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Social media roles in crowdsourcing innovation tasks in B2B-relationships

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Abstract: Social media and crowdsourcing are increasingly important means of involving different actors from outside the company borders, as well as their expertise, knowledge and other resources in the development of new innovations. Research on the use of social media in innovation of B2B companies has been carried out only quite recently, and is yet little understood. The goal of this exploratory study is to understand the significance and the various roles and functions of social media in crowdsourcing, especially in crowdsourcing innovation-related tasks in B2B relationships. A three-phase netnographic approach, including literature review, participant observation and case analysis, was used to identify crowdsourcing platforms that have been utilized in B2B context, as well as concrete company cases targeted for B2B innovation development, and to develop understanding on what was crowdsourced, and what was the role of social media in crowdsourcing carried out by companies.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing; innovation; open innovation; social media; B2B; business-to-business; B2B products.

1 Introduction

Some increasingly important relatively novel means of involving different actors and their expertise and knowledge in the development of new products and innovations are social media (Bernoff and Li, 2008) and crowdsourcing (Howe, 2008) in particular.
Social media is one of the important drivers for a quick-paced increase in currently existing crowdsourcing approaches.

The current lack of organized and analysed case evidence and examples, as well as a lack of a suitable framework for evaluating and pinpointing useful crowdsourcing approaches especially in the business-to-business (B2B) sector make it difficult for managers to estimate the possibilities of social media in crowdsourcing innovation tasks. Some characteristics of the B2B sector, such as B2B's having typically far fewer customers than B2C's (Geehan, 2011), often make it difficult to locate sufficiently large and useful crowds of customers for crowdsourcing purposes. Second, the ways to motivate and engage business customers are, in many respects, very different from motivating and engaging consumers (Tickle et al., 2011) for crowdsourcing purposes. Third, various IPR and information security issues (Marjanovic et al., 2012) set limitations and challenges for crowdsourcing use in B2B sector. Due to the above characteristics, currently available academic studies, that almost merely present B2C crowdsourcing examples, are useful only in a very limited way to B2B's.

Recent studies demonstrate that B2B- crowdsourcing is actually possible, despite many restrictions and related doubts (e.g. Koivisto, 2012; Kärkkäinen et al., 2012; Simula and Vuori, 2012). It has only been done by a small amount of forerunner companies in variety of innovative ways (Simula and Vuori, 2012; Simula et al., 2012). Simula and Vuori (2012) demonstrate that conducting crowdsourcing is clearly more challenging in the B2B context, and they emphasize the need for more research of crowdsourcing especially in B2B context.

Recent studies (Marjanovic et al., 2012; Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2011) reveal that social media seems commonly to have an important role in crowdsourcing, and even if crowdsourcing has been carried without the aid of computers, it seems to benefit from social media in a variety of ways, for example by enabling crowdsourcers to reach larger crowds, more competent crowds, or crowds with more extensive knowledge variety. Current studies (e.g. Simula and Vuori, 2012) also bring forth that the roles of social media in B2B crowdsourcing are not yet understood comprehensively.

In addition research of social media in business-to-business innovation and new product development tasks, has been carried out only quite recently, and the topic is currently yet little understood. In the B2B context, it has been e.g. shown that social media can enable and significantly increase the collaboration and learning form customers in various ways, for instance by novel social ways of providing and receiving feedback from new products and concepts (Jussila et al., 2012; Kärkkäinen et al., 2011).

