



# The Importance of Social Media in Small Businesses Sustainability Strategies for Sustainability

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## ABSTRACT

The exponential increase in social media usage by consumers necessitates its use in marketing and is considered an imperative for businesses to increase consumer engagement as an additional communication channel to market. The barrier to this engagement may be when social media marketing (SMM) strategies are wanting in the adeptness to engage consumers, which can constrain small business managers (SBMs) successes in competing and increasing sales. SBMs and business owners who fail to reach, and engage consumers, may limit opportunities to increase sales, and lower competitiveness in their sphere of operations, and are at a higher risk of failure. Underpinned by the theory of diffusion of innovation (DOI), the purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies, in the quest for greater existing and prospective customer engagement. The sample drawn from the study population of business owners included six business managers of six serving successful small businesses in Maryland who used social media marketing strategies successfully for five years, in the efforts are marketing to the customer. Semi-structured interviews serve to collect qualitative data, supplemented with a perusal of financial and other documents of industry and company respectively. A thematic analysis of the data in tandem with the lens of the DOI was instrumental in identifying the major theme of content design and engineering. SBMs could find value from this study findings as may increase knowledge of the SMM strategies that are most beneficial in developing consumer favored SMM content, selecting appropriate social media platforms, and developing effective customer reach and engagement strategies. The potential for business leaders to increase business success also holds beneficial ramifications for increased social and community welfare and prosperity.

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## Introduction and Background

Small businesses serve the interests of a country by being an important and principal source of economic contributions. The revenues of small businesses add to the economic growth and well-being of national and global economies, with the creation of jobs, the innovations that transpire, and a sense of optimism when there is growth (Karadag, 2015). However, despite the important role of small businesses in the economy, the survival rate of small businesses is dismal and grim as many do not survive five years or longer, going by the statistics from 2005 to 2017 (Small Business Administration, 2020). In a networked and internet-leveraged mode favored by most, social media marketing (SMM) strategies are found critical and effective for small businesses to engage consumers and increase survivability and profitability (Nawafleh, 2015). From the experiences of Oyza and Edwin (2015), however many small business managers (SBMs) fail to effectively adopt SMM strategies, which therefore may undermine success. In this study and under the extensive analysis, the deficit in contemporary knowledge became apparent. An important finding was that many small businesses display a lack of the fortitude and savviness to

develop and implement effective SMM strategies, which constrains business performance (Cole et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2015).

The economic contributions of small businesses to the economy of the United States (US) are well documented and known. From the business statistics of 2000 to 2017, small businesses accounted for about 66% of net new job creation in the US (SBA, 2020). The drawback often, is that many small business owners lack strategies and innovative approaches to communication and consumer attraction, and therefore often fail to secure a market position compared to businesses that are more adept at leveraging technology to advance business and consumer engagement (Hutchinson et al., 2015). From the abundance of success stories in business growth, the adoption of effective SMM strategies stands out as a critical success factor in business sustainability. However, on the other side of the coin, failure to improve communication approaches in contemporary settings is one of the most significant marketing challenges for small business leaders (Omoyza & Agwu, 2016). Perčić and Perić (2021) found that the implementation of an effective marketing strategy is an invaluable asset to the success of a business.

Innovation is critical in the global market, where the communication and marketing skills approaches of business leaders with customers are an explicit business success factor (Clausen & Fichter, 2019; Kwon et al., 2021). In the ubiquity of the internet, the innovativeness in harnessing the many possibilities of social networks holds immense possibilities for business managers to communicate with customers to market existing and new products and services (Roberts & Piller, 2016). Consumer engagement is vital and integral for business success and without a doubt, small businesses must employ SMM strategies effectively to customer engagement practices and remain sustainable (Herman, 2015; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016). On a cautionary note, Grewal et al., (2019) identified negative consumers' responses, advising that failure in using social media can stem from a lack of effective strategies. This study was an exploration of how some successful small business leaders develop and implement SMM effectively to improve consumer engagement.

#### **Problem Identification and Purpose and Aims of Study**

In business, customer acquisition and retention represent the critical imperatives in increasing revenues and business sustainability. The lack of innovation and adeptness may account for the failure of organizations to effectively implement SMM, which may pose difficulties in customer engagement and consequently limit business sustainability and survivability (Valos et al., 2017). From a study in 2017 of 300 small businesses with revenues of under \$100,000 in the United States, it was found that 75% of the managers indicated a significant challenge to adopting and implementing SMM strategy effectively (Cole et al., 2017). The general business problem noted, was that many SBMs lack effective approaches to leverage social media in the quest for greater customer engagement. The identified specific business problem was that some SBMs display a lack of adeptness in formulating and implementing strategies for customer engagement.

