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The effects of social media usage on solution quality and performance in professional service firms

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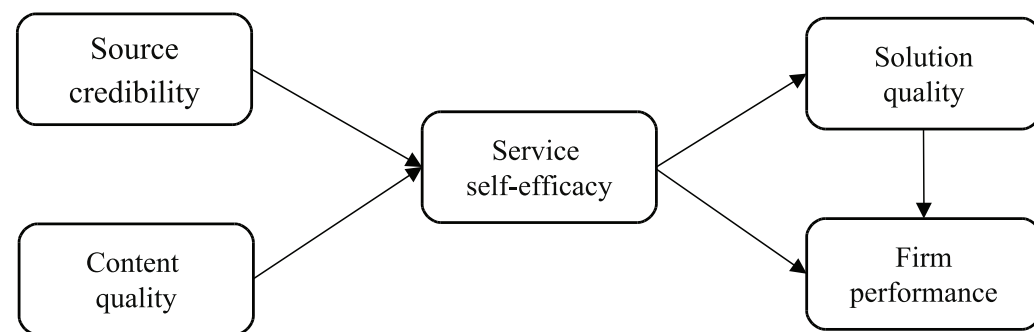
Purpose and background

Knowledge intensity is the most fundamental distinctive characteristic of professional service firms (PSFs) such as law and accounting firms (Brandon-Jones, Lewis, Verma, & Walsman, 2016; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). In fact, PSFs' value creation process relies on the accumulation and application of professionals' specialist knowledge to provide a customized solution that solves a customers' specific problems (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Bettencourt, Ostrom, Brown, & Roundtree, 2002; Verma, 2000).

Previous research has examined the sources of such professionals' specialist knowledge and problem-solving capability highlighting the role of extensive education and professional practice (Hausman, 2003; Hitt, Bierman, Shimizu, & Kochhar, 2001), experience (Jaakkola & Halinen, 2006) and interactions with customers (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Fosstenlökken, Löwendahl, & Revang, 2003). In addition, interactions with other professionals have the potential to strengthen knowledge intensity. Therefore, professionals should participate in professional networks (Brandon-Jones et al., 2016). However, no study to date has specifically investigated whether the participation in professional social media may contribute to improve PSFs' performance by increasing professionals' level of specialist knowledge and their ability to apply knowledge to solve customers' problems. The few available studies about the use of social media by PSFs have focused on the adoption of enterprise social networks to foster internal knowledge sharing among employees (Chin, Evans, & Choo, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to develop and test a model (figure 1) that fills this gap. The model theoretically relies on the knowledge-based view (KBV) (Grant, 1996) and on the experiential learning theory (EXT) (Kolb, 1984). Previous research has noted that knowledge acquisition from social media fosters learning behavior consisting of learning, relearning, integrating acquired knowledge and applying knowledge (Nguyen, Yu, Melewar, & Chen, 2015).

Figure 1. The research model.



Our model suggests that knowledge is the results of both social media's content quality (Magno, 2017) and source credibility (Kim, Kandampully, & Bilgihan, 2018). The model also draws on previous studies showing that PSFs' value creation process is characterized by a high degree of risk with regard to the results, making the professionals experiencing uncertainty and anxiety (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012). Therefore, our model suggests that the knowledge acquired from professional social media positively impacts on solution quality (defined as the degree to which it is "the right solution for the problem encountered" (Atuahene-Gima, 2003, p. 359)) and that this impact is mediated by a professional's service self-efficacy (defined as "a service provider's self-confidence regarding capabilities, skills, and expertise to effectively perform service tasks to meet customer expectations satisfactorily" (Lee, 2014, p. 142)). In turn we hypothesize that solution quality is positively related to firm performance in terms of growth and profitability (Tajvidi & Karami, 2017).