The goal of this exploratory study is to understand the significance and the various roles and functions of social media in crowdsourcing innovation- related tasks in B2B relationships. To achieve the goal, a three-phase netnographic approach was used to gather and analyse the data related to the specific subject area of the study. The first phase consisted of a literature review to gain an overview of the various crowdsourcing platforms related to B2B innovation. The second phase included a participant observation to gain more knowledge and identify crowdsourcing platforms, as well as identifying concrete company cases targeted for B2B innovation development. The final phase consisted of a maximum variation case selection strategy-based multiple case study followed by case analysis to develop understanding on what was crowdsourced (innovation task, task complexity and types of crowds used) and how the crowdsourcing was carried out (the role of social media in crowdsourcing) in companies operating in B2B markets and producing B2B products and services.
2 Crowdsourcing in B2B innovation

Crowdsourcing is a relatively new concept. One widely accepted useful definition clarifying the general nature of crowdsourcing has been presented by Howe (2008). He describes crowdsourcing as an “act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”. This definition is not, however, sufficient for understanding crowdsourcing specifically in B2B context, nor to identify useful B2B crowdsourcing cases for our study.

Defining crowdsourcing in B2B context

In current crowdsourcing literature the definitions have varied from very specific notions to broad generalist concepts depending on the subjects or the scopes of research projects. To unify the vague group of definitions Estellés-Arolas and González (2012) studied over two hundred documents, related to crowdsourcing, and found 40 different crowdsourcing definitions which they used to form one universal interpretation to act as a theoretical base:

“Crowdsourcing is a type of participative online activity in which an individual, an institution, a non-profit organization, or company proposes to a group of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity, and number, via a flexible open call, the voluntary undertaking of a task.”

In addition, they also emphasize the mutual benefit between the crowdsourcer and users (individuals who perform the given tasks) by not only recognizing the nature of the task and different efforts needed to fulfil the task, but also distinguishing the different needs that both actors have during the process (Estellés-Arolas and González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012).

Drawing from the above, we perceive B2B crowdsourcing rather extensively as “companies operating in B2B markets, using crowdsourcing in any way to their business benefit”, thus not necessarily the B2B’s starting or making the actual crowdsourcing call themselves, or only between companies (as name “business-to-business” might refer). In order to understand crowdsourcing in B2B innovation in the context of this paper, we define (Kärkkäinen et al., 2012) crowdsourcing as:

“companies operating in Business-to-Business markets propose themselves or aim to benefit in some other way from voluntary provision of A from B in C purpose, benefiting from this in D sense
in which:

A = concepts, ideas, information, knowledge, funding or other resources
B = a group of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity and number, consisting from individuals from any companies, organizations, non-profits, intermediaries, communities or individual professionals
C = new product development (NPD) or the whole innovation process, from ideas and concepts to commercialization
D = cost reduction, quality increase, increased customer orientation and customer understanding, time-to-market time reduction, sales / profit increase, etc. NPD or innovation related benefits

By business-to-business innovation we refer to the development of new commercially successful products, services and other innovations for other companies. In this study, we exclude internal crowdsourcing and focus on social media roles in external business-to-business relationships.

**Crowdsourcing types in B2B innovation**

Classifications of crowdsourcing have earned substantial attention in recent crowdsourcing literature. For example, Howe (2008) has described four primary types of crowdsourcing: crowd wisdom, crowd creation, crowd voting and crowd funding. Schenk and Guittard (2011) have collected and classified different crowdsourcing practices based on the type of tasks sourced (simple, complex or creative) and the nature of the crowdsourcing process (selective or integrative). In addition, Vukovic (2009) classifies crowdsourcing by its function (spanning the different parts of product life cycle) and crowdsourcing mode (whether the request is a tender or a competition).

Based on our analysis of current literature, most importantly, the studies of Howe (2008), Schenk and Guittard (2011) and Vukovic (2009), crowdsourcing can be divided into two classes depending on the nature of compensation: a) mainly monetary or material compensation, b) mainly non-monetary or non-material compensation. In the mainly monetary or material compensation class we applied the definition of Vukovic (2009) that distinguished two different crowdsourcing types: competition and marketplace. However, based on the literature we identified three additional crowdsourcing types: events (Erickson, 2011), communities (Zwass, 2010) and toolkits (Bessant and Möslin, 2011). Instead of considering toolkits as an independent crowdsourcing type, we recognize it as a technological option that can be used in all types of crowdsourcing (for example Bombardier uses toolkits in its innovation competition).