The principal purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumer engagement. For this study, the small business population, as a purposive sample of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland served to undertake the stated purpose. There is extensive documentation on the business impact of effective marketing with innovation. The knowledge from this study may serve the interests of SBMs to have a better understanding of the value of social media and therefore contribute to the framing of effective SMM strategies to engage consumers effectively and achieve business growth.

#### **The Rationale for Chosen Method and Design in Undertaking Study**

The usually favored research methods to undertake a research study are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2018). Qualitative research is an inductive approach, amenable to undertaking exploratory research favored by researchers use to gain insight into a phenomenon using the conduit of observations, open-ended interview questions, and supplemented by secondary data and documentation (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Quantitative research on the other hand is deductive and a method that researchers use to collect numerical data to test hypotheses, select variables of interest, and which involve examining their characteristics and relationships (Yin, 2018). A quantitative approach was not deemed appropriate for this study as

achieving the research goals enunciated did not require deductive reasoning about variable characteristics or relationships. Mixed-methods researchers leverage qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Kachouie & Sedighadel, 2015). Although the mixed method could have served to explore the phenomenon studied, the duality of this approach was rejected since there were no hypotheses to test and examine underlying characteristics or relationships of variables. The qualitative method was considered relevant to explore the strategies that SBMs have used to effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement, facilitated using open-ended interview questions and supplemented by examining and reviewing other documentation.

In terms of conducting this study, a multiple case study design was also ideal to explore the strategies that the sampled SBMs used to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement. Researchers in undertaking a multiple case study, draw from multiple distinct cases and data sources such as interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts to facilitate in-depth investigation within a real-world context, often using a specific time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Using a case study furthermore often enables the development of a more intense and more vibrant picture of the research problem than other qualitative research designs (Lewis, & Molyneux, 2018). In justification of the choice of a case study, the phenomenological design was rejected for this research, because it limits the exploration to only exploring the meanings of the lived experiences of study participants in the context of the studied phenomenon lived experiences (Sylvan, 2018). Researchers use an ethnographic design to study an entire culture (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), which was not the intent of this study as well. A multiple case study design was chosen to probe and gain insight into generating a detailed description of the strategies that SBMs use to effectively implement SMM using exploratory means of interviews. Yin (2018) a leading case study authority, emphasized that with multiple cases, researchers can conduct a broader exploration of research questions and concepts, thereby potentially increasing the robustness of the findings.

In this study, probing interview questions and recording devices were employed, which in qualitative research are deemed essential to clarify any uncertainties and achieve a high level of substantial validity (Matta, 2019). This study aimed to interview the target audience of small business owners, who had implemented effective SMM strategies. The invocation of a multiple case study design facilitated an in-depth description and analysis of two or more cases, which a researcher can use to investigate dissimilarities in cases and uncover details specific to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018).

#### **Research Question (RQ)**

The overarching research question for the study was: What strategies do SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumer engagement?

#### **Interview Questions**

1. The principal interview questions for this component of the study were: How does your organization develop its SMM strategies?
2. How did your organization implement SMM strategies to engage customers?

### **Theoretical Underpinning and Representation in Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework was underpinned and represented by the theory of diffusion of innovation (DOI), which grounded the study, and provided the additional theoretical perspectives, which aided in exploring the strategies SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement. As early as 1962, Rogers presented the theory of DOI, notably, first as a communication model and subsequently as the foundation of the adoption concept to elucidate how over time, new products or concepts can acquire momentum and diffusion in different generational cohorts (Rogers, 2015). The DOI theory can be used to explain how, why, and the degree to which technology and ideas may be adopted by different generations and ages, and it provides knowledge on the adoption and engagement of customers and businesses on products and services in terms of adoption, influence and even understanding factors which influence the market and business growth. The key propositions underlying the DOI theory are innovation, communication channels, time, and social systems (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). In 2003, Rogers further indicated that DOI is the process where innovation spreads across communication channels, and as time progresses, the innovation reaches the members of social systems. Muhammad and Chin-Hong (2017) posited that researchers could use the DOI theory to assess customer influence and use it as an invaluable understanding of customer behavior. The model serves in the quest for innovation and communication practices making the DOI theory an appropriate framework to foster the effective development and implementation of SMM strategies by SBMs to improve consumer engagement.