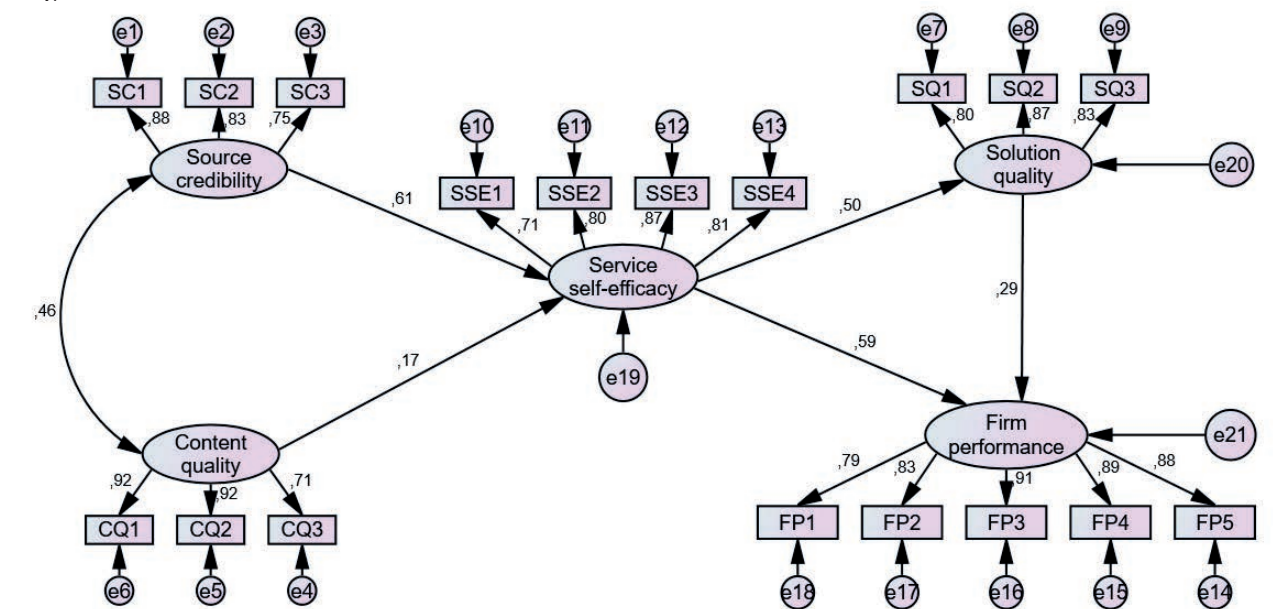
Methods and results

A questionnaire-based survey was conducted. A list of 1,143 Italian certified accountants and auditors was compiled by consulting registries available to the public of all about 100,000 Italian certified accountants and auditors (Cassia & Magno, 2012). A stratified sampling technique was used to select the sample of 1,143 accountants and auditors to reflect both the level of experience (number of years since the accountant or auditor was certified) and the geographical location. The selected accountants and auditors were contacted to present the research and asked for their collaboration. Up to now (data collection will be completed by mid-May), 352 questionnaires have been received but only 131 respondents reported that they consult professional social media and therefore have been considered for the analysis.

As regards the questionnaire, all constructs were measured through multiple items taken from previous studies and slightly adapted to the research context. Source credibility was measured by three items reflecting information sender's expertise (Kim et al., 2018). Content quality, service self-efficacy, solution quality and firm performance were tapped on the basis of respectively three, four, three and five items from Magno (2017), Lee (2014), Atuahene-Gima (2003) and Tajvidi and Karami (2017). All constructs were measured by multi-item seven-point Likert scales, except for credibility for which 7-point semantic differential scales were used.

A confirmatory factor analysis was used to evaluate the measurement model (CFA) ($\chi^2/df = 1.59$; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA=0.06 and $p_{close} > 0.05$), showing good overall fit (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). Structural equation modeling was then used to estimate the structural model. The results indicated good model fit (overall model fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.68$; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA=0.07 and $p_{close} < 0.05$). The analysis revealed that all hypothesized relationships were supported (findings are summarized in figure 2)

Figure 2. The structural model.



Conclusion

The findings of this paper shed new light on the effects of social media on value creation processes of PSFs. In particular, they both enrich theoretical knowledge and provide insights for practice (both for professionals and for bloggers and other social media operators).

Keywords: professional service firms; social media; knowledge management