In events and communities the compensation is typically mainly non-monetary and non-material, such as reputation, gaining new understanding, sharing knowledge, reciprocity, and a sense of community. It must be noted that our classification does not limit the use of multiple forms of compensations, but it is based on the primary form of compensation that is typically used. For example, in competitions the winner is typically compensated monetarily but he or she may also gain other forms of compensation, such as reputation.

To select different types of crowdsourcing cases for our maximum variation case strategy- based multiple case study approach, we ended up categorizing the different crowdsourcing types based on how the crowdsourcing platforms help the company to gain the resources (e.g. ideas, concepts, funding). For example, crowdsourcing platforms that applied competition logic, such as Atizo, were categorized as competitions. As events we categorized such crowdsourcing platforms as Dell Storm Sessions, where the resources were acquired by time-limited events, that neither were competitions nor were the participants monetarily compensated for participating in the event. Those crowdsourcing platforms (e.g. uTest) that followed a market logic, in which the company
gains the resource through assignment or task, we categorized as marketplace crowdsourcing type. Last, as innovation communities, we categorized crowdsourcing platforms where the acquiring of resources is not organised as competitions, time-limited events, or marketplaces, rather as ongoing communities, where the company and each community member can initiate the open call, for example National Instruments Idea Exchange (cf. Leino, 2011).

Roles of social media in crowdsourcing

A useful framework for conceptualizing the role of social media is the categorization of 5Cs based on the actions enabled by the social media tools: communicating, collaborating, connecting, completing, and combining. The frame was introduced by Vuori (2011). Examples of social media tools based on the 5Cs categorization are illustrated on Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Application examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communicating: publishing and sharing content</strong></td>
<td>Publish, discuss, express oneself, show opinion, share, influence, store</td>
<td>Blogger, WordPress, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, SlideShare, Prezi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs, media sharing systems, discussion forums, microblogging, instant messaging</td>
<td>Create content together, collaboration, produsage</td>
<td>Wikipedia, TWiki, GoogleDocs, MatchWare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborating: collective content creation</strong></td>
<td>Socialise, network, connect, play, entertain</td>
<td>Facebook, LinkedIn, SecondLife, World of Warcraft, Habbo Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis, shared workspaces</td>
<td>Adding metadata, describing content, subscribing updates, combining, serendipity</td>
<td>GoogleReader, Del.ici.ous, Pinterest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting: networking people</strong></td>
<td>Combining other tools and technologies according to situation and needs</td>
<td>GoogleMaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks, communities, virtual worlds</td>
<td>Combining other tools and technologies according to situation and needs</td>
<td>GoogleMaps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Condensed from Vuori (2011).

3 Research approach

We applied netnographic research principles, designed for studying internet-based platforms, e.g. social media-based communities, on the observation of textual discourse in selected social media-based crowdsourcing platforms, and the media (platforms) themselves (Kozinets, 2002) related to our research goal. The subject area of observation
of textual discourse was specifically crowdsourcing innovation tasks in B2B relationships, and the media studied were the identified and selected crowdsourcing platforms, where the conversation that produced the studied textual discourses took place.

Firstly, following Kozinets’ netnography approach, we conducted a literature review to gain an overview of the various well-known crowdsourcing platforms related to our subject area. For the information search, five databases were consulted: ACM, IEEE, ScienceDirect, SAGE and Emerald using “crowdsourcing” as a keyword. The information search resulted in 1305 documents which were skimmed by evaluating their relevance to B2B and innovation. Articles that dealt with only intra-organizational crowdsourcing were excluded, based on our B2B crowdsourcing definition. After removing duplicates from the search results, there were 59 unique documents in total that matched our criteria. Based on the literature review, we identified 104 different crowdsourcing platforms.

