

# Contributions of Social Networks to Employee Socialization and Performance in Cameroonian SMEs during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The rapid evolution of the internet has given birth to social networks, which are a dedicated website or other application that enables users to communicate by posting information, comments, messages, images, etc. Generally, the utilization of social networks tends towards entertainment; however, they are also used for professional purposes. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this study aims to respond to the following question: What factors favor the adoption of social networks as tools to maintain operating activities in Cameroonian SMEs, and what is the impact of this utilization during the Covid-19 pandemic? At the centre of this study is a research model design based on four conceptual elements: TAM, the theory of socialization, the theory of connectivism, and the theory of performance. Data collected from 271 employees in Cameroon constitutes the dataset to test the model using the PLS-SEM approach. The results prove that TAM and the theory of connectivism are relevant to identifying the factors driving employees' behavioural decisions to use social networks during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study confirms the adequacy of both theories (performance and socialization) as conceptual frameworks by which to explain the impacts of the utilization of social networks.

## Keywords

Theory of Socialization, Theory of Performance, Theory of Connectivism, TAM, Social Networks for SME Operations during Covid-19, Cameroon

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the opportunities social media creates for workforce

management in the post-Covid-19 era in the African context: the literature about the recent evolution of the African economy (as well as the Cameroonian one) reveals that the Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the organizational behaviour of its components (its enterprises, government organizations, non-governmental organizations, etc.) (Coulibaly, 2021). Many authors highlight the poor preparation of both private and public organizations for this profound transformation in their economic environment. Some reasons are poor internal technology development; the scarcity of public technology infrastructures, such as electricity; and the weakness of the bandwidth of telecommunications networks (Bankole et al., 2015; Mignamissi, 2021; Ozili, 2022). This weakness in technology infrastructures led to three key issues that affected Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Cameroon during the Covid-19 pandemic (Onyishi et al., 2021; Ozili, 2022): 1) the for SMEs to quickly implement survival mechanisms for their enterprise, 2) the imperative need to find alternative technological solutions to ensure their continued functioning, and 3) the need for employees to embrace the use of social networks to maintain their professional communications.

This research topic is of keen interest to researchers and operations managers because Covid-19 has forced firms to redesign their business operations to at least maintain their pre-Covid-19 performance goals. Thus, operations managers are faced with several challenges regarding how to effectively manage their workforces to maintain acceptable operational performance levels. This concern has led to several calls for researchers to propose new theoretical perspectives that could suggest new ways of using technology for workforce management in operations. For example, Irani et al. (2017), Dey et al. (2019), and Babutsidze (2018) have developed research topics to tackle knowledge sharing based on social network. Prior research typically shows that social networks are mostly used as a tool for socialization in organizations and that they are not very useful with regard to the actual work being done. However, since the outbreak of Covid-19, social networks have been extensively used for workforce management, especially in organizations that cannot afford very expensive collaborative tools (Abelsen et al., 2021). SMEs in Cameroon are typical examples of such firms.

Given this background, the primary objective of this research is to understand the mechanism through which social networks affect the operational performance of firms post-Covid-19. This study answers the question: How do social networks affect the operational performance of firms through workforce management support?

This research question is evaluated through the lens of the theory of socialization, the theory of connectivism, the theory of performance, and the technology acceptance model. Four key concepts are central to this study: connectivity, socialization, professional performance, and social networks. Connectivity refers to the ability of a social media platform to bring together people with common interests (Wamba & Akter, 2016). Socialization refers to the processes through

which inexperienced individuals learn the skills, behaviours, values, and motivations necessary for them to function within the group to which they belong (Chao et al., 1994; Grusec & Hastings, 2014). Professional performance refers to the accomplishment of work-related tasks that are mandated, coordinated, and rewarded by the organization and linked to the achievements of the organization's objectives. It refers to activities carried out regularly, and it is reliable (Ali-Hassan et al., 2015). Social networks refer here to internet applications of the Web 2.0 type that allow the connection of individuals, groups, or organizations for the purposes of sharing information in a multi-media format (Aichner & Jacob, 2015). This study concentrates on four social networks: Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram.

A PLS-SEM approach is applied to survey data collected from 271 SME employees in the towns of Yaoundé and Douala in Cameroon (Hair Jr. et al., 2021). The primary finding of this study is that the use of social networks for work purposes has a strong positive effect on operational performance as well as on socialization in organizations. This research also finds that the results prove that TAM and the theory of connectivism are relevant to identifying the factors driving employees' behavioural decisions to use social networks during the Covid-19 outbreak. Furthermore, the study confirms the adequacy of the theory of performance and the theory of socialization as conceptual frameworks through which to explain the impacts of the utilization of social networks on maintenance operations (customer relationship management, vendor relationship management, production control inside firms, etc.) inside Cameroonian SMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic. These findings contribute to existing research by revealing how technology contributes to the functioning of businesses under Covid-19 pandemic conditions, highlighting that social networks are an emerging trend in workforce management operations in SMEs in developing countries and confirming the importance of social networks in employee socialization. In light of these findings, operation managers should consider systematically integrating social networks into workforce management to ensure operational continuity and making social networks a strategic dimension of workforce management in their organizations.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Following a literature review, we develop the research background and hypotheses. Then, in concordance with the research framework, the methodology and the results are presented. We close the article with discussions, limitations, research avenues, and conclusions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Social Networks in Cameroon

Various literature have already deeply examined social networks around the world (Wenninger et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2017) by identifying various links between its usage and individual or social behaviours such as the development of anxiety and depression at the individual level (Yang et al., 2020), addiction at the

individual level (Maier, 2020), and global harassment at the social level (Weninger et al., 2021). Fortunately, numerous other studies link social network usage and positive outcomes both at the individual and social level such as in disaster management (Kavota et al., 2020), job performance (Chen et al., 2020b), and socialization (Chen et al., 2020b).

The Cameroonian context has not escaped this frenzy of social network use. One of the main consequences is ubiquitous social network utilization for social communication, professional communication, entertainment, knowledge sharing, and business processes. Indeed, the explosion in mobile phone technology in the Cameroonian context has also induced important developments regarding the use of the internet, mostly in urban areas. Furthermore, social networks feature in the daily lives of many Cameroonians both at individual and enterprise levels. At the individual level, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Skype are the most popular social networks, while LinkedIn is most popular for professional use (Chedjou Kamdem, 2020).