### **The Business Potential and Significance of the Study**

The potential significance of a research study may lie in the degree to which the findings may serve to enhance business practice, about increasing the effectiveness of SMM strategies and thereby advancing business performance, which may also have beneficial ramifications for society. The key beneficiaries and stakeholders from the knowledge of this study may be SBMs and owners, as it could help these entities to acquire knowledge on the business practices and effective strategies for developing and implementing SMM strategies. Small businesses in the launching or diffusion stage as outlined by Rogers and others, in respect of innovation may use the knowledge from this study to create and implement effective SMM strategies and practices. The study may also contribute to knowledge on the development of effective SMM strategies and could serve as a guide for new innovators in small businesses entering the market to enhance business sustainability. The survival of small businesses may lead to increased profits and create more employment opportunities, thus holding positive social change ramifications for communities.

### **Implications for Business Sustainability**

The findings of this study may in addition also add to the current and existing body of knowledge of the processes, that small business could use for the effective development and implementation of SMM. The increased knowledge could also equip SBMs and owners with strategies for implementing SMM and maintaining an increasingly effective online presence. The online presence of small businesses could serve in promoting and reaching a larger population size in many more geographical locations and

reduce traditional marketing costs (Jiang et al., 2017). Many practitioners and researchers have concluded that information on the effective implementation of SMM strategies can help the leaders of businesses to (a) increase brand recognition, (b) improve productivity and profitability, (c) improve customer retention, and (d) prevent business failure (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The findings of this study could therefore potentially help small business leaders develop and implement effective strategies for business growth and sustainability.

### **A Critique of Pertinent Literature**

In the business world, it is found, that some businesses and their strategists are unable able to develop strategies for the effective implementation of SMM to engage and convert consumers to loyal and frequent consumers of products and service offerings. One of the significant problems in using social media is the inability to astutely develop and implement marketing strategies, and therefore the failure to leverage social media to obtain the desired results by first targeting prospective and existing targets, then deftly engaging and converting and converting these to be loyal customers (Arora & Sanni, 2019). The responses to the research question, with qualitative data analysis and appropriately infused with the theoretical aspects of the diffusion of innovation theory, also grounded in marketing innovation literature, yielded valuable insight into SMM and customer engagement strategies. The following major components were included in this study: (a) the concept used to frame the study, (b) the weaving in of the conceptual framework and the justification in choosing Rogers' DOI theory, (c) a review and the significance of the phenomena, (d) gaps and limitations discovered en route to other discoveries and earnings in the study.

### **Analysis of Social Media Marketing**

The analysis of SMM and innovation in small businesses may pinpoint the importance of the role of innovation management, customer engagement, collaboration, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and value-added strategies needed enhancement to the efficiency of small businesses in a competitively charged marketplace. The evolution of multi-dimensions in channels and platforms in communication with customers often serves in sale initiatives, when innovatively used, and has frequently aided in reaching and intercepting customer wants and needs effectively, to serve and address these (Verhoef et al., 2015). In this sense, social media platforms are a favorite channel for customer testimonials, eliciting feedback, exchanging opinions, and discerning their judgments on brand information, and performance. Roberts and Piller (2016) noted, that social media has become a more integral part of the lives of people. Businesses of all dimensions are revolutionizing the use of social media in innovative ways to market and meet and surpass their expectations. Simultaneously, customers accept and are part of the dialog and communication with brand and service offerors, through the mediating options offered by social media channels.

In the marketing revolution, social media networks serve as an interactive and innovative channel of business communication with customers, which can trigger interest in new products and more brand success (Roberts & Piller, 2016). Recent statistics indicated that there are more than 1.8 million social media users in the world, and 77% of the participants are active either by link and click, comments, and/or share (Kanuri et al., 2018). Kanuri et al. (2018) opined that business

organizations could use social media as a commercial channel for communication with consumers. Li et al. (2021) found that it is vital for firms to effectively implement SMM, as the judiciousness in doing so and the skills in this form of innovation reflect the ability to effectively communicate with customers in the contemporary era of technological innovations and globalized markets. The adeptness in employing novel and effective strategies to implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement, nevertheless, is often a problem for business managers. Omoyza and Agwu (2016), found that for the 62% of marketers studied, one of the most challenging problems of business managers is to effectively adopt and implement SMM strategies.