Secondly, to collect data and to sample related crowdsourcing platforms with the specific subject area (cf. Rokka, 2010), a participant observation (Lewis et al., 2009) was used as a part of our netnographic approach to identify the crowdsourcing platforms that have been utilized in business-to-business context, as well as concrete company cases targeted for crowdsourcing innovation tasks. The observation included registrations to several online platforms, browsing through the available textual discourses, and identifying, observing and analysing the social media actions the users have performed or can perform in the platforms. The approach included also following various links to secondary sources (e.g. company websites and online discussion forums) in order to gain comprehensive knowledge about the crowdsourcing platforms. During the observation we adapted Gill and Johnson’s (2002) role of “complete observer” with some characteristics from “observer as participant”, as we did not take part in the actual crowdsourcing tasks, but did not deliberately hide our presence on the platforms, either.

Further analysis, from the original 104 platforms, resulted in 19 crowdsourcing platforms that were used by B2B companies for innovation purposes representing four crowdsourcing types. Competition type of crowdsourcing included platforms: Atizo (Frey et al., 2011), Bombardier YouRail (Haller et al., 2011), InnoCentive (Brabham, 2008), Brainfloor (Hüsigt and Kohn, 2011), Cisco i-Prize (Simula et al., 2012), Idea Bounty (Puah et al., 2011), GrabCAD Challenges (Simula et al., 2012), Lemminkäinen Constructive Idea (Simula et al., 2012), NI Community Challenges (Elliott et al., 2007), and TopCoder (Vukovic, 2009). Marketplace type of crowdsourcing included platforms: Go4Funding (Simula and Vuori, 2012), Kickstarter (Noble, 2012), NineSigma (Sawhney et al., 2005), uTest (Vukovic, 2009), and Yet2 (Sawhney et al., 2005). Event type of crowdsourcing included platforms: Dell IdeaStorm Storm Sessions (Bernardino, 2010) and IBM Innovation Jam (Frey et al., 2011; Hüsigt and Kohn, 2011). Community type of crowdsourcing included platforms: Dell IdeaStorm (Bernardino, 2010), My SAPIens (Ebner et al., 2008), NI Community Idea Exchange (Elliott et al., 2007), and YourEncore (Simula and Vuori, 2012).

Thirdly, and finally, by using maximum variation case selection strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2006) we selected nine crowdsourcing platforms with related B2B cases. The cases were drawn from different industry sectors, i.e. manufacturing, construction, information technology and professional services, and they represented different types of crowdsourcing (competitions, events, marketplaces, and communities). The studied companies operating in B2B markets utilizing these nine crowdsourcing platforms in innovation-related tasks were: Baden-Chemie, Bombardier, Dell, Formlabs, Intuit,
Konecranes, National Instruments, Numerex and Tecnisa (Table 2). The purpose of the maximum variation case strategy was to learn as much as possible about the critical few cases concerning the different crowdsourcing approaches applied in the development of B2B products and services in different industries.

Table 2 B2B companies using a crowdsourcing platform to crowdsource innovation tasks related to specific B2B product in their respective industries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company and platform</th>
<th>B2B product</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baden-Chemie Atizo</td>
<td>Chemical product for building and redevelopment</td>
<td>Construction chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombardier YouRail</td>
<td>Rail vehicles (interior design for trains)</td>
<td>Rail-equipment manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dell IdeaStorm Storm Session</td>
<td>Developer laptop</td>
<td>Computer hardware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formlabs Kickstarter</td>
<td>Professional 3D printer</td>
<td>Manufacturing (3D printing technology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuit TurboTax Live Community</td>
<td>TurboTax Business tax software</td>
<td>Professional services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konecranes GrabCAD Challenge</td>
<td>Chain hoist (chain wear indicator)</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NI Idea Exchange / Community Challenges</td>
<td>LabVIEW software product</td>
<td>Software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerex uTest</td>
<td>M2M (machine-to-machine) solution for tracking vehicles and assets</td>
<td>M2M hardware and software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tecnisa Ideas</td>
<td>Building sites and buildings</td>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Results and analysis