In Cameroon, many students and workers are interested in social networks, and the purposes they use them for are various. Students use social networks for entertainment and academic purposes. With regard to entertainment, their activities are mainly accessing publications and other content published by social networks in general. With regard to academic purposes, students use social networks such as WhatsApp to share knowledge and carry out reviews via groups. These groups are ones in which educational documents are often shared, exercises are often corrected, and academic misunderstandings are dealt with (Bawack & Kala Kamdjoug, 2020). For some employees and self-employed workers, social networks such as Skype allow them to instantly exchange information and aid their clients, publish job offers, or search for specific profiles on networks such as LinkedIn. The LinkedIn social network is now one of Cameroon's most used social networks (Etomes, 2021).

Facebook has been the most widely used social network in Cameroon since 2009, thanks to its messaging applications WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Among the 2.9 million internet users active on social networks, 2.8 million are present on Facebook. Most people use WhatsApp as a messaging tool, while Instagram occupies second place (Chedjou Kamdem, 2020).

## **2.2. Social Networks for Professional Performance and Socialization**

Independent of technology infrastructures that may be public or private, an enterprise's social network constitutes a relational ecosystem that encompasses not only the employees but often the business partners also. Despite the current use of social networks primarily for entertainment, many employees use them for professional purposes in developing countries. From an individual point of view, the extant literature on the effect of Covid-19 on the work design highlights the perceiving connectivity, factors of adoption, socialization, or professional per-

formance as essential aspects for social network adoption and their (Abelsen et al., 2021; Fotiadis & Stylos, 2017; He et al., 2021).

Professional performance refers to the performance of work-related tasks which are mandated, coordinated, and rewarded by the organization and linked to the achievement of the objectives of the organization. It refers to activities carried out on a regular and reliable basis (Ali-Hassan et al., 2015), while socialization refers to the processes through which inexperienced individuals learn the skills, behaviours, values, and motivations necessary for them to function within the group to which they belong (Chao et al., 1994; Grusec & Hastings, 2014). Some existing studies have focused on professional performance, socialization, and social networks (Abelsen et al., 2021; Loh et al., 2022); Chen & Wei, 2020). Without ambition to be exhaustive, **Table 1** summarizes the studies in the recent literature.

Except for the study by (Abelsen et al., 2021), which focuses on socialization and performance in the Covid-19 context, the other studies tackle only socialization or job performance. Furthermore, these studies are concerned with the use of social networks in academic and enterprise contexts outside of Africa. The aspects of social networks that affect SMEs' socialization and job performance in Africa have not yet been identified. Additionally, none of these works have studied connectivity as a factor that can prompt an employee to use a social network.

### 3. Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

This research paper is supported by four conceptual pillars: 1) the technology acceptance model (TAM), 2) the theory of connectivism, 3) the theory of socialization, and 4) the theory of performance. The basic model used in this study is TAM, proposed by Davis (1989), which is used to explain the determinants of the actual use of social networks in the time of Covid-19. According to TAM, the critical determinants of information technology usage are the conceptual constructs of Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use. In numerous studies on the adoption of social media, TAM has served as a basic component of the conceptual framework. For example, studies of the drivers of Facebook usage behaviour (Rauniar et al., 2014) examine the effects of psychological ownership on social media loyalty (Zhao et al., 2016) and the use of social media for collaborative learning to enhance collaborative authoring (Alenazy et al., 2019).

The theory of connectivism, proposed by Siemens (2004), has been primarily used in the context of learning to suggest that students should combine thoughts, theories, and general information in a useful manner. Here, this theory serves to provide an explanation of learning in technologically enabled networks and, notably, the characteristics linked to the construct of Perceived Connectivity, which Wamba and Akter (2016) find very important in explaining the decision of humans to adopt social media. This theory is also used to study social media

**Table 1.** Summary of the links between social networks (media), socialization, and professional performance.

Reference and authors	Topic	Purpose	Key findings
(Abelsen et al., 2021)	Information technology, professional performance, and socialization; Covid-19.	To investigate the relationship between information technology use, professional performance, and employee socialization during Covid-19.	High task-technology fit has both directly and indirectly influenced the work performance of individuals. Designing ICTs in line with task-technology fit principles reduces an individual's loneliness at home. At the same time, it gives them the ability to perform better in their work-related tasks.
(Zhang et al., 2016)	Socialization, discontinuous usage behaviour, and social networks.	By using the stressor-strain-outcome framework, an investigation is conducted to address the antecedents and outcomes of fatigue in the SNS context.	System features, information, and social overload induce social network fatigue. System feature overload and social network fatigue cause dissatisfaction. Social network fatigue and dissatisfaction influence discontinuous use intention.
(Cai et al., 2020)	The contributions of social media to newcomers' socialization.	To examine of the impact of the intensity of social media usage on newcomers' socialization and its boundary conditions.	The intensity of social media usage has positive effects on performance proficiency and interpersonal relationships.
(Barkhuus & Tashiro, 2010)	Students' socialization via Facebook.	To focus on offline socializing structured around Facebook and how this can facilitate in-person social activities for students.	Online social networks are a powerful tool for encouraging peripheral friendships.
(Ellwardt et al., 2012)	A social network perspective on workplace gossip.	To analyse of the antecedents of becoming the object of gossip.	Employees spread both positive and negative gossip about colleagues from their own work group. Negative gossip is directed towards colleagues who have few friends in the organizational network. Negative gossip is concentrated on a few individuals in the network, whereas positive gossip is not.
(Loh et al., 2022)	The negative effects of mobile learning via social media.	From the perspective of stimulus-organism-response theory, this study examines the influences of mobile learning via social media on university students.	Technostress and exhaustion account for more than half of the students' low performance and are significant facilitators of students' reduced intention to use mobile learning via social media.