In an intensely competitive global market, SMM remains one of the core innovation management strategies to gain a better understanding of consumer purchase intentions as they frequently share opinions, likes and dislikes, and more, in testimonials, ratings and other forms of feedback and experiences online. The globalization of goods and services is vital in innovation management as it is an excellent opportunity for SBMs to become more innovative to engage consumers, remain competitive, and improve the market positioning of the firm (Story et al., 2015). Hassan et al. (2015) advised on the value of social media and the Internet as crucial elements for small business competitiveness and innovation. The deftness in leveraging social media for marketing purposes is a key differentiator in increasing the success of small businesses to reach audiences within and outside of the immediate location (Sajid, 2016). Taalbi (2019) perhaps rightly held, that innovation is a driving force to maintain interest and spur demand for a product or service and it can also generate insight into the anticipations and expectations for the next generation of services and products. In predicting future trends. Love and Roper (2015) discovered the existence of positive relationships between innovation, exportation, cash flow, and liquidity. However, there are also negative consequences in failure to adequately use social media platforms by firms for SMM, as that may harm small businesses.

In some evolutionary trends, many social media platforms have begun to cut back on the organic visibility of brands and in catering to corporations while also prioritizing individual user content. The commercial aspects seem inevitable as social media platforms like Facebook have by the same token, cut back on the use of user content to feed news better to the average user; the issue is that this change will likely affect brands in the future as they may have to pay more to continue to achieve the same level of social reach (Hofacker&Belanche, 2016). The future of SMM firms may hinge on a drastic cut in organic visibility, which may lead to paid advertising as the only way to achieve meaningful reach. SBMs may therefore need to develop and implement cost-effective SMM strategies, which may lead to improved consumer reach.

From a strategic business perspective, another vital factor that makes it necessary for small businesses to look for an effective SMM strategy to improve consumers' engagement is the use of big data analytics (BDA) on social media (social media analytics). Papadopoulos et al. (2016) suggested that analytic tools can reduce marketing costs as it was costly to analyze traditional market reporting, with the help of BDA. The opportunities to use BDA also give room for business organizations to tap into the exact details that form the marketing strategy of their competitors (Papadopoulos et al.,

2016). The benefits, big data notwithstanding, are still a dilemma for managers as it is difficult for marketers and business managers to scrutinize the problems alone properly, no matter the depth and level of expertise. BDA in the wrong hands may also lead to the mismanagement of personal information, infringement of privacy, willful or inadvertent individual profiling, discrimination, and breaching of privacy norms (Gharajeh, 2018). Small businesses must carefully avoid these issues, and so there is a need for managers to effectively adopt innovative marketing strategies and obtain information directly from consumers. Astutely applying the DOI in the marketing of business products and services might serve SBMs and markets to understand how innovations are diligently adopted and the benefits of new technologies cleverly utilized to create effective SMM strategies.

### **Leveraging Social Media Advantageously**

The key to business success may lie in diligence and resourcefulness, for when small businesses take advantage of existing social media platforms, they can create new business strategies and adapt marketing strategies to positively engage consumers, increase revenue, and remain competitive (Felix et al., 2017). The advantages of the adeptness in innovatively using social media have included consumer self-support, sharing of information between consumers and the firm, have led to an increase in referrals, greater brand, product, or service awareness, reduced operation costs, and enhanced consumer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and purchases (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015; Sajid, 2016).

Creative marketing and business managers are known to frequently use consumer feedback, on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, to track current and future purchases via consumer-provided status updates, and thereby develop and implement strategies that motivate consumers and spell greater their more extensive engagement and retention (Sashi et al., 2019).

The empirical study of marketing innovation might increase understanding of how and why SBMs adopt SMM (Fityan&Huseynov, 2018). The main source of small business profit invariably derives from target audiences with a positive psychological attitude and high social approval, in therefore stands to reason, that businesses should develop and implement SMM strategies to improve consumer engagement, through the powers of influence that social media can afford (Zaitseva et al., 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. A purposive sample was drawn from the study population and comprised six business managers of identified six successful small businesses in Maryland. The beneficial implication for positive social change to the community are in the anticipated business growth, contingent upon diligence and innovation, which could result in increased employment and tax revenues, poverty reduction, potentially contributing in some way to an improvement in the living standards for the people in local communities, within the sphere and catchment areas of these businesses.

### **Purposeful Sampling of the Population, a Logical Choice**

The concept of appropriate research sampling as envisioned by Wirtz et al. (2017), was that careful selection is the foundation of research integrity and the generation of quality data. With the methodology employed for this study, an appropriate sampling approach aimed to maximize validity

and efficiency. In this multiple case study, the aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the view of SBMs or owners in Maryland who had successfully developed and implemented an SMM strategy, in their efforts to improve consumers' engagement. For this study, purposeful sampling was employed to identify and select six SMM knowledgeable and experienced participants. Qualitative researchers frequently find value in using purposeful sampling in identifying and selecting participants or groups of participants who are especially experienced or knowledgeable in the study of a phenomenon of interest (Boddy, 2016). In addition to knowledge and experience, purposeful sampling serves to meet critical points such as participants' availability, willingness, and communication ability (Spradley, 1976; Zhang et al., 2017).

This study entailed using a purposeful sampling to reach a population of successful business owners and managers of small businesses in Maryland with a record of employing SMM strategies with a track record of achievement in consumer engagement. Conducting semi-structured interviews served to obtain depth data from participants. The words of wisdom from exponents of purposive sampling are that researchers should select a suitable interview setting to ensure the comfort of participants, and ensure their confidentiality, and in using a favorable setting for uninterrupted interview dialog (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Ecker, 2017). Interviews for this research transpired in a comfortable location that was mutually agreed upon for the convenience of each participant, such as the participants' office, or other locales, and video conferencing of the interviews was achieved through Zoom, Skype, or Google meetings.

The study involved six in-depth individual face-to-face or video conferencing interviews, which were undertaken with the participants recruited. Schram (2006) suggested that optimally for a qualitative study, a range of five to 10 participants was appropriate as a larger sample size could be a hindrance to an in-depth exploration of the studied phenomena. Dean (2019) undertook a qualitative case study with six participants, in exploring the SMM strategies used by small retail business owners to improve sales. The use of six participants in this study, therefore, was justifiable, as endorsed by influential researchers, for instance, Dean, Ezeife, and Schram because of the similarities in the topic, scope, method, and design. Following the interviews, a review of the firms' SMM strategies records and annual and consumer reports also served to gain additional perspective and validate the views and opinions of participant responses.

The attainment of data saturation is a goal in qualitative research, which may be concluded reaching this goal when the efforts of the researcher do not yield new information and repetitive information that was already collected (Tran et al., 2017). One cue on the achievement of data saturation is that it is often the stage where, after conducting multiple interviews, the subsequent participants offer no new information to the already provided by the previous interviewees. In this stage of data saturation, further interviews reflect redundancy and the yield of lowered new information and diminishing value and information, which may be construed as data saturation, when adequacy is already ensured. The repetitious data may be a signal as the quest for data saturation has been fulfilled. Researchers can reach data saturation by probing participants, adding the number of participants, engaging participants in member checking, and engaging in methodological triangulation (Baškarada, 2014). Qualitative researchers using

a case study design, benefit from the quality and depth of data by employing data triangulation (Denzin, 2012). The rich, in-depth data collection provides a direct connection between triangulation and data saturation (Fusch, et al., 2018). To convincingly reach data saturation, in this study, the process involved conducting semi-structured interviews, asking probing questions for more clarity during interviews, involving the participants in member checking, and employing methodological triangulation. Data were collected until no additional new data was obtained and no new themes or patterns were found emerging.

#### **The Comprehensiveness in the Sources of Data**

Cypress (2017) stated that instrumentally, the ultimate qualitative research data collection tool lies in the researcher. Castillo-Montoya (2016) listed some data collection instrument options, as interviews (semi-structured interviews, in-depth phenomenological interviews, focus groups), observations, and company documents. In multiple case studies, researchers use multiple data collection sources in the effort to acquire credible and reliable data to answer the study's research question (Yin, 2018). In this study, face-to-face and video conferencing, for conducting the semi-structured interviews entailed using open-ended questions and probes to explore the views of SBMs and owners of the SMM development and implementation strategies, successes, and challenges in improving consumer engagement. Face-to-face interviews often serve to maximize the interviewer's contact with participants and enhance more thorough, in-depth interviews to be conducted (Palinkas et al., 2015). Interviewers can personally observe nonverbal cues and receive better-quality responses. Some suggestions many are that researchers should use a reflective journal during data collection to maintain a record used all the data collection processes used (Larivière & Kandampully, 2019). For this study, a reflective journal served to record notes and nonverbal cues from the participants during interviews. Audio recordings with the permission of the participants during semi-structured interviews aided in the transcription and analysis of the data collected.

To facilitate deep and meaningful conversations, open-ended questions are beneficial during an interview as are conducive for the researcher to gain a deeper and better understanding of how a participant viewed a specific phenomenon (Roberts et al., 2019). To conduct reliable and valuable interviews researchers should (a) acquire IRB approval, (b) acquire the informed consent from each participant, (c) stay focused, (d) record the interview, and (e) listen during the interview to ask follow-up questions when possible

Data organization is critical to researchers as it eases the data analysis process (Yin, 2018). Following the advice of Roberts et al. (2019), the data was organized using a database for easy retrieval. Qualitative multiple case study researchers collect data from multiple sources (Baškarada, 2014). Several researchers advocate the use of computer-mediated software programs to organize different data from multiple sources (Chowdhury, 2015). In this study interview transcripts were organized with Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel was used to create a data-tracking database. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo<sup>12.0</sup> software program, widely used in the research was used to organize the data, which further facilitated the analysis of the interview transcript and data perused from company documents as the data was coded and categorized into reduced information, to achieve succinct and

insightful data analysis. Ethical researchers ensure the confidentiality of study participants by the removal of any personal identifiers of those involved in the study and within the published research paper (Rowlands et al., 2015).

For this study, to ensure participant confidentiality, assigning codes such as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6, aided in achieving this goal. Each participant was further assigned a file using a number rather than a name or other identifying information. Maintaining secure custody of all research records is the critical activity of ethical researchers (Rowlands et al., 2015). After 5 years, all printed material will be shredded and electronically data deleted permanently to ensure appropriate disposal to assure and guarantee the protection of the identities of those who partook in the study.

### **Presentation and Details of Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. The specific sample purposively drawn from the study population was six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. Yin's five-phase process and NVivo12 software underpinned by the postulations of the DOI helped to analyze the data emanating from the semi-structured interviews, while other documentation helped to identify the Principal and Central Themes.

The central research question for this study was: RQ: What strategies do SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumer engagement?

The interview questions and follow-up questions aided in achieving data saturation. Using qualitative data analysis software in the form of NVivos, aided in identifying various strategies using a thematic approach to group the data and in its sequential and logical analysis.

### **Principal and Central Emergent Theme: Social Media Marketing**

The consensus of participants was that customer behavior fluctuates in the buying process. P5 and P6 state, that there are two types of content: informative and persuasive. P5 noted persuasive content consists of facts and emotion. P6 noted that persuasive content is influenced by appealing to logos, pathos, and ethos. For example, celebrity endorsement is ethos, philanthropic content often results in empathy, and we call it emotional influence through pathos, and logos is about influencing consumers through facts about products and services.

P5 said that the informative marketing content includes product description, deals, targeted message to segment, brand mention, and sponsorship. P5 stated social media, informative, and persuasive marketing content could result in customer engagement. P4 contended that the purpose of informative and persuasive marketing content is to improve customer engagement to connect to the brand.

Participants indicated that persuasive and informative marketing content comes in different forms, shapes, and sizes. Participants designated as P1 suggested that marketers need a thorough review and consideration of content to improve its effectiveness. P1 stated the marketing content could be in the form of videos, live videos, company news, and market data. Additional marketing content could be photos, tips and tricks, events, polls, and surveys. Other marketing contents participants discussed include behind-the-scenes, animations, interesting quotes, industry news, teaser, memes, and press release. Participants' messages within the

content, timing, and location will play a significant role in content effectiveness.

P3 noted, that the consumer engagement marketing content constitutes messaging strategies for customers to post and comment on. P3 stated that the company's marketing content should allow customers to express an opinion. P3 leaders prompt customers to express opinions by probing their personalities through a poll and playing 'test your knowledge games and asking a simple question. P4 posited that the marketing content needs to have functional appeal, experimental appeal, and emotional appeal. per the opinions of participants, their SMM content varies throughout the product life cycle. For instance, various content constitutes humor, small talk, and price comparison. P3 noted, that the marketing content in social media needs to be functional to grow sales, add value, engage customers, and extend the brand name.

All participants suggested that the content needs to inspire and inform customers rather than just push customers. P2 stated, that our approach is to shift from passive to empowered customers through connectivity and customer choices.

When asked to define empowered customers, P2 indicated, that customers now have constant access to smartphones. Consumers have more choices and control to access information. The brand often hence needs to earn customer loyalty by delivering values and understanding their needs.

Participants were unanimous in expressing that content varies depending on their marketing objectives. P3 noted that a company SMM utilizes the RACE concept in its marketing objectives. P3 noted RACE stands for Reach, Act, Convert, and Engage. This participant emphasized that the RACE comprises the entire customer journey. The participant presented a customer journey map that provides a visual representation of buyers' journey. The mode of interaction as revealed in the document includes email, live chat, hangtags, and the use of other channels. P3 added, "We use paid media, owned media, earned media, and other channels to reach customers." P3 indicated that act means customers purchasing products using their social media, landing page, product page, and marketing automation. P3 concluded convert is about multiple selling, producing content, and converting indecisive customers to repeat customers. Finally, in P3, engagement converts lapsed customers to indecisive customers and ultimately turns into repeat customers.

Participants also unanimously noted that the Covid-19 pandemic had affected their marketing approach as people's lifestyle has changed and customers are shopping more online than before. P4 stated that the company brand adapted its content to Covid-19 while being sensitive to its customers. P6 noted during Covid-19, the company leaders focus on retaining consumers through a positive brand image. When asked how leaders improve brand image, P6 said that customers are inclined toward authentic news and informative articles due to pandemics, so they do not add irrelevant ads, are hard-selling, or bombard customers with advertisements. P6 suggested that selling refers to a distribution channel, which means adding value, speaking relates to communication to get closer to the customers, saving relates to the cost, and sizzle is about the value proposition. P6 expressed that to learn about the customers' journey, the SMM routinely does surveys. P6 presented a document

relating to the customer journey survey. The survey template had ten questionnaires to grasp customer experience in buying journey.

All customers supported the notion of engagement through word-of-mouth branding. P3 posited that they have better success in selling products if their customers circulate their message. P4 noted that consumers consider what their friends and people in their network say about the company and its products. Participants opined, that customer engagement, and the positive stories reached people outside of the customer base.

Several participants observed that free giveaway attracts more customers. P5 said that from a marketing content perspective regarding the company's social media platform, the SBM provides voucher codes, restaurant offers, and regular deals in exchange for customers to tell their stories to funnel down to a larger audience. P5 handed a copy of vouchers and deals they provided to customers. The coupons and deals were suitable to their targeted demographic.

P1 added, "But if we talk about the specific needs of our community and provide solutions or offer deals for them to save money, then it will resonate with people.

P2 suggested that their secret to business success is defining their segment and the quality of marketing content they put in front of their segment. P2 said, "Many marketers define segment by the boundary. What if the customer is just outside at the edge of the boundary, then marketers contemplate whether should they bring those people into their segment. If they do, and soon the boundary will expand, affecting process integrity.

Often, therefore, per P2, the company SMM does not define segment by the boundary but by the center point. They call this idea the poster child concept. Their poster child is an ideal representation of their segment. In other words, the poster child is the persona of targeted customers. Then the company SBM channels all communication with appropriate marketing content to that poster child because it resonates with all people in their segment. The accord of participants said that the marketing team focuses on facts rather than opinions when it comes to content. P1 said, "We are careful with our content nature. We do not want our ads besides breaking news about a mass shooting or any other inappropriate content.

#### **Connecting the Principal and Central Emergent Theme to the Literature**

It was noted in this study, that participants used informative and persuasive marketing content types to foster customer engagement on social media. A participant indicated that the journey of customers essentially constitutes many touchpoints, and for each touchpoint, the marketing content type needs to have an emotional appeal for customer engagement. Kraus et al. (2019) stated appropriate styles of marketing content communication that are vibrant, entertaining, and trustworthy. Hahn et al. also (2016) noted emotional content could result in customer engagement leading to robust brand relationships. Participants also expressed, that posting informative and persuasive marketing content in the schedule and providing helpful links and giveaways to engage customers, so they become brand advocates and recommend products through eWOM. Fernandes and Moreira (2019) recommended developing marketing content regularly and timely, including giveaways to engage customers. Participants identified segments through the poster boy concept, which resonates with all targeted

customers. Haikel-Elsabeh et al. (2019) supported developing marketing content that enables eWOM from customers, potentially reaching target audiences within the segment.

#### **Connecting the Principal and Central Emergent Theme to the Conceptual Framework**

The key construct of innovation hinges on the ability to harness creativity, to foster and achieve desired outcomes (Cooper et al., 2016). In the details falling under this emergent theme, it was found that participants had emphasized various marketing content types to improve customer engagement. The proposition in DOI was held to be valid in the interpretation of study findings and congruent with the adapting processes, as was critical to foster innovative ideas and improve communication (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). The DOI concept congruent with the principal theme, was because the SBM approach to marketing content identification and development requires an innovative approach for idea generation and communication across the team.

#### **The Application Study Findings in Relation to Realities in Professional Spheres**

The challenges SBM experience, typically includes designing the marketing content, astutely leveraging social media platforms, and utilizing business intelligence tools to maximize ROI in social media. Knowledgeable exponents of social media in marketing have recommended the adoption of social media engagement (Cawsey&Rowley,2016). The identified strategies in this study may have an application to business practices. Consumer engagement is the psychological state of consumers, and through informative and persuasive content, SBMs could provide a feeling of being an essential part of the firm (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016).

Informative and persuasive marketing content could result in customers advocating the company brand, image, and product through WOM. Positive WOM has been known and proven to increase brand trust, brand commitment, and quality of consumer-brand-relationship (Akroun&Nagy, 2018). In the data from which the central theme was derived, it was found that participants expressed, that multichannel communication experts use persuasive and information marketing content throughout various customer journeys. Gill et al. (2017) noted, that providing the correct information for each type of touchpoint gives customers an enjoyable positive experience along their customer journey.

#### **Societal and Positive Applications of Study Knowledge**

The study findings in respect of the beneficial and favorable implications of effective marketing strategies indicated that SMM is often able to reach consumers and must engage with appropriate content, resulting in sales. Successful businesses are likely to grow by providing employment opportunities to people in local communities. Shibia and Barako (2017) opined, that new job creations could eliminate poverty and improve living standards.

From statistical data, small businesses consist of 99.7% of organizations with paid employees and 40.8% of private-sector payroll (SBA, 2018a). Business growth and employment result in tax revenues for local government. Local governments could improve local schools, senior housing, and parks and recreation facilities benefiting people. Successful businesses are likely to fulfill corporate social responsibilities by contributing to charities of choice such as cancer research and environmental protection.

### Strategic Prioritized and Actionable Recommendations

A review of the trends and statistics revealed, that in 2015, small businesses in the U.S. employed 58.9 million people, created 1.9 million net jobs, and represented 47.5% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018a). In that same year, Maryland small businesses employed 1.1 million people, representing 50.2% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018b). From these figures, it can be easily discerned, that small business is a significant contributor to the U.S economy, and their success is vital for productive contributions to the country's GDP.

The strategies that participants identified during the interviews may have potentially positive ramifications, in improving marketing, and leading to consumer engagement. Discussing all social media-related marketing activities is beyond the scope of this research, however, the strategies identified in this study possibly have universal applicability. Business leaders of all industry types could use the knowledge and identified strategies from this study to reach customers, engage and aid their buying decisions. The identified strategies could also enable consumers to experience a pleasant journey in the buying process, improve company image, and brand loyalty, and reach a wider audience.

### Knowledge and Discovery in Further Research

Researchers then could explore using quantitative and other approaches, to learn the effective SMM strategies that small business leaders employ to exploit possible benefits and assess the social media tools and strategies that are most beneficial to remain sustainable (Bouranta et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2017). Marketers who effectively leverage social media podiums, such as Facebook and Twitter, often are seen to have enhanced consumer engagement, when using monitoring customer activities, testimonials, online comments, and posts, and use this knowledge to engage consumers (Galati et al., 2017). The effective development and implementation of SMM strategies can serve to improve business-to-consumer engagement, however, often remains elusive and a problem for some SBMs, ostensibly due to a lack of resources and expertise (Hassan et al., 2015).

### Conclusion

This qualitative study included the interviews of six participants and was grounded using the lens of the DOI. This study's findings potentially add to the knowledge of small businesses' processes and can be a valuable resource to those seeking to develop and implement SMM. The increased understanding could also equip SBMs and owners with strategies for implementing SMM and maintaining an increasingly effective online presence. Participants in this study indicated from personal experiences, that informative and persuasive content is a conduit to foster greater customer engagement in products via SMM. Several of the participants explained that the use of text messages with philanthropic content, induced empathy as a tool of persuasion as it appeals to the emotions of consumers to adopt a product via the social media platforms used for advertising. The participants also found the thorough experience, that the use of informative and persuasive content such as messages via logos that carry unusual information, influenced consumers to engage in a product or created awareness for consumers to adopt the product as a form of appealing for logic. Marketing practitioners are frequently categorized content that attempts to persuade and promote relationship building in this manner as persuasive content. Several participants indicated that in

the customer journey, there are many touchpoints between business and customer, and for each, the content must be crafted with emotional appeal. In other words, for customer engagement the acuity of the business, their diligence, and communications skills in the framing of effective communication, is a key differentiator, over others. The failure rate of small businesses is high, especially, during the period of vulnerability, which is usually for small businesses, within the first 5 years of operation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Overall, the identified SMM strategies in this study, in diligently enacted, could help potentially serve business leaders to gainfully increase brand recognition, customer retention, and engagement and lower the high rate of businesses failures, during the period of susceptibility of the first years of formation, when many are prone to failing.

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