Because crowdsourcing an innovation task is a complex phenomenon, we decided to limit the results of this study to crowdsourcing of specific innovation tasks related to a specific B2B product of the company operating in B2B markets using the crowdsourcing platform (see Table 3). On the basis of the studied crowdsourcing cases, the complexity is due to several factors. First, crowdsourcing in B2B involves a crowdsourcing platform, which can be either company built or maintained, such as Dell IdeaStorm Storm Sessions, or it can be an intermediary platform that the company is using to crowdsource a specific task, such as Numerex used uTest to crowdsource testing of their hardware product. Second, while some platforms are seemingly built for crowdsourcing only one type of innovation task, for example funding in Kickstarter, actually various types of innovation tasks can be crowdourced in most of the platforms. For example, in Kickstarter the company that is crowdsourcing funding from the platform can also crowdsource ideas from the contributors (backers) of the project. Third, the crowdsourcing platforms keep evolving, and new features and possibilities for crowdsourcing innovation tasks are introduced, making the object of study a moving target.

Table 3 Description of crowdsourced innovation tasks in select B2B company cases and crowdsourcing platforms.
We discovered that the crowdsourcing platforms were used to crowdsource simple, creative and complex innovation tasks. Simple innovation tasks, that required a relatively low involvement from the individuals, were observed to have been crowdsourced from Kickstarter platform and uTest platform. Numerex crowdsourced testing of their vehicle tracking device on uTest’s platform, which practically only required the testers to install a device on the roofs of their vehicles. Formlabs used Kickstarter to crowdsource funding for the development of 3D printer, where the task was simply to pledge from $5 to $10,000 or more to the project.

Crowdsourcing of creative innovation tasks were observed in Bombardier’s YouRail platform, where the company crowdsourced new interior designs for trains. The designs were either freely created by using any design tool or created with the help of configuration tool provided by Bombardier.

Most of the crowdsourced innovation tasks were however complex in nature, such as complex problem solving activities (e.g. solving problems of the customers on Intuit’s platform) or generating new ideas, concepts or designs (e.g. Konecranes’ GrabCAD challenge). Solving complex innovation tasks requires more knowledge intensive activities from the solvers as opposed to solving simple tasks (Schenk and Guittard, 2011). For example Konecranes’ GrabCAD challenge of designing new chain wear indicators requires significant knowledge and expertise from various knowledge domains. Regarding crowdsourcing complex innovation tasks all of the platforms have different processes for selecting the most suitable solution from amongst all candidate solutions. These processes include, for example, GrabCAD’s competition logic together with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company and platform</th>
<th>Crowdsourced innovation task</th>
<th>Task complexity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baden-Chemie Atizo</td>
<td>New ideas for chemical products (Atizo, 2012)</td>
<td>Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombardier YouRail</td>
<td>New interior designs of trains (Bombardier, 2012)</td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dell IdeaStorm Storm Session</td>
<td>Requirements and features for developer laptop (Dell, 2012)</td>
<td>Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formlabs Kickstarter</td>
<td>Funding of development of 3D printer (Kickstarter, 2012)</td>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuit TurboTax Live Community</td>
<td>Solutions for customer problems regarding corporate taxes (Intuit, 2012)</td>
<td>Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konecranes GrabCAD Challenge</td>
<td>New ideas and designs for chain wear indicator of chain hoists (Step files) (GrabCAD, 2012)</td>
<td>Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerex uTest</td>
<td>Testing hardware of vehicle tracking device (uTest, 2012)</td>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tecnisa Ideas</td>
<td>New ideas and concepts related with Tecnisa’s construction projects, building sites, and individual apartments (Tecnisa, 2012)</td>
<td>Complex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
solution seeker’s criteria, and Tecnisa’s or NI Community’s processes where the solution seeker decides the solutions for further development.

In order to better understand the potential and roles of social media in crowdsourcing innovation tasks in B2B companies we used the 5C framework of social media tools (Vuori, 2011) to analyse the roles. Table 4 illustrates the identified social media roles in the studied company cases and crowdsourcing platforms from the perspective of the user.

**Table 4** Social media roles in the studied company cases and crowdsourcing platforms from the user perspective (1C = Communicating, 2C = Collaboration, 3C = Connecting, 4C = Completing, 5C = Combining).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case and platform</th>
<th>1C</th>
<th>2C</th>
<th>3C</th>
<th>4C</th>
<th>5C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baden-Chemie Atizo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombardier YouRail</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dell IdeaStorm Storm</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formlabs Kickstarter</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuit TurboTax Live Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konecranes GrabCAD Challenge</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NI Idea Exchange / Community Challenges</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerex uTest</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tecnisa Ideas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding communicating there were differences in different platforms in sharing information inside and outside the platform. While most crowdsourcing platforms enabled sharing information inside the platform, platforms such as Bombardier YouRail and GrabCAD enabled sharing information also outside the platform. Sharing of information inside the platform was possible in a limited way in uTest and Kickstarter.

As for collaboration, collective content creation actions similar to the use of Wiki or Google Docs were not supported directly in any of the platform from the users’ perspective.

Concerning connecting, the role of social media varied greatly between the platforms, although setting up profiles was possible in all of the platforms. Only a few platforms enable linking to other individuals’ profiles, such as Atizo and NI Community and uTest. Navigating and interacting with others inside the platform was enabled slightly more in the platforms, e.g. Atizo, Bombardier YouRail, GrabCAD, and NI Community. In addition navigating and interacting with others outside the platform was made possible to those user’s that had provided their social media contact details in platforms, such as Tecnisa Ideas and GrabCAD.

Related to completing, most platforms enabled describing content by means of commenting, but only a few platforms like NI Community enabled tagging. In NI Community new ideas are searchable by tags and tagging is also encouraged by presenting Tagging Leaderboards to the community.
Combining actions were possible in GrabCAD, NI Community and Tecnisa Ideas. In NI Community users could combine YouTube videos into new ideas to demonstrate what the user would like the software to do. Similarly, in GrabCAD and Tecnisa Ideas users combined YouTube videos to their ideas to better demonstrate the idea to the company.

5 Conclusions

We found that the role of social media was quite essential in every crowdsourcing type. Most of the crowdsourcing platforms utilized well-known social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube to enhance the crowdsourcing initiatives. Some of the crowdsourcing platforms had built-in social functionalities such as commenting, mash-up functionalities, rating functions, and effective cross-referencing tools. On the surface level most studied crowdsourcing platforms enabled communicating, connecting and completing actions. Regarding communicating there were differences in sharing information inside and outside the platform. Collaboration, was not supported directly in any of the platforms from the users perspective. Related to completing, most platforms enabled commenting, but only a few platforms enabled tagging. Most platforms enabled connecting actions at the surface level, since it was possible to set up a profile in every platform. Combining actions were possible only in three platforms, in GrabCAD, NI Community and Tecnisa Ideas.

Social media served many different functions in B2B crowdsourcing, such as making the crowdsourcing calls more extensively visible, and enabling the general networking of the members of the crowds, but also quite essentially, they enabled, in various ways analyzed in this study, the efficient sharing of information and knowledge. As social media use has been very little studied and understood in the specific contexts of B2B and crowdsourcing, this study adds to the understanding of the roles of social media in B2B innovation context in general, as well as more specifically in crowdsourcing innovation related tasks in B2B relationships.

Companies that operate in B2B markets and produce B2B products and services can utilize the recognized and analyzed social media approaches and social media- based crowdsourcing approaches as useful models for facilitating their own open innovation activities and experiments. The concrete examples provide insight on potential areas of application of social media- based crowdsourcing approaches in manufacturing, construction, information technology, and professional service industries in innovation of new products and services ranging from machine parts to corporate tax solutions.

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