## Continued

(Chen et al., 2020b)	How enterprises' social media affordances affect social network ties and job performance.	To investigate how four enterprise social media (ESM) affordances (visibility, association, editability, and persistence) affect social network ties (instrumental and expressive), which, in turn, influence the in-role and innovative job performance of employees.	All four affordances are positively associated with instrumental ties; however, only the association and editability affordances are positively related to expressive ties. Although instrumental and expressive ties are positively related to in-role and innovative job performance, instrumental ties exert stronger effects on in-role job performance, whereas expressive ties show stronger effects on innovative job performance.
(Park et al., 2017)	Is social networking a waste of time? The impact of social network and knowledge characteristics on job performance.	To investigate the impact of social networks on job performance by focusing on knowledge quality and diversity using social network theory and the knowledge-based view.	The empirical analysis reveals that the strength of social network ties is strongly associated with knowledge quality in offline interactions, while social network diversity is associated with knowledge quality in online interactions. Knowledge quality acquired from social networks has a significant impact on both creativity and productivity in relation to job performance in the workplace.
(Chen & Wei, 2020)	The effect of social media on employees' job performance with reference to the information technology (IT) sector.	To examine the effect of social media on employees' job performance.	The results show that the effectiveness of social media is strongly correlated with employee job performance, and especially with task performance and contextual performance.

adoption and usage. For example, investigations of the determinants and consequences of citizens' engagement with government social media accounts during the Covid-19 pandemic (Islm et al., 2021) determine—from a civic voluntarism perspective—why citizens engage with government social media accounts during crises (Guo et al., 2021) and integrate big data and social media services for the empirical investigation of the adoption of mobile health applications (Saheb, 2020).

Using the theory of socialization, Moreland and Levine (2006) study some strategies that enterprises adopt to tackle the issue of socialization inside of employees' working groups. In this vein, this work examines the impacts of social network use on employees' socialization during the Covid-19 pandemic. The current literature in information systems highlights some quality research works; for example, those that analyse the effects of social media use through peer communication on purchase decisions (Wang et al., 2012), measure brand-related content in social media (Saber majidi et al., 2020), and analyse the impact of enterprise social media utilization by employees on the affordance perspective of enterprise social media and organizational socialization (Leidner et al., 2018).



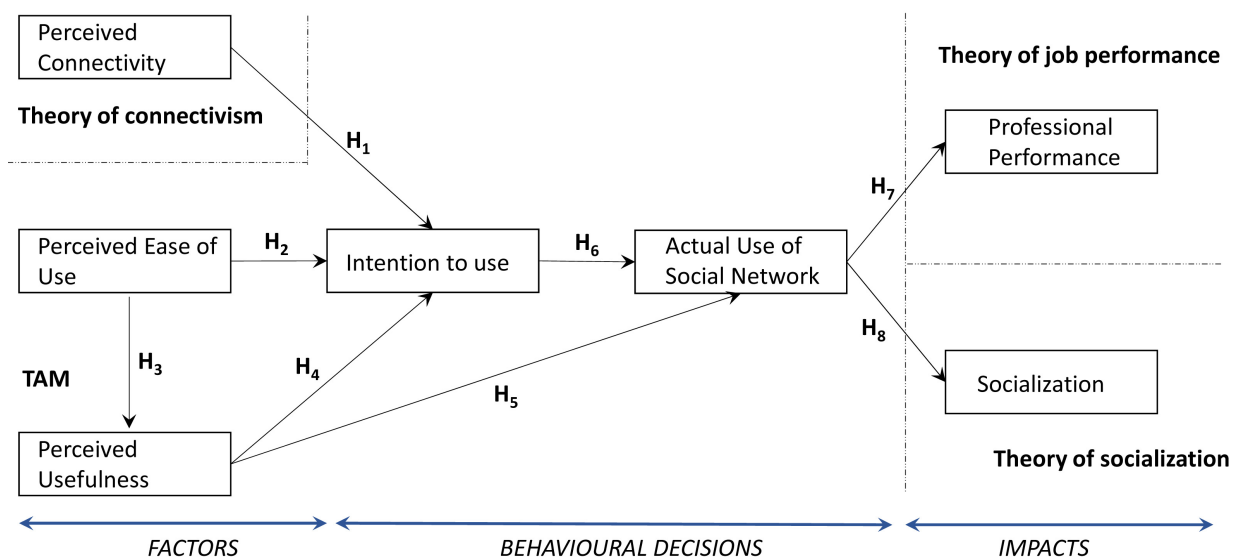
Finally, as stipulated by (Motowildo et al., 1997), the theory of job performance presumes that the four dimensions of appreciation of job performance are: 1) behavioural, 2) episodic, 3) evaluative, and, 4) multidimensional. They define job performance as the aggregated value to the organization of the discrete behavioural episodes that an individual performs over a standard interval of time. In the context of the Covid-19 outbreak, this study assumes that employee job performance refers to an aggregation of values linked to the behaviours that an individual performs for an organization over a standard interval of time.

The changes imposed as a result of Covid-19 on enterprise organizations, and their impact on employee job performance, are a major concern. Literature reveals the contribution of social media in maintaining employees' activities during this pandemic. Studies have analysed the impact of Covid-19-related news shared on social media on employee behaviour (Anwar et al., 2022), the relationship between Covid-19 and employee behaviours (Kumar et al., 2021), and the effect of enterprise social media affordances on social network ties and job performance (Chen et al., 2020b).

In concordance with the theoretical framework developed above, **Figure 1** presents a conceptual model that summarizes the hypotheses tested in this paper.

### 3.1. Factors for Behavioural Decisions

Behavioural decisions, including Intention to Use and Actual Use of Social Network, are defined by Davis (1989) and Venkatesh and Bala (2008). Extensive literature on information systems has been devoted to these concepts and proposed a wide spectrum of factors to explain these behavioural constructs using a causal approach. Here, our model takes support from three main constructs split



**Figure 1.** The proposed conceptual model for social media utilization and its impacts.



into two parts. The first part contains the constructs from TAM, which are Perceived Ease of Use and Perceived Usefulness, which the literature widely suggests explain Intention to Use or Actual Use (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008; Suki & Suki, 2011; Gribbins, 2007). For these reasons, this study suggests the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Perceived Ease of Use is positively associated with Intention to Use social networks.

**H2:** Perceived Usefulness is positively associated with Intention to Use social networks.

**H3:** Perceived Usefulness is positively associated with Actual Use of Social Network.

There is also link between factors, which comes directly from the early model of TAM, as set out by (Davis, 1989), thus:

**H4:** Perceived Ease of Use is positively associated with Perceived Usefulness.

In one of their seminal works on technology acceptance, (Davis & Venkatesh, 1996) theorize that the higher the usage intention, the more intensely individuals will use a particular form of information technology. Recent studies of social network use emphasize this primary hypothesis (Kala et al., 2017; Kavota et al., 2020; Ameen et al., 2018). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H5:** Intention to Use positively influences Actual Use of Social Network.

Technological aspects alone cannot explain the behavioural decisions made in relation to the use of social networks; some explanations may come from socialization aspects. Here, Perceived Connectivity, which is the ability of a social media platform to bring together people with common interests or goals, is of particular interest. Other authors have already established a link between Perceived Connectivity and the decision to use technology (Goldie, 2016; Wamba & Akter, 2016).

