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Leveraging Social Media Marketing Strategies Advantageously To Enhance Small Businesses Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Leveraging social media advantageously in marketing is one of the important innovative strategies that has made it easier for business managers to enhance consumers engagement and exploit purchase intentions. The lack of social media marketing (SMM) strategies to engage consumers has generally impeded small business manager effectiveness (SBMs) to compete and increase sales. SBMs and owners who fail to reach, engage consumers, increase sales, and remain competitive in the market are at a higher risk of failure. Rooted in 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 to improve consumers' engagement. The specific study population comprised six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland who effectively used social media marketing strategies to engage consumers for at least 5 years. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and a review of the companies' documents. A thematic assessment grounded in DOI helped in identifying the major theme of content design and engineering. SBMs might benefit from this study's findings by increasing their knowledge of the SMM strategies that are most beneficial in developing consumers' desired SMM content, selecting the very appropriate social media platforms, and developing highly effective customer reach and engagement strategies. The implications for positive social change could include the potential for business leaders to increase business success, which bodes well for increased social and community welfare and prosperity.

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Introduction and Background

Small businesses are vital contributors to national and global economy. notably by generating innovations, new jobs, and economic growth (Karadag, 2015). The alarming statistic, however, is that despite the important role of small businesses in the economy, about half did not survive five years or longer between 2005 to 2017 (Small Business Administration, 2020). In the contemporary landscape, social media marketing (SMM) strategies are effective means for a small business manager to improve consumers' engagement and acquire and retain convert consumers, grow profitability; therefore, it may lead to improved survival of small businesses (Nawafleh, 2015). Oyza and Edwin (2015) stated that one of the significant challenges of many small business managers (SBMs) is the failure to adopt SMM strategies effectively. From extensive analysis, it was apparent that there is a void in the contemporary knowledge on how to develop and implement effective SMM strategies to enhances mall business performance (Cole et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2015).

Small businesses are of critical value and importance to the United States (US) economy. From 2000 to 2017, small businesses accounted for about 66% of net new job creation in the US (SBA, 2020). Small business owners face marketing challenges to effectively communicate to attract and improve consumers' engagement, which may lead to an

advantage in a competitive market position (Hutchinson et al., 2015). The adoption of effective SMM strategies to improve communication approaches is one of the most significant marketing challenges for small business leaders (Omoyza & Agwu, 2016). Perčić and Perić (2021) noted that the implementation of an effective marketing strategy is an invaluable asset to the success of a business.

The rapid diffusion of innovation into the global market has changed the communication approaches of business leaders with customers (Clausen & Fichter, 2019; Kwon et al., 2021). Social networks offer an innovative and interactive platform for business managers to communicate with customers and triggers the interest of new products (Roberts & Piller, 2016). As consumer engagement remains a primary business success component, small businesses must employ SMM strategies effectively to customer engagement practices and remain sustainable (Herman, 2015; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016). However, Grewal et al., (2019) identified negative consumers' responses when posting on social media sometimes fail, perhaps due to a lack of effective strategies. This study was an exploration of how small business leaders develop and implement SMM effectively to improve consumer engagement.

Problem Studied and Purpose Stated

Customer acquisition and retention are critical in the pathway to increasing revenues and business sustainability.

The failure of organizations to effectively implement SMM may result in difficulties to relate with customers and remain sustainable (Valos et al., 2017). In a 2017 survey of 300 small businesses with revenues of under made \$100,000 in the United States, 75% of the managers indicated a significant challenge to adopting and implementing SMM strategy effectively (Cole et al., 2017). The general business problem is that SBMs lack effective approaches to social media strategies designed to improve customer engagement. The specific business problem is that some SBMs lack the strategies to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement.

The aim and prime objective of 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 study population consisted of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. The business impact to the organizations may include the potential for SBMs to have a better understanding of social media and therefore develop and implement SMM strategies to engage consumers effectively and bring about business growth.

Rationale for Chosen Method and Design in Undertaking Study

The principal research methods to undertake a research study are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2018). The qualitative research is an inductive approach, suitable for exploratory research in which researchers use to understand the phenomenon via observations, open-ended interview questions, and documentation (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Quantitative research is a deductive method which researchers use to collect numerical data and perform mathematical calculations and hypotheses testing involving variables' characteristics or relationships (Yin, 2018). A quantitative approach would not be appropriate for this study because completing the proposed purpose does not require deductive reasoning about variable characteristics or relationships. Mixed-methods researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Kachouie & Sedighadeli, 2015). Although the mixed method may serve to address the qualitative issues of the proposed study, this method was rejected because there were no hypotheses to test and examine underlying characteristics or relationships. The qualitative method was deemed appropriate to explore the strategies that SBMs have used to effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement through open-ended interview questions and via documentation provided by the participants.

A multiple case study design also served to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement. Researchers in undertaking a multiple case study, depend on 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 period (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Using a case study enables developing a more intense and more vibrant picture of the research problem than other qualitative research designs (Lewis, & Molyneux, 2018). For example, the phenomenological design was rejected for this study, because it limits the exploration to only the meanings of participants' lived experiences (Sylvan, 2018). Researchers use an ethnographic design to study an entire culture (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). A multiple case study design was chosen

to produce detailed descriptions of the strategies that SBMs use to effectively implement SMM using concepts to order the data and relating to earlier literature. Yin (2018) emphasized that with multiple cases, researchers can conduct a broader exploration of research questions and concepts, thereby potentially increasing the robustness of the findings.

The use of probe questioning and recording devices are also employed in qualitative research to clarify any uncertainties and achieve a high level of substantial validity (Matta, 2019). Here, the target audience was small business owners, who had implemented effective SMM strategies. The invocation of a multiple case study design facilitates 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 central research question for the study was: What strategies do SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumer engagement?

Interview Questions

1. How does your organization use social media as a communication channel to engage customers?
2. What effective SMM strategies have your organization developed and implemented to engage customers?

Theoretical Representation in Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was represented by the theory of diffusion of innovation (DOI), which underpinned and grounded the study, to explore the strategies SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement. In 1962, Rogers first developed the theory of DOI as a communication model and later the foundation of the adoption concept to elucidate how over time, new products or concepts can acquire momentum and diffusion (Rogers, 2015). The DOI theory can be used to explain how, why, and the degree to which technology and ideas spread via cultures to increase the engagement of customers and business growth. The key propositions underlying the DOI theory are innovation, communication channels, time, and social systems (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). In 2003, Rogers described DOI as 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 evaluate the reaction of individual to fostering of innovation and the awaiting success of the implementation. Therefore, innovation and communication practices make the DOI theory an appropriate framework to address 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 reflect possible utility to the domains of similar businesses practice, herein as may relate to the effectiveness of SMM strategies, in advancing business performance and holding beneficial ramifications for society. The proposed study findings were of significance to organizations. The key beneficiaries and stakeholders from this research's knowledge as the findings may enable SBMs and owners to acquire knowledge concerning business practices such as effective strategies for developing and implementing SMM strategies. Small businesses in the launching or diffusion stage of innovation may use this

study's outcome to create and implement effective SMM strategies and practices. Also, the development of effective SMM strategies may become 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 promoting positive social change for communities.

Implication on Business Sustainability

This study's findings may add to the current and existing body of knowledge of the processes that small businesses can 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 help 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 help small business leaders develop and implement effective strategies for business growth and sustainability.

A Critique of Pertinent Literature

Some managers are not able to develop strategies for the effective implementation of SMM to engage and convert consumers. One of the significant problems in using social media is to develop and implement marketing strategies to leverage social media to get desired results by first targeting the appropriate consumers then engage and convert the consumers (Arora & Sanni, 2019). The responses to the research question and topics such as the diffusion of innovation theory synthesized the marketing innovation literature and provided valuable insight into SMM and customer engagement strategies. The following major components were included in this study: (a) the concept used to form the study, (b) the background of the conceptual framework and justification of choosing Rogers' DOI theory, (c) a review and the significance of the phenomena, (d) gaps and limitations discovered in the study.

Analysis of Social Media Marketing

The analysis of SMM and innovation in small businesses pinpoint innovation management, customer engagement, collaboration, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and value-added strategies efficiency in small businesses. The evolution of multi-channel to Omni-channels for communication and sale initiatives has promoted firms to constantly search for the most appropriate channels for reaching and intercepting customers effectively (Verhoef et al., 2015). In this sense, social media platforms are a favorite channel for feedback, exchanging opinions, judgments, brand information, and performance. Roberts and Piller (2016) specified that social media has become a more integral part of the lives of people. Increasingly, firms are changing the use of social media to a business tool to enhance performance. At the same time, customers are now accepting products and brands communication via social media channels.

Social media networks provide an interactive and innovative meaning of business communication with customers, which triggers the interest of new products (Roberts & Piller, 2016). There are more than 1.8 million

social media users in the world, and 77% of the participants are active either by link click, comments, and/or share (Kanuri et al., 2018). Kanuri et al. (2018), business organizations could use social media as a commercial dais for communication with consumers. Li et al. (2021) explained that it is vital for firms to effectively implement SMM to foster their ability to effectively communicate with customers in this era of sophisticated innovations and globalized markets. Employing effective strategies to implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement remains a problem for business managers. Omoyza and Agwu (2016), found that 62% of marketers stated that one of the most challenging problems of business managers is to effectively adopt and implement SMM strategies.

In the global market, SMM remains one of the core innovation management strategies to gain a better understanding of consumers' purchase intentions as they share feedback and experiences online. The globalization of goods and services is vital in innovation management as it is a driving force for SBMs to become more innovative to engage consumers, remain competitive, and improve their market positioning (Story et al., 2015). Hassan et al. (2015) observed that social media and the Internet are crucial for small business competitiveness and innovation. The use of social media for marketing purposes is increasing, making it easier for small businesses to reach audiences outside of the immediate location (Sajid, 2016). Taalbi (2019) held that innovation is a driving force for the demand for a product or service or it promotes the expectation for next-generation products. Love and Roper (2015) discovered the existence of positive relationships between innovation, exportation, cash flow, and liquidity. However, there is a potential for cutbacks from social media platforms to firms for SMM that may have a negative impact on small businesses.

Many social media platforms have begun to cut back on organic visibility of brands and corporations while are also prioritizing individual users' content. Platforms like Facebook have cut back on the use of user content as a way to feed news better for 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 on firms may hinge on a drastic cut on 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 consumers' reach.

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, which is not today because of the help of BDA. BDA also gives room for business organizations to tap into the exact details that form the marketing strategy of their competitors (Papadopoulos et al., 2016). Despite all the benefits, big data is still a dilemma for managers as it is difficult for marketers or 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, individual profiling, discrimination, and breaching privacy (Gharajeh, 2018). However, for small businesses to avoid these issues, there is a need for managers

to effectively adopt innovative marketing strategies and obtain information directly from consumers. Applying the DOI theory might serve SBMs and markets to understand how innovations are adopted and the benefits of new technologies to create effective SMM strategies.

Leveraging Social Media Advantageously

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 using of social media tools included consumer self-support, sharing of information between consumers and the firm, referrals, increased brand, product, or service awareness, reduce operation cost, increase consumers' satisfaction, brand loyalty and increase purchase (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015; Sajid, 2016).

Business managers could use social media tools to improve the understanding of consumers (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). Marketing and business managers often use consumer feedback on platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, to track current and future purchases via consumer-provided status updates, which managers might use to develop and implement strategies that motivate consumers' engagement and retention (Sashi et al., 2019).

Social media was found to be advantageous to businesses for virtual communication, sale promotion, direct marketing, low-cost marketing, publicity collaboration on projects, writing blogs and microblogs, and networking in personal and professional sceneries (Perčić & Perić, 2021). The use of social media applications was observed to have enhanced the performance of business communication and collaboration, which increased business performance and was customizable to suit the business objectives of a company (Sajid, 2016). Financially, Buhalis and Mamalakis (2015) showed a 656% increase in return on capital after 14 months of the study of social media activities in the Princess Andriana Hotel in Rhodes, Greece.

Buhalis and Mamalakis (2015) emphasized the nonfinancial benefits of using social media platforms for business activities as improved product reach, customers' engagement, and high brand recognition. The study of Lepkowska-White et al. (2019) on small restaurants in the US showed that social media platforms are sources of providing reliable business information. The authors concluded that ignoring social media for only a week might be detrimental to the business, especially in case any problem occurred during the period. The empirical study of marketing innovation might increase understanding of how and why SBMs adopt SMM (Fityan & Huseynov, 2018). Since the main source of small business profit comes from target audiences with a positive psychological attitude and high social approval, managers should develop and implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement (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. The specific study population consisted of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. The business impact and contribution of this study may be to organizations, and could include the potential for SBMs to have a better understanding of social media and be able to develop and implement SMM strategies to engage consumers effectively and bring about business growth. The implication of positive social change to the

community is business growth, which could result in increased employment and tax revenues, poverty reduction, leading to an improved living standard for the people in local communities.

Purposeful Sampling of the Population, a Logical Choice

The concept of research sampling as envisioned by Wirtz et al. (2017), was that sampling is the foundation of research integrity. Despite the methodology employed, the decision to select a sampling method for this study was 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 a SMM strategy to improve consumers' engagement. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify and select six SMM knowledgeable and experienced participants. Qualitative researchers widely use purposeful sampling techniques for identifying and selecting participants or groups of participants who are especially experienced or knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Boddy, 2016). In addition to knowledge and experience, a purposeful sampling includes critical points like participants' availability, willingness, and articulate communication ability (Spradley, 1976; Zhang et al., 2017).

The study entailed using a purposeful sampling to reach a specialized population of owners and top managers of small businesses in Maryland with a record of employing SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. Conducting semi-structured interviews served to obtain depth data from participants. Researchers should select a suitable interview setting to ensure participants' comfort, confidentiality, and a favorable setting for uninterrupted interview dialog (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Ecker, 2017). Interviews took place in a comfortable location that was agreed upon for the convenience of each participant, such as the participants' office or the library's meeting room or video conferencing interview through Zoom, Skype, or Google meeting.

Six in-depth individual face-to-face or video conferencing interviews were undertaken with the participants recruited. Schram (2006) suggested that 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. In a social media strategy research that business managers use to increase sales (Ezeife, 2017), intentionally selected five participants. Dean (2019) conducted a qualitative case study with six participants to explore the SMM strategies used by small retail business owners to improve sales. Therefore, the use of six participants in this study was justifiable, as endorsed by influential researchers, for instance by 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 validate participants' responses.

Data saturation, a goal in qualitative research, may be concluded in attainment when the researchers' efforts to collect additional data do not result in new information (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, the further interviews may yield diminishing value and information, depicting repetitions in the information to that which has

already been collected. 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, and engaging participants in member checking, and engagement of methodological triangulation (Baškarada, 2014). Qualitative researchers add depth to data by employing triangulation (Denzin, 2012). The rich, in-depth data collection provides a direct connection between triangulation and data saturation (Fusch, et al., 2018). To 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.

Sources of Data

Cypress (2017) stated that instrumentally, the ultimate qualitative research data collection tool was the researcher. Castillo-Montoya (2016) listed some data collection instruments as interviews (semi-structured interviews, in-depth phenomenological interviews, focus groups), observations, and company documