and communication style. By bundling their non-location-bound social media FSAs with their foreign partners' location-bound FSAs, the firms learn about the foreign market and explore new location-bound social media FSAs that allow them to

enter their partners' networks. The approach allows the liability of foreignness and newness to be more easily overcome. The study also shows that firms tend to strategically deploy the new location-bound social media FSA to enter strategic networks considered vital for further growth in international markets (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Möller & Svahn, 2006; Möller, 2013). The learning obtained from strategic partners enables entrepreneurial ventures to explore further new location-bound social media FSAs, that when bundled with existing FSAs enable the firm to become insiders in host country strategic networks and thus overcome the liability of outsidership.

This study makes several contributions. First, it contributes to the field of international entrepreneurship by using network literature and internationalisation (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). The research highlights the governance mechanisms through which international entrepreneurial ventures use their social media capabilities to attain an insidership position within relevant foreign networks and to overcome outsidership (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013). Second, by conceptualising the social media capabilities and treating them as FSAs, the study brings internalisation theory to international entrepreneurship and networking streams of research, a research area that is still nascent (Verbeke, Zargorzadeh & Osiyevskyy, 2014; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018). Third, the research advances a theoretical framework where network literature and internalisation theory are merged to understand how social media technologies are used during internationalisation. International entrepreneurs can be supported by the use of social media to learn about foreign markets and expand internationally. These firms however need to develop new social media FSAs based on existing non-location-bound FSAs and partners' location-bound social media FSAs, in order to successfully overcome a dearth of resources at different stages of the internationalisation process.

### **4.3 ESSAY 3. The integrated use of social media, digital, and traditional communication tools in the b2b sales context of international SMEs**

Sara Fraccastoro, Mika Gabrielsson & Ellen Pullins

Essay 3 explores how social media, digital, and traditional communication tools are leveraged during the business-to-business sales processes of international small and medium-sized firms. Sales literature acknowledges social media as offering platforms that are increasingly used by salespeople in their work and specific job functions (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Lacoste, 2016; Itani, Agnihotri & Dingus, 2017; Müller et al., 2018). However, other digital and traditional communication tools are still used in the selling process, with the consequence that salespeople experience fragmentation in the selection of communication methods. Recent marketing and sales literature have deepened the synergistic effects of the use of social media and other marketing tools on different customer metrics (Kumar et al., 2016; Kumar, Choi & Greene, 2017), however extant analyses have focussed on firms from individual countries and operating in business-to-consumer markets (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2017). Therefore, the main research question driving this essay is: how are sales communication tools including social media used and integrated within the sales process of international firms operating in business-to-business markets?

The context of this study is that of internationally operating small and medium-sized firms. Earlier research shows that social media use in these firms affects both communication and business performance (Wang, Pauleen & Zhang, 2016) and it opens up business opportunities on the global marketplace (Alarcón-del-Amo, Rialp-Criado & Rialp-Criado, 2018; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). I review previous research dealing with social media use for business-to-business sales purposes (Rodriguez, Peterson & Krishnan, 2012; Rapp et al., 2013) and sales process literature (Dubinsky, 1980, 1981; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) to understand the state of the art in this field. After noticing a dearth of conceptualisation and underdeveloped theoretical understanding regarding the integration of different sales

communication tools for the business-to-business sales process of internationally operating SMEs, an exploratory study through a grounded theory method approach is conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Importantly, when starting the research, I adhere to the definition of social media platforms given by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), and distinguish them from digital tools involving communication based on Web 1.0, and traditional communication involving person-to-person interaction.

The data collection process started by piloting the study with two internationally operating SMEs from Finland. The interviews with these firms – which are not part of the final sample – helped to refine the research questions. On the basis of the results, I theoretically sampled (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) and chose six internationally operating SMEs from Finland, Italy, and Poland. Those firms commercialise services and operate in business markets. During the research process, when interacting with the chosen firms, particular differences emerged relating to the selection of communication tools during the sales process among the firms. Therefore, to increase the robustness of the sample and determine if further differences appeared during the data analysis, I introduced two firms from Brazil.

The study reveals that small and medium-sized firms operating in the service industry follow a business-to-business sales process that builds on three main phases: identification of new business opportunities, persuasion, and relationship management. It is evident that firms seek combinations of sales communication tools during each of the sales process phases and across the sales process. It appears that during the first phase of the sales process, international SMEs use social media to continuously engage with geographically dispersed customers, while traditional communication methods are used more sporadically, such as during trade fairs. Firms from different countries follow different models of communication tool integration. A boundary condition to the use of social media during the identification of new business opportunities is represented by the relationship culture of the country in which the firm is embedded. In fact, the study reveals that in some of the firms investigated (i.e., the Brazilian ones), personal relationships are preferred when

undertaking business transactions. The research shows that when trying to convert prospects into customers, international SMEs tend to rely on digital sales communication tools. Social media during this phase takes on a supportive role, operating alongside person-to-person interaction used when the perceived potential of the prospective customer is high or if the latter is in a market where the firm operates a sales location. Furthermore, the research highlights that the firms tend to use traditional communication methods when managing relationships with strategic customers and tend to rely on digital communication tools with the clientele that they believe to be transactional (McDonald, Millman & Rogers 1997; Rogers, 2011). It appears that the level of technology adoption of the environment where the firm is embedded acts as a boundary condition for the use of social media and digitalised tools when managing relationships with existing customers.

Overall, the findings show that an integrated use of sales communication tools within each of the sales process phases helps internationally operating SMEs develop the international scope of their business. This has implications for the geographical dispersion of the firms' activities and the typology of relationships built with customers. Furthermore, the study reveals that the integration of communication tools across the sales process phases helps firms adapt to foreign customers' specific needs during the sales process progression phases.

The current research makes several contributions. A theoretical framework outlining the integrated use of social media, digital, and sales communication tools and the boundary conditions related to them is the major take-out of the research. Moreover, the research contributes to international marketing literature by integrating sales process literature (Dubinsky, 1980/1981) with that on international business. In fact, there is a lack of studies looking at the integration of social media and other communication tools in the context of the business-to-business sales processes of international SMEs. In addition, by revealing how international SMEs use social media in combination with digital and traditional communication tools, the paper enriches integrated marketing and multichannel marketing literature (Naik & Raman 2003; Naik & Peters 2009; Wiesel,



Pauwels, & Arts, 2011), and adds to social media literature. Lastly, the research contributes to sales process literature (Dubinsky, 1980, 1981; Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) by suggesting a foreshortened sales process for international SMEs operating in business markets, and through its inclusion of social media in the analysis, a research area for which more academic attention has been invited (Salo, 2017).

## **5 Discussion and conclusion**

This dissertation addresses the nascent phenomenon of the use of social media to aid the internationalisation and sales processes of international entrepreneurial ventures. In this chapter, I address the main research objective and the three research questions on which this doctoral work is based by integrating the empirical findings generated from the essays. Then, I outline the theoretical contributions that this study makes, together with the implications for international entrepreneurs and sales managers. Lastly, I reflect on the limitations connected to this study and I outline avenues for future research stemming from my academic contribution.

### **5.1 Integration of the findings: answering the research questions**

The study offers new empirical and theoretical understanding around the use of social media to address internationalisation, sales, and growth challenges of international entrepreneurial ventures (Figure 3). When internationalising, these firms face various resource constraints, referred to in previous literature as liabilities of smallness, newness, and foreignness (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). Entering relevant foreign networks has been regarded as a way to overcome these liabilities (Coviello, 2006). Nevertheless, acquiring a position of insidership within unknown networks in foreign markets can be burdensome, especially when firms are start-ups or when the founders have no entrepreneurial experience and existing relationships (Forsgren, 2016).

The first research question of this dissertation revolves around how social media platforms are used during the growth of an international new venture's operations in international markets. It was evident that at first, when facing resource scarcity and being unknown in foreign markets, these firms leverage the low-cost and global connectivity characteristics of social media to promote themselves internationally. The qualitative

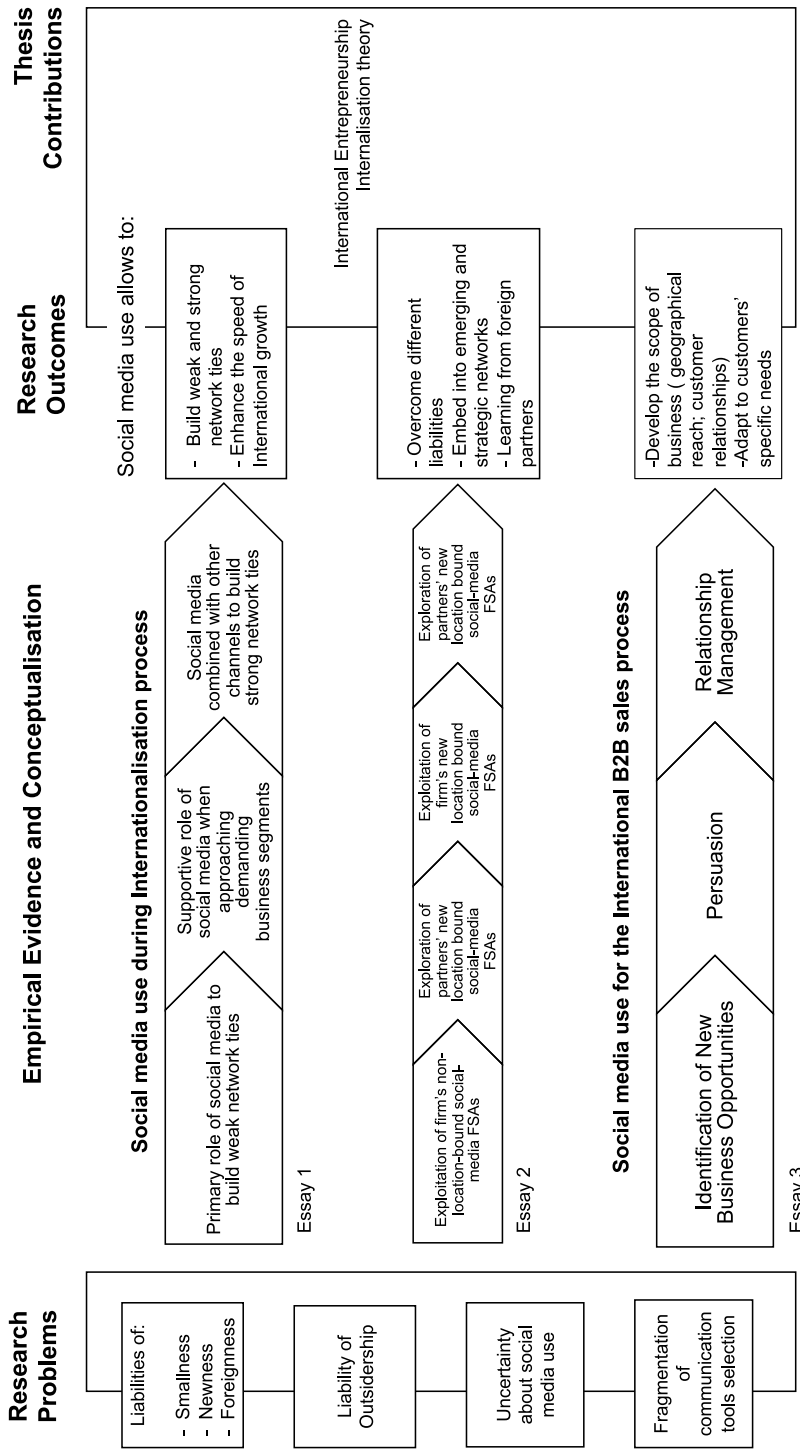
findings from Essay 1 show that in this phase, social media are used as alternative channels of internationalisation, leveraged to verify product and service attractiveness and connect with interested stakeholders at different levels. Specifically, social media can enable entrepreneurs to build weak network ties and internationalise rapidly through them. Over time, and in the course of growing internationally, firms try to build stronger connections with various partners and tend to combine social media with search engine optimisation and deploying sales personnel. These attempts allow entrepreneurial ventures to reach more challenging business segments, build more personal relationships with customers that requires the strengthening of network ties, and finally grow internationally. It is evident that during growth and the later stages of internationalisation, when firms seek greater commitment to those international markets already entered, social media tools be employed in a more supportive role than previously. In these phases, the firms seek to build strong network ties that maintain the rapid speed of internationalisation.

The second core objective of the dissertation is to understand the mechanisms underpinning social media use and enabling entrepreneurial ventures to enter and extend their presence into foreign markets, as well as overcoming liabilities connected to internationalisation (e.g. smallness, newness, foreignness, and out-sidership). It can be argued that social media use is an idiosyncratic capability that firms can develop over time and that can be leveraged as an FSA during foreign market expansion. The findings of Essay 2 on the internationalisation process show that when first approaching new and unknown foreign markets, entrepreneurial ventures exploit their existing and limited non-location-bound social media FSAs to boost the visibility of their products and services. Their activities on various social media platforms enable them to attract orders from around the world inexpensively and therefore to overcome the liability of smallness. Once the first international deals are signed, the firms bundle their social media FSAs to those of the foreign partners, such as distributors and retailers, who often have their own social media presence in the local language. This usage allows them to learn about the market and explore combinations of social media usage, which allows them to enter

the networks of the partners and overcome liabilities connected with foreignness and newness. Important learning is elicited from those connections, and firms develop new location-bound social media FSAs, a process that can be fundamental to entering strategic networks. Furthermore, the new location-bound social media FSAs are explored and combined with existing capabilities of social media use to enable the firms to become insiders in host country strategic networks and overcome the liability of outsidership.

The final objective of the dissertation was to understand how international firms leverage and combine social media with other digital tools during sales processes conducted in business-to-business markets. The grounded theory approach of Essay 3 produced results showing that international small and medium-sized firms operating in business markets tend to follow a sales process that revolves around three main phases: identification of new business opportunities, persuasion, and relationship management. When identifying new business opportunities, social media facilitates the continuous search for prospects, and combined with the sporadic use of traditional sales interaction methods, such as door-to-door prospecting and attendance at trade fairs. However, an important boundary condition to this finding is represented by the relationship culture of the country where the firm comes from. When converting prospects into paying customers, entrepreneurial firms prefer to rely on digital communication tools such as emails and online meeting platforms. Boundary conditions to this trend are represented by the possibility of travelling to potential customers either when doing so is perceived as having the potential to secure a very promising business relationship or when the firm owns a sales unit in the prospect's location. Lastly, when managing relationships with existing customers considered strategic, firms tend to rely on the personal interaction fostered by traditional means of communication, and to use digital options such as CRM tools with transactional customers. Social media are hardly ever used in this phase of the sales process, other than to share successful sales projects. In this case, an important boundary condition on the use of different sales communication tools is represented by the level of technology

adoption of the environment in which the firm is embedded. Finally, it is evident that important benefits can be derived from the integration of different sales communication tools including social media within and across the business-to-business sales process phases. Internationally operating firms have the opportunity to develop their international scope of business, in terms of geographical dispersion of the firms' activities and the typology of relationship built with customers. Furthermore, such integration helps firms to adapt to foreign customers' specific needs during the sales process and to embrace flexibility in terms of the communication tools employed.



**Figure 3.** The framework of social media use for international entrepreneurial ventures.

## **5.2 Theoretical contributions**

The main contribution of this dissertation is to advance theoretical understanding in the field of international entrepreneurship through the development of knowledge regarding the use of social media platforms in the internationalisation and sales processes of international entrepreneurial ventures. The study highlights the use of these platforms to overcome internationalisation challenges and attain growth in foreign markets. Particular emphasis is then placed on the mechanisms underpinning social media use when approaching foreign partners and trying to build network connections. Lastly, the study offers new insights into the ways that international entrepreneurial ventures use combinations of social media and other communication tools in the course of their business-to-business sales processes. To provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the study examines many streams of literature. By diligently reviewing extant studies and following methodological rigour in the qualitative approaches towards the research questions, this dissertation carves out important contributions to different theories and streams of literature, laying at the broad intersection of international business and sales process management. Therefore, this study contributes to the field of international entrepreneurship by scrutinising the use of social media through the implementation of theoretical constructs drawn from network literature such as network embeddedness (see Granovetter, 1985) and insidership and outsidership from Johanson and Vahlne (2009). It also contributes to international business literature, by using internationalisation theory (Rugman & Verbeke, 1992), and to sales process literature, (e.g. sales process phases, see Dubinsky, 1980, 1981) in the context of international entrepreneurial ventures. This cross-pollination of different fields of research seems to be very apposite when investigating phenomena within the international entrepreneurship domain, an area of research that is at the intersection between international business and entrepreneurship and which is marked by the absence of a strong theoretical grounding.

This study adds to international entrepreneurship research by conceptualising social media use as an alternative channel of internationalisation.

The development of this area of research has been particularly encouraged, as there is a dearth of theoretical knowledge around the use of social media platforms for international business purposes (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013; Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013; Alarcón-del-Amo, Rialp-Criado & Rialp-Criado, 2018). The current study shows that social media are important platforms that entrepreneurial firms can leverage to enhance their internationalisation at different junctures of their development in foreign markets. By using theoretical constructs drawn from network literature, such as network embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), the first essay maps out the possible ways in which entrepreneurial firms can combine social media with different internationalisation methods to attain weak and strong network ties over time, to approach more demanding business segments, and ultimately to grow internationally. By looking at social media platforms as examples of internet-based innovations within the ICT domain, this study is in line with and expands upon prior research in the field of international entrepreneurship looking at the role that the internet plays in sustaining internationalisation (Moen, 2002; Arenius, Sasi & Gabrielsson, 2005; Loane, 2006; Servais, Madsen & Rasmussen, 2007).

Furthermore, by conceptualising social media use as a firm-specific capability that firms can develop over time, and bundle with those partners' idiosyncratic social media FSAs, the study sheds light on the governance mechanisms that international entrepreneurial ventures use to enter international markets and subsequently extend their penetration of them. The study has strong implications for the resolution of detrimental liabilities that have been found to burden international entrepreneurial ventures when approaching international markets (e.g. smallness, newness, and foreignness, see Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). From a contribution perspective, conceptualising social media as among firms' idiosyncratic FSAs contributes strong theoretical knowledge to international entrepreneurial literature. Whereas earlier research has warned against the applicability of internationalisation theory to explain the behavioural traits of firms that internationalise early (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018), in this study internationalisation theory is used as it builds on transaction cost economics and resource-based foundations to explain the relevant organisational



modes in international business (Chi, 2015) rather than predicting time of internationalisation (Verbeke, Zargarzadeh & Osiyevskyy, 2014; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018). Specifically, in this dissertation internalisation theory is bundled with network literature on insidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) in a theoretical framework (Essay 2) outlining the use of social media tools during the internationalisation process of entrepreneurial ventures. Theoretical understanding on how firms leverage social media tools to learn about foreign markets and expand internationally emerges (Larson, 1992). Therefore, by conceptualising social media use as a firm-specific capability, this study contributes to internalisation theory and brings it into the field of international entrepreneurship, a research challenge that few scholars have touched upon.

Secondly, a further important contribution of this study is to link the use of social media platforms to network literature, in the field of international entrepreneurship. This research has highlighted the importance of the use of social media to reach network embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) through the establishment of weak and strong network ties over time (Essay 1). Building an insidership position within foreign networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) through the use of social media can be seen as a resource available to entrepreneurial ventures to leverage during their foreign market expansion (Sigfusson & Chetty, 2013); therefore, it can be argued that although beyond its scope, the study indirectly complements the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991). Attaining embeddedness within relevant foreign business networks opens the door for firms to successfully overcome barriers to internationalisation (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). By highlighting the governance mechanisms of social media use over time, the study shows how a firm can attain the structural embeddedness that is crucial for internationalisation, as it is key to accessing appropriate knowledge, opportunities, and linkages in the foreign markets (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). In particular, the thesis shows that over time, entrepreneurial firms exploit their social media FSAs, explore those of their partners and finally explore new location-bound social media FSAs to gather knowledge of international markets and enter foreign partners' networks. Through this mechanism, firms can enter emerging and strategic

networks of relationships to help ensure success in foreign markets despite initial resource constraints and lack of existing business relationships (Forsgren, 2016).

Furthermore, by looking at the use of social media during the internationalisation process through a longitudinal research approach, often implemented with the direct collection of textual content coming from firms' social media posts and spanning the whole of the firm's history, the study accounts for the dynamism of internationalisation and that of a network's evolution (Knight & Liesch, 2016; Welch, Nummela & Liesch, 2016; Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014). This triggers theoretical implications relating to the internationalisation process of the firm, when viewed through the lenses of dynamism associated with the temporal emergence of facts, rather than when focussed around antecedents and consequences of specific events (Jones & Coviello, 2005; Pettigrew, 2012; Van de Ven, 1992). In this sense, this study brings new insights to the processual nature of internationalisation (Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014), by explaining the temporally-embedded process of the use of social media tools for the internationalisation of entrepreneurial ventures. The relevance of this contribution lays in previous calls for research revolving around the time and speed of internationalisation (Casillas & Acedo, 2013; Chetty, Johanson & Martin, 2014; Jones & Coviello, 2005; Prashantham & Young, 2011).

Thirdly, this study adds to sales process literature and international marketing literature, in the field of international entrepreneurial ventures, an area where studies of the sales processes of such ventures are limited. The study conceives social media platforms as a sales communication method and it outlines how social media, digital, and traditional communication tools are integrated within and across the main phases of a business-to-business sales process conducted in international markets. The grounded theory method used in Essay 3 offers clear empirical evidence that the sales function within business markets is evolving and that finding has important implications for sales process literature. I conceptualise and develop a sales process that revolves around three main phases: identification of new business opportunities, persuasion, and relationship management; these phases represent a sales process that fits the needs of agility

and cost-reduction of internationally operating small and medium-sized firms. Such theoretical development is in line with previous academic research, calling for a revision of the seven steps of selling elaborated by Dubinsky (1980/1981), and that would take into consideration the changes brought by innovation within the ICT domain, such as social media platforms, to the tasks and tools used by salespeople (Marshall, Marshall, & Lassk, 1999; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Rodriguez, Peterson & Krishnan, 2012; Rodriguez, Ajjan & Peterson, 2016). Furthermore, by integrating and juxtaposing social media with digital, and traditional sales communication methods, this study brings new insights on integrated marketing communication, and multichannel marketing. Earlier studies have looked at the integration and synergistic effects of social media and other marketing tools on different customer metrics, but focussed on firms operating in business-to-consumers markets. Despite considerably extending our understanding of the integration of social media with other sales communication methods in consumer-oriented firms, these studies have however fallen short in explaining the integration of such communication tools in firms operating in business-to-business domains, and therefore have left this area of research largely unexplored ( Rapp et al., 2013). In addition, by investigating firms from different countries that sell in international contexts, the research takes into account important boundary conditions to selling in an international endeavour, and ultimately makes important contributions to international marketing literature (Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2016; Johnston, Khalil, Nhat Hanh & Cheng, 2018).

Furthermore, by analysing the use of social media platforms in international entrepreneurial ventures, this study offers new theoretical contributions to social media literature: Research on how these tools are used in internationalisation and sales processes of small entrepreneurial ventures remains in its infancy.

Lastly, the research advances methodological approaches in the field of international entrepreneurship. This advance arises from the combined use of semi-structured interviews, data directly coming from firms' social media posts, and publicly available information. This approach reveals that when investigating the use of social media in many of a firm's functions,

the direct analysis of textual content coming from those sources can enhance the credibility and the richness of the data, providing longitudinal information that can help the researcher avoid recall bias, sometimes encountered when asking about events and information that happened in the past. The direct use of material coming from social media platforms enables researchers to have in-depth understanding of the network connections built over time by the firm with its external national and international foreign partners. These are valuable insights that can be followed up as part of the future development of this research area.

### **5.3 Practical implications**

The research findings encapsulated in this thesis provide practical implications for international entrepreneurs and sales managers.

First, the research encourages entrepreneurs to continuously use social media for many of their business activities, and in particular during the whole internationalisation process. The findings of Essay 1 and Essay 2 suggest the particular usefulness of social media tools during the initial approach to international markets. Entrepreneurs can leverage the particular characteristics of social media in that it is a non-intrusive, low-cost, means to provide global online connectivity to reach international markets affordably, to verify product and service attractiveness, and to deliver value from initial sales. I would encourage enterprises to use social media, especially when they lack previous entrepreneurial experience, or personal connections to foreign markets, alongside being hindered by financial and other various resource constraints. The research shows that using social media platforms in this particular phase helps firms acquire success in international markets and to internationalise fast. This is especially true in those cases where the firms come from countries with a small internal market (e.g. Finland, New Zealand, or Sweden; examples of the aforementioned SMOPEC countries), or when selling a niche product, thus, when internationalisation is essential for the firms' growth. Having taken the initial steps into an international market, the research findings indicate a

firm should establish personal relationships with local partners and stakeholders at various levels. Therefore, social media use works best if integrated with personal relationships with local business partners and sales agents. I recommend to the firms that internationalise to maintain the activity on their social media channels; however, I encourage them to find partners and deploy the coverage of those partners' social media channels in foreign markets. Such partners could be expected to use social media in the local language, sometimes on local social media platforms and can also offer the entrepreneurial firm access to their network of existing connections. Access to such networks has implications for the development of new business relationships and can prompt unsolicited requests from buyers and consumers that often translate into increased online visibility and sales. It is important to mention that through these mechanisms, the firms derive learning from foreign markets and can put in place international growth strategies for their long-term success.

It is also evident that in addition to improving firms' success rates in business markets already entered, integrating social media tools with the presence of local partners or sales personnel hired by the company and working locally, enables firms to approach different and more demanding business segments, that might be an arduous undertaking if attempted via a social media approach alone. I would caution firms against taking an overly optimistic approach when examining the use of social media to support various international business activities. These tools do represent an important networking and internationalisation means; however, I would discourage entrepreneurial firms from relying on these tools as the only and independent channel to reach internationalisation. This recommendation is in line with previous research recognising the relevance of digital and online sales channels in enhancing the export performance of rapidly internationalising firms, but stresses the risks associated with an overreliance on them, which may lead to what has been termed a virtuality trap (Yamin & Sinkovics, 2006; Sinkovics, Sinkovics & Jean, 2013) – an important obstacle to entrepreneurial ventures' successful growth in international markets.

Therefore, I encourage entrepreneurs to leverage these tools as part of a compelling approach towards internationalisation, provided that, even if not all the actions undertaken are strategically planned, there is a general vision of using social media in combination with different internationalisation channels to acquire information about foreign markets and to establish connections with internationally-located partners who can provide insightful information about the characteristics of the target market, the particular taste of the local consumers, or knowledge and connections with other parties.

This study also offers practical implications for international sales managers and sales personnel. The research findings of Essay 3 illustrate how sales professionals can use combinations of social media, digital tools (such as emails and online meeting applications), and traditional communication methods when selling in business-to-business markets and interacting with internationally dispersed customers. My suggestion to this category of professionals is to organise the implementation of various sales communication methods around the three main phases of a business-to-business sales process advanced by the study: identification of new business opportunities, persuasion, and relationship management.

For activities aiming at engaging with internationally dispersed customers, the recommendation is to rely on the continuous use of social media that enables firms to connect with internationally dispersed potential buyers at reasonable costs. This plan of action would help firms mitigate risks connected to high investments in traditional marketing and prospecting activities. However, integrating social media use with traditional sales communication methods such as participation in international conferences and door-to-door prospecting (used more sporadically) can enhance the geographical scope of business reach. An important boundary condition when selecting the sales tools for use during international prospecting is however the national culture of the firm. Firms must make strategic decisions on which communication tool best fits their relationship culture and preferred way of interaction when conducting business transactions.

The study reveals that when firms are attempting to convert prospects into paying customers, a more personalised way of communication might

be preferable. Therefore, where possible, the recommendation would be to lead persuasion activities via face-to-face interaction. However, in the case of international transactions taking place where the firm does not own a sales unit, when business travel is too expensive, and the perceived potential of the deal is low, sales persuasion activities can be conducted through digital communication channels. The study shows that the choice of communication method during this phase is indeed dependent on the strategic importance of the sales and the geographical location of the business counterpart. However, social media use in this sales process phase takes on a secondary role.

When managing post-sales relationships with existing customers, the research shows that traditional interaction methods are appropriate for firms working with strategic customers. On the other hand, the implementation of digital communication tools such as CRM software and newsletters support firms in the communication with transactional customers. Social media can be used to share success stories and important deals with strategic partners. This can enhance firms' visibility and increase the reliability of the firms in the eyes of new business partners. Overall, I encourage firms to integrate different communication tools when managing post-sales relationships to develop their scope of business activities in terms of the typology of business relationship. However, I acknowledge that when choosing sales communication tools in post-sales activities, the level of adoption of technological innovations of the country in which the firm is embedded plays an important role, as do the technological resources of the firm.

Lastly, the research shows that integrating different communication tools including social media during international sales processes helps entrepreneurial firms to reach geographically dispersed prospects and enhance relationships with customers by adapting to their particular needs. This has important implications on the needs of flexibility and limited budgets often faced by internationalising small and medium-sized firms.

## **5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

This thesis contains a number of limitations that do however open up avenues for future research looking at the use of social media in international entrepreneurial ventures.

To begin with, the nascent research area of social media use during an internationalisation process is mainly explored in this thesis through the lenses of network theory and internationalisation. Given the embeddedness of the phenomenon within the international entrepreneurship literature, other theories in the fields of international business and entrepreneurship could be applied and extend understanding of the analysed phenomenon. For instance, theories of entrepreneurial decision-making logic could be applied to examine whether the entrepreneurs follow causation or effectual decision-making processes (Sarasvathy, 2001) when leveraging social media tools and the opportunities that they generate. This application could for instance shed new light on how entrepreneurs make decisions regarding social media tool selection under conditions of uncertainty related to foreign market expansion. In addition, from among the network literature, only the concept of structural embeddedness within business networks was examined; however, other types of embeddedness, such as the cognitive, cultural, and political (Zukin & Di Maggio, 1990; Hite, 2003) could be studied and analysed in relation to social media adoption. This could shed light on how the firms relate themselves to the mainstream political and social discourse run over social media through their product offerings when internationalising. This could offer important implications to the research, given that this area has mostly focussed on firm-level aspects, rather than on the relationships between firms and external agents or institutions.

Secondly, when looking at the use of social media in the business-to-business sales process of international small and medium-sized firms, the research has mainly focussed on firms being different in cultural, administrative, geographical, and economic aspects such as Finland, Italy, Poland, and Brazil (Ghemawat, 2001). This has given rise to a model where particular boundary conditions dealing with relationship culture, geographic location,



typology of business relationship, and level of technological adoption play an important role in sales tool selection. Future studies could extend these boundary conditions and elicit learning on the effects they have on the choice of communication methods with customers and sales process performance. For instance, it would be of great research interest to understand whether institutional environment elements (e.g. Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik & Peng, 2009) or cultural background (see Hofstede 2003) of the firms studied spur similar findings in companies from different countries. Future research could investigate whether findings stemming from firm-level evidence could be traced-back to the above-mentioned macrotopical phenomena.

Third, the qualitative nature of this thesis introduces some limitations to the typology of elicited findings. It should be noted that the main aim of this dissertation is to contribute new knowledge in an empirically and theoretically underdeveloped research area. Doing so calls for the adoption of qualitative methodologies such as singular and multiple case-study research designs, as well as a grounded theory method. The approach has helped acquire an extensive knowledge of the analysed phenomena and to generate new theory (Yin, 2009). However, this has implications for the generalisability of the results to the typology of firms investigated. Future studies could extend the same qualitative research approach to firms from different countries and operating in diverse business sectors. Despite providing data from a wide selection of countries (interviews were conducted with 12 different firms from six countries: Brazil, Finland, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, and Sweden), this dissertation has focussed primarily on firms operating mainly in business-to-business markets and often commercialising digital services. Future qualitative research could investigate the phenomenon of social media use to advance internationalisation among firms operating in consumer markets and with different value offerings. Furthermore, studies adopting quantitative techniques could extend the topics investigated and unveil the cause-effect relationships among the various phenomena analysed in this thesis, and therefore offer generalisable understanding, as well as testing the theoretical advancements suggested in this dissertation. An example of how the research could be further developed from this standpoint might be through the analysis of

the effects of social media use on firms' financial and international sales performance.

Last, but not least, the investigation of the use of social media through qualitative techniques and the collection of all the firm-generated social media posts has provided longitudinal perspectives on the analysed topics. There is evidence from literature in the field of information systems sciences that different methodological approaches, such as data mining and social network analysis, are apt to investigate phenomena involving social media adoption. Further research is called for on the ways in which these quantitative and software engineering techniques could be applied to international business and sales literature. Such investigations could bring new theoretical and methodological insights to theoretically nascent and practically relevant phenomena.



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## **SARA FRACCASTORO**

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Social media platforms are cost-efficient communication channels that provide global online reach and improve interaction among users. Inherently, firms leverage them for their internationalisation and sales management processes. This dissertation focuses on explaining how and why social media platforms are used by international entrepreneurial ventures in such processes and help them overcome financial and organisational resource limitations when conducting business in foreign markets.



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