The Covid-19 pandemic has imposed social isolation on the global population because of the risks of infection. This situation has profoundly impacted the organization of work or 'the way we work, and social networks seem to be an appropriate solution for employees to maintain professional relationships (Swartz, 2021; Chadee et al., 2021; Ahmed & Ismail, 2020). Aligned with earlier studies, we propose that:

**H6:** Perceived Connectivity is positively associated with Intention to Use social networks.

### 3.2. Impacts of Behavioural Decisions

In this study, which is devoted to analysing the use of social networks by employees to maintain professional contact during the Covid-19 outbreak, the key impacts are identified as being socialization and job performance. Socialization refers to the processes through which inexperienced individuals learn the skills, behaviours, values, and motivations necessary for them to function within the group to which they belong (Chao et al., 1994; Grusec & Hastings, 2014). The li-

terature on information systems has made many connections between social network utilization and individual socialization, particularly in the professional context (Jarvenpaa & Tuunainen, 2013; Leidner et al., 2018). Socialization, when focused on the Cameroonian SME context during the Covid-19 pandemic, views the relationship between employees as being an essential aspect for maintaining continuity in their professional activities. Therefore, it is logical to propose the following hypothesis:

**H7:** Actual Use of Social Network has a significant positive impact on the socialization of employees.

Professional performance represents the performance of work-related tasks that are mandated, coordinated, and rewarded by the organization and which are linked to the achievement of the objectives of the organization. It refers to activities carried out on a regular and reliable basis (Ali-Hassan et al., 2011; Ali-Hassan et al., 2015). Authors have already made the link between social network use and employee performance in the professional context (Kwahk & Park, 2016; Alshurideh et al., 2019). This aspect is particularly important for Cameroonian SME employees, for whom social networks represent an unexpected solution through which to ensure the continuity of their professional activities. Thus, we state the following hypothesis:

**H8:** Actual Use of Social Network has a significant positive impact on employee performance in the professional context.

## 4. Methodology and Descriptive Analysis

With the aim of verifying the hypotheses developed in Section 3, we develop an approach based on the methods from (Hair Jr. et al., 2019) to study information behaviours.

### 4.1. Data Collection

Ethical approval was gained through the GRIAGES review board (a research group in the Catholic University of Central Africa) to begin this study and the data collection. The questionnaire was also accompanied by a declaration of confidentiality and outlined the anonymity aspects concerning individual participants' data. This means that each participant was informed in writing of consent issues to ensure they were aware of the use of the gathered information.

Every statistical test requires the researchers to consider the minimum sample size against the background of the model and data characteristics (Hair Jr. et al., 2021). As far as PLS-SEM is concerned, the literature recommends two possibilities to determine the minimum sample size: 1) the 10-time rule and 2) the use of G\*Power 3.1 software. According to the 10-time rule, the minimum size can be established by taking the largest number of formative indicators; that is, 3 (Table 2), multiplied by ten (10), which is 30. Using G \* Power 3.1 software, the minimum size obtained is 92, based on the following parameters: five predictors, 15% effect size, and 80% power.

**Table 2.** Assessment of the measurement model.

Constructs	Outer Loading	VIF
<b>Intention to Use</b> refers to a person's perceived likelihood or the subjective likelihood of a person engaging in a given behaviour (Wamba & Akter, 2016). $\alpha = 0.811$ , $Rho = 0.843$ , $CR = 0.886$ , $AVE = 0.723$		
IU1: If I need to temporarily use a computer/smartphone without social media tools, I intend to install them.	0.794	1.725
IU2: If I have a smartphone/computer with social media tools, I intend to use them.	0.891	1.987
IU3: Since I have a smartphone/computer with social media tools, I predict I would use them at work.	0.862	1.712
<b>Perceived Connectivity</b> is the ability of a social media platform to bring together people with common interests or goals (Goldie, 2016; Wamba & Akter, 2016). $\alpha = 0.767$ , $Rho = 0.794$ , $CR = 0.894$ , $AVE = 0.809$		
PC1: Among the colleagues with whom I communicate regularly, several use social networks.	0.923	1.630
PC2: From my observation, the number of social media users is quite high.	0.876	1.630
<b>Perceived Ease of Use</b> is the extent to which a person believes that using a tool or system would be effortless (Davis, 1989). $\alpha = 0.845$ , $Rho = 0.847$ , $CR = 0.906$ , $AVE = 0.763$		
PEOU1: I think I would find it easy to use social media for my work commitments in a remote-working context.	0.880	2.268
PEOU2: My interaction with social networks is clear and understandable for my work commitments.	0.898	2.372
PEOU3: It would be easy for me to become skilled in using social media in a remote-working work context.	0.842	1.740
<b>Professional Performance</b> represents the performance of work-related tasks which are mandated, coordinated, and rewarded by the organization and which are linked to the achievement of the objectives of the organization. It refers to activities carried out on a regular and reliable basis (Ali-Hassan et al., 2015). $\alpha = 0.874$ , $Rho = 0.877$ , $CR = 0.923$ , $AVE = 0.799$		
PERF1: The use of social media allows me to carry out my work duties.	0.881	2.625
PERF2: I meet all the formal performance requirements of my job.	0.932	3.374
PERF3: I fulfill all the responsibilities required by my job.	0.868	2.033
<b>Perceived Usefulness</b> is the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would improve their professional performance (Davis, 1989). $\alpha = 0.770$ , $Rho = 0.774$ , $CR = 0.866$ , $AVE = 0.683$		
PU1: Using social media in my work duties allows me to get things done faster.	0.824	1.787
PU2: Using social networks increases my productivity.	0.843	1.828
PU3: Social networks help me connect instantly with other colleagues.	0.812	1.370
<b>Socialization</b> refers to the processes through which inexperienced individuals learn the skills, behaviours, values, and motivations necessary for them to function within the group to which they belong (Chao et al., 1994; Grusec & Hastings, 2014). $\alpha = 0.857$ , $Rho = 0.862$ , $CR = 0.913$ , $AVE = 0.778$		
S1: I am more easily accepted by my entourage and my work group.	0.854	1.993

**Continued**

S2: I am quite popular with those around me.	0.886	2.131
S3: I am someone whom most of my close friends and colleagues like.	0.905	2.500
<b>Actual Use</b> refers to the use that is made of a given technology (Hughes et al., 2012). $\alpha = 0.806$ , $Rho = 0.825$ , $CR = 0.884$ , $AVE = 0.717$		
U1: I use social media to find and distribute information.	0.868	2.020
U2: I use social networks to stay in touch with my friends and colleagues.	0.859	1.607
U3: I use social media to keep up to date with the latest news.	0.812	1.774

Overall, the data collection comprises three steps: 1) the questionnaire development and validation, 2) the pilot test, and 3) the online data collection. For questionnaire development, the questionnaire contained the participants' demographic profiles and the measurement of the research model. To measure the research model in **Figure 1**, an explorative analysis of the literature on social network use and its impacts has permitted us to identify 20 measurement items. These measurements formed the core of the questionnaire. As suggested by (Boone & Boone, 2012), a seven-point Likert scale constitutes the measurement tool of the items with the following items: strongly disagree (1), moderately disagree (2), weakly disagree (3), neutral (4), weakly agree (5), moderately agree (6), and strongly agree (7).

The questionnaire passed control checks and was validated by two students who checked the responses of five master's students at the Catholic University of Central Africa. This process ensured the understandability of the questions (Bawack & Kala Kamdjoug, 2020). For the pilot test, 35 employees who are active users of social networks were surveyed to guarantee the reliability of the questionnaire items (Dillman, 2011). The online data collection, via Google Forms, took place between September 2020 and October 2020 using a survey data collection method that involved distributing online (email, LinkedIn, Facebook, WhatsApp) questionnaires to participants in Yaoundé and Douala (Bawack & Kala Kamdjoug, 2020). These towns were chosen because they are home to the greatest proportion of the enterprises in Cameroon. In fact, the data collected from employees in these towns represent behavioural tendencies that can be extrapolated to the wider Cameroonian context. This study tests the conceptual model in the Cameroonian context to identify factors that explain the adoption of social networks and their impacts.

As presented in **Table 3**, every participant was over the age of consent; that is, older than 18. Independent consultants were hired to collect the data used in this study. More than 7000 questionnaires were sent to the target population of employees living in Yaoundé and Douala, resulting in an exploitable dataset of 271 valid responses (which represents a response rate of 3.87%). The returned questionnaires constitute the dataset of this study.

We use common method bias (CMB) to ensure that the data collected to

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of sample.

Age (in years)		
Variable	Freq.	Percentage
18 - 25	146	53.88%
26 - 35	117	43.17%
36 - 45	7	2.58%
Over 46	1	0.37%
Total	271	100.00%
Education		
Variable	Freq.	Percentage
Vocational or apprenticeship education	25	9.23%
Secondary education	16	5.90%
Master's degree or above	148	54.61%
No formal training	2	0.74%
Undergraduate degree	80	29.52%
Total	271	100.00%
Gender		
Variable	Freq.	Percentage
Female	130	47.97%
Male	141	52.03%
Total	271	100.00%
Experience of using social networks (in years)		
Variable	Freq.	Percentage
1 - 3	11	4.06%
3 - 5	54	19.93%
Less than 1	6	2.21%
More than 5	200	73.80%
Total	271	100.00%
Reasons for using social network(s)		
Variable	Freq.	Percentage
Communication	228	84.13%
Enquiries	32	11.81%
Entertainment	123	45.39%
Other	15	5.54%

measure our research model are reliable. The evaluation of our data using a Single Factor Test of CMB gives a result of 37.183%, which indicates that the measurement error, compounded by the sociability of the respondents involved in the data collection, is not significant (Chang et al., 2020).

## 4.2. Data Analysis

Based on the process suggested by Ramli et al. (2018), the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) method is deemed as being best suited to conducting the data analysis in this study. PLS-SEM has proven to be efficient in several studies that aim to explain and predict more or less complex phenomena in the business or social research context (Bawack & Kala Kamdjoug, 2020). In this approach, the model analysis comprises two steps: 1) the assessment of the measurement model and 2) the assessment of the structural model. The assessment of the measurement model is supported by four criteria: 1) item reliability, 2) internal consistency reliability and validity, 3) convergent validity, and 4) discriminant validity. The assessment of the structural model is supported by two criteria: 1) the explanatory power of the dependent constructs and 2) path significance.

**Table 3** presents the unique characteristics of our study population in relation to five criteria: age, education, gender, experience of using social networks (in years), and reasons for using social network(s). For the gender variable, the distribution of the sample is 52.03% for males and 47.97% for females. These values are slightly different to the population distribution in Cameroon, which is 50.6% female and 49.4% male according to government's latest census (2010). The analysis of our dataset (**Table 1**) shows that most of the participants are aged between 18 and 25 (53.88%), followed by those aged between 26 and 35 (43.17%). With regard to the participants' education level, the biggest proportion had a master's degree and government's latest census (2010) (54.61%), followed by an undergraduate degree (29.52%). Regarding their experience of using social networks, the biggest proportion of the participants had been using social networks for more than five years (73.80%). Finally, regarding the reasons why the participants use social networks, 84.13% did so for communication in the professional context, 45.39% for entertainment, 11.81% for enquiries, and 4.43% for other purposes.

## 5. Results and Analysis

### 5.1. Exploratory and Confirmatory Analysis

**Table 2** lists the standardized factor loadings, variance inflation factor (VIF), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), Rho, and Cronbach's alpha values ( $\alpha$ ). All these factors are reliable and significant. In fact, almost all factor loadings are larger than 0.7, and the items' variance inflation factor (VIF) are between 1 and 3 (an indication of moderate correlation). Thus, all items demonstrate sufficient reliability levels. All AVE values are above 0.5, supporting convergent validity measures.  $\alpha$  and CR are between 0.7 and 0.95. The

values of all these indicators ensure the reliability of the research model's constructs with regard to internal consistency and reliability (Hair Jr. et al., 2021).

The establishment of discriminant validity is supported by the HTMT criterion and Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to HTMT, all the results are below the 0.85 threshold (Table 4), which confirms the discriminant validity. Additionally, the validity of the Fornell-Larcker criterion also confirms the discriminant validity of the model, given that for each factor, the square root of AVE is larger than its correlation coefficient with other factors (Table 5) (Venturini & Mehmetoglu, 2019).

## 5.2. Path Coefficient

In this study, structural equation modeling (SEM) serves as model for the data analysis. Conceptually, SEM is a combination of regression-based multivariable techniques and path analysis. Its primary objective is to determine the validity of empirical research by simultaneously examining the relationships among many groups of variables by establishing a network of cause-and-effect relationships among these variables (Mohammadi, 2015). This analysis proceeds in two parts: the outer model estimation and the inner path model estimation.

**Table 4.** Discriminant validity test results using heterotrait-monotrait ratio criteria.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<b>Actual Use (1)</b>							
<b>Intention to Use (2)</b>	0.606						
<b>Perceived Usefulness (3)</b>	0.830	0.478					
<b>Perceived Connectivity (4)</b>	0.752	0.597	0.744				
<b>Perceived Ease of Use (5)</b>	0.545	0.502	0.681	0.639			
<b>Professional Performance (6)</b>	0.450	0.367	0.345	0.504	0.435		
<b>Socialization (7)</b>	0.685	0.451	0.484	0.596	0.513	0.640	

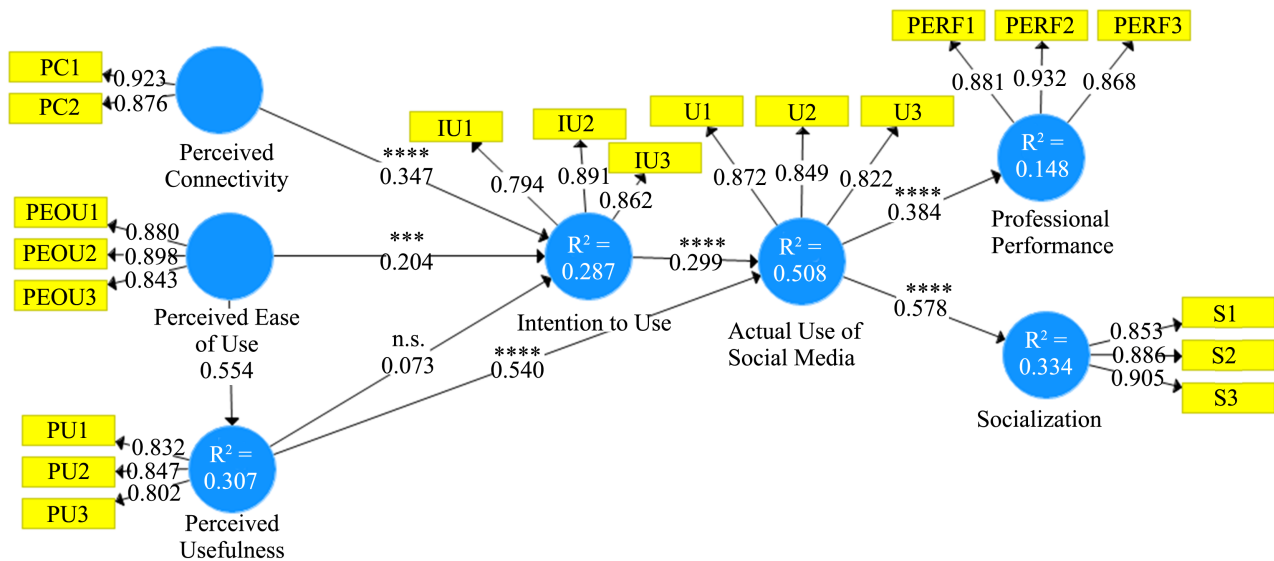
**Table 5.** The square root of AVE (italics at diagonal) and discriminant validity test results using the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<b>Actual Use (1)</b>	<i>0.848</i>						
<b>Intention to Use (2)</b>	0.510	<i>0.850</i>					
<b>Perceived Usefulness (3)</b>	0.657	0.391	<i>0.827</i>				
<b>Perceived Connectivity (4)</b>	0.611	0.495	0.589	<i>0.899</i>			
<b>Perceived Ease of Use (5)</b>	0.456	0.424	0.554	0.517	<i>0.874</i>		
<b>Professional Performance (6)</b>	0.384	0.317	0.286	0.413	0.372	<i>0.894</i>	
<b>Socialization (7)</b>	0.578	0.381	0.398	0.486	0.437	0.547	<i>0.882</i>



Given that the outer model estimations are reliable and valid, the presentation of the results of the inner path model estimates is the purpose of this section. The inner path model estimation is supported by the path coefficients, which are linear regression weights. These statistics aim to examine the possible causal linkages between constructs in the structural equation model (Hair Jr. et al., 2021). The results of the structural model are presented in **Figure 2** and in **Table 6**. The results show that one hypothesis (H4) of this study is not supported. All the others are supported with very strong significance.

**Table 7** shows the predictive power of the PLS path of the research model study. The  $R^2$  analysis reveals that the research model developed best explains the actual use of social networks. Therefore, according to Chin (1998), only



**Figure 2.** Results of the structural model. \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (Hair Jr. et al., 2021); n.s. = not significant.

**Table 6.** Path coefficients and their significance level.

	Path coefficients	$p$ Values	Sign. level	Decision
H1: Perceived Ease of Use $\rightarrow$ Intention to Use	0.204	0.008	***	Supported
H2: Perceived Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Intention to Use	0.073	0.318	n.s.	Rejected
H3: Perceived Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Actual Use	0.540	0.000	****	Supported
H4: Perceived Ease of Use $\rightarrow$ Perceived Usefulness	0.554	0.000	****	Supported
H5: Intention to Use $\rightarrow$ Actual Use	0.299	0.000	****	Supported
H6: Perceived Connectivity $\rightarrow$ Intention to Use	0.347	0.000	****	Supported
H7: Actual Use $\rightarrow$ Socialization	0.578	0.000	****	Supported
H8: Actual Use $\rightarrow$ Professional Performance	0.384	0.000	****	Supported

\*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (Hair Jr. et al., 2021); n.s. = not significant.

**Table 7.** The predictive power of the PLS path model.

	R Square	R Square Adjusted	Results
<b>Actual Use</b>	0.508	0.504	<b>Moderate</b>
<b>Intention to Use</b>	0.287	0.279	<b>Weak</b>
<b>Perceived Usefulness</b>	0.307	0.305	<b>Weak</b>
<b>Professional Performance</b>	0.148	0.145	<b>Very Weak</b>
<b>Socialization</b>	0.334	0.332	<b>Weak</b>

Intention to Use and Perceived Usefulness prove to be strong predictors of the actual use of social networks in the professional context during the great disruption caused by Covid-19. Actual Use is the actual use of social networks predictor of Socialization and Professional Performance; however, the prediction is lesser for Professional Performance. An explanation for these findings may be found in the Covid-19 context: enterprises closed their doors suddenly, and the objective of employees at this time was to maintain a minimum-level of social connections to ensure the continuance of their work activities. Furthermore, before the Covid-19 crisis, these employees were already users of social networks, albeit perhaps for other purposes in which the professional aspects were of less importance.

### 5.3. Predictive Relevance, Predictive Power, and Effect Size

The predictive power of our model is acceptable: **Table 8** indicates that the majority of the indicators under PLS produced lower root mean squared errors (RMSE) compared to the linear regression model (LM) (Loh et al., 2022).

According to Lee et al. (2020), as presented in **Table 9** and **Table 10**, the research model of this study possesses predictive relevance, as the  $Q^2$  values are more than 0. Furthermore, in an acceptable manner, the model captures 50.8%, 28.7%, 30.7%, 14.8%, and 33.4% of the variance in Actual Use of Social Network, Intention to Use, Perceived Usefulness, Professional Performance, and Socialization, respectively.

We also use the effect size criterion to assess our model. This criterion indicates the intensities of the associations between variables. Based on the thresholds defined by Yan et al. (2021), **Table 9** shows the intensities of the relationships between the variables obtained using the model. They are as follows: 1) **small** for Perceived Connectivity → Intention to Use and Perceived Ease of Use → Intention to Use; 2) **medium** for Intention to Use → Actual Use of Social Networks and Actual Use of Social Networks → Professional Performance; and 3) **large** for Actual Use of Social Networks → Socialization, Perceived Usefulness → Actual Use of Social Networks, and Perceived Ease of Use → Perceived Usefulness. The relationship between Perceived Usefulness and Intention to Use is not relevant.

**Table 8.** PLS predict.

	PLS			LM	
	RMSE	MAE	Q <sup>2</sup> _predict	RMSE	MAE
U2	0.959	0.696	0.243	0.860	0.581
U1	1.411	1.079	0.196	1.328	1.004
U3	1.401	1.069	0.125	1.354	1.045
PERF1	1.397	1.099	0.096	1.362	0.994
PERF2	1.401	1.114	0.087	1.372	1.029
PERF3	1.473	1.168	0.074	1.448	1.110
S1	1.281	0.935	0.126	1.255	0.893
S2	1.346	1.104	0.140	1.286	1.005
S3	1.232	0.987	0.153	1.204	0.918

U = Actual Use of Social Network, PERF = Professional Performance, S = Socialization.

**Table 9.** Effect size ( $f^2$ ).

Constructs /dependent constructs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Actual Use of Social Networks (1)						0.173	0.502
Intention to Use (2)	0.154						
Perceived Usefulness (3)	0.503	0.004					
Perceived Connectivity (4)		0.101					
Perceived Ease of Use (5)		0.037	0.444				
Professional Performance (6)							
Socialization (7)							

**Table 10.** Predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) and predictive power ( $R^2$ ).

Constructs	SSO	SSE	Q <sup>2</sup> (=1 – SSE/SSO)	R <sup>2</sup>
Perceived Connectivity	542.000	542.000		
Perceived Ease of Use	813.000	813.000		
Actual Use of Social Networks	813.000	522.673	0.357	0.508
Intention to Use	813.000	658.480	0.190	0.287
Perceived Usefulness	813.000	649.020	0.202	0.307
Professional Performance	813.000	723.436	0.110	0.148
Socialization	813.000	605.721	0.255	0.334

## 6. Discussion and Implications

**Table 6** in the results section indicates that seven out of the eight hypotheses of

the structural model are fully supported. Also, in **Table 7**, the model explanations are moderate for Actual Use of Social Networks and weak for Intention to Use, Perceived Usefulness, Professional Performance, and Socialization. The final structural equation of the research is given in **Figure 2**. Then, the following structural equations can emerge:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Professional Performance} = 0.384 * \text{Actual Use of Social Media} \\ \text{Socialization} = 0.578 * \text{Actual Use of Social Media} \\ \text{Actual Use of Social Media} = 0.299 * \text{Intention To Use} + 0.540 * \text{Perceived Usefulness} \\ \text{Intention to Use} = 0.347 * \text{Perceived Connectivity} + 0.204 * \text{Perceived Ease of Use} \end{array} \right.$$

The data collected from 271 employees in the Cameroonian towns of Yaoundé and Douala, supported by the use of PLS-SEM as the data analysis approach, was used to test a conceptual model on three parts: 1) the factors part, 2) the behavioural part, and 3) the impacts part.

The modeling of the factors driving the acceptance of social networks in a professional context is based on the TAM model and the theory of connectivism. These two theoretical models are revealed to be relevant in determining the acceptance of social networks in a professional context during the Covid-19 pandemic, a period of time marked by the confinement of populations and significant reductions in economic activities requiring human contact. Unexpectedly, the hypothesis related to the link between Perceived Usefulness and Intention to Use is revealed not to be relevant in the professional context of employees using social networks. This result corroborates the one obtained by Lin et al. (2011) regarding the citizen adoption of e-government initiatives in The Gambia; however, it does not correspond to previous studies in the literature that tackle social media (Wamba et al., 2017) and other technologies (Davis, 1989; Alavi & Henderson, 1981; Singh & Srivastava, 2019) used in different economic and social contexts. This situation may be explained by the specific context of Covid-19, where employees had to alter their use of social networks by suddenly switching from using them for social communication and entertainment to professional use. In Covid-19 pandemic context, a predisposition to use the social networks is directly related to Perceived Ease of Use, and the utility is seemed evident for them and not necessary to express. On the contrary, the decision behaviour part of our study conforms with the literature (Davis, 1989; Alavi & Henderson, 1981; Kavota et al., 2020; Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020), notably in explaining the decision to use social networks in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to Intention to Use and Perceived Usefulness. Finally, with regard to its impacts, the use of social networks is an effective predictor of job performance and socialization. These results conform with the literature (Cao & Ali, 2018; Chen et al., 2020a; Staniewski & Awruk, 2022; Zhou et al., 2021; Bagozzi, 1992; Szajna, 1996).

### 6.1. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

This study develops a theoretical model which meets two objectives: 1) the de-

termination of the factors driving the adoption of social networks by employees in the context of the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and 2) the determination of the impact of the utilization of the social networks on employees in terms of professional socialization and their professional performance.

Furthermore, the extant literature on the adoption of social networks in professional settings during outbreaks of disease and pandemics is enriched by this study's results. First, given the increasing sophistication of mobile devices and the great diversity of existing social networking sites, it is necessary to know the factors that drive the individual's intention to use social networks and how these impact employees. In this regard, this study proposes a model—a combination of variables taken from TAM, the theory of connectivity, and the theory of socialization—based on the analysis of data from 271 respondents from the cities of Douala and Yaoundé in Cameroon.

Although there are many published works on the adoption and use of social networks, studies that examine their implementation and use in individual workspaces are not numerous, particularly in the sub-Saharan context during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study contributes to the existing literature on social networks by examining the Cameroonian context during a troubled period following the outbreak of disease. While other studies have used only TAM (Wamba et al., 2017) to explore social network adoption, this study provides a new theoretical perspective for the body of literature concerned with the use of social networks for operational purposes in SMEs. Within this operational framework, which considers SME employees' concerns, we innovatively extend and adapt TAM using the theory of connectivism, the theory of socialization, and the theory of performance to examine the factors driving the use of social networks and their impacts. Furthermore, the findings of this study encompass aspects linked to the Covid-19 outbreak in Cameroon's professional context.

## **6.2. Implications for Practice**

Three aspects characterize the situation of Cameroonian SMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, Cameroonian SMEs have been taken by surprise by the functional restructuring imposed due to the sudden decisions set in motion in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which made it imperative for them to shift to remote work. Cameroonian SMEs hastily implemented survival measures and tried to cope with the remote working situation as best as possible with the means at hand in an economy poorly equipped with public information technology infrastructures. Second, Cameroonian SMEs, when compared to multinational enterprises and international organizations operating in this context, do not have suitable technology facilities for remote working. Very few SMEs have a functional intranet accessible on the available technology that would allow for remote connections to be made that are capable of facilitating the interactions between their employees and interconnections with their stake-

holders (customers, suppliers, subcontractors, etc.) through an extranet link. In addition, SMEs have been forced to find alternative technological solutions to ensure their continued functioning. Third, the current information technology infrastructure that is accessible to and affordable for SME employees outside the workplace, and which enables them to maintain their professional connections (and others), is a triple combination comprising mobile terminals (smartphones, tablets, etc.), 3G modems, and social networks available as an application. Fortunately, in this economic environment, employees have proved to be creative. They have been able to find remedial solutions that allow for business continuity in their companies by using the technological means at their disposal, such as social networks, especially after the abrupt stoppage in their economic activities as a result of Covid-19. This latter situation has prompted employees of some SMEs to find alternative ad hoc solutions to enable their business to survive in a situation where it is almost impossible for companies to consider teleworking or mobile working. Thus, employees, for the most part, have resolved to use available solutions such as social networks to maintain their professional communications and engage in other operational activities such as customer relationship management, vendor relationship management, production control inside the firm, etc.).

As presented in **Table 3**, most participants in this study use social networks to communicate and for enquiries related to professional purposes. However, some still include entertainment as a reason for their use of social networks. These results reveal the importance of social networks in maintaining employees' professional activities, which has been a lifesaver for Cameroonian SMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic. This lifesaving and unexpected use of social networks, which has been sudden and unplanned for SMEs in Cameroon, has led to calls for drawing up appropriate measures for meeting future challenges, particularly now that alarming forecasts predict other pandemics and even new waves of Covid-19 (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Singh & Srivastava, 2019).

This study calls upon the managers of Cameroonian SMEs (and managers in other African countries) to implement innovative measures that allow their organizations to be more flexible, more agile, more capable of implementing new forms of work, and more secure in their business systems. The development of ICT in Africa now provides opportunities for integrating IT into SMEs' business processes at an affordable cost (Haoudi & Touati, 2020). These include the establishment of corporate intranets supporting all transactional activities, corporate communication, and other related services such as mobile work and remote work. The operationalization of these solutions requires training and increasing the awareness of staff regarding these new forms of work and the use of these technologies to transform Cameroonian SMEs into proper network companies.

As a consequence, SMEs in Cameroon will be required to develop the ability to swiftly adapt their business environment based on customer feedback, changes in the social environment, and health conditions that may influence economic

activities. At the same time, these SMEs need to possess self-sufficient teams that collaborate efficiently and to implement efficient production approaches in their processes. Finally, based on information technology platforms, SMEs' cross-functional teams need to have the necessary skills to complete a task, project, or product.

### **6.3. Limitations and Future Research**

Three main limitations of this study can be highlighted, which open up directions for future research. This study proceeds by using a cross-sectional survey, and the data do not consider the evolutionary effects that the Covid-19 pandemic may have on employees' use of social networks over time. Given that this pandemic seems destined to last a long time, it would be appropriate to conduct a longitudinal study to allow for an understanding to be gained of all the subtleties of the decision to use social networks and their impacts on Cameroonian SMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic from the employee point of view.

In the same vein, this study is quantitative, which prevents it from accessing information that employees could reveal during qualitative data collection such as in an interview. Thus, a mixed qualitative and quantitative study may permit researchers to gain a better understanding of the factors driving the adoption of social networks and their impacts on the professional activities of those involved in a troubling event such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is not easy to generalize the research results of this study, and our sample encompasses only SMEs in the cities of Douala and Yaoundé in Cameroon. The question that remains is the one concerning what would be found should the dataset be extended to integrate other SMEs, notably those from all sub-Saharan African countries.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this study, the objectives are twofold: 1) to determine the factors driving the adoption of social networks by SME employees to alleviate the complications caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and 2) to identify the consequences of the use of these social networks for job performance and the socialization of employees. To conduct this study, we designed a research model based on three extensions of the TAM model comprising the theory of connectivism, the theory of job performance, and the theory of socialization. The model is analysed using PLS-SEM with a dataset collected from 271 employees from SMEs operating in Yaoundé and Douala in Cameroon. Globally speaking, the combination of TAM and the theory of connectivism is a tool that can be used to explain the adoption of social networks during the Covid-19 pandemic as a solution to the constraints imposed in response to the pandemic and the abrupt shift from the physical to the online operation of SMEs. An unexpected result, but one that is contextually justified, comes in the form of the rejection of the causal link between Perceived Usefulness and Intention to Use. The combination of the theory of job perfor-



mance and socialization is found to be relevant in explaining the impacts of the utilization of social networks by employees. Future research should be further considered that uses a longitudinal dataset, extends the research scope to more countries, and integrates qualitative analysis into the research process.

### Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Jean Robert Kala Kamdjoug: Idea generation, Theory building: a selection of relevant theories Guide for literature review and conceptualization, Conceptualization, Research methodology, Discussion, Framing of theoretical and practical contributions, Supervision of the whole process, Writing an original draft, Review original draft.

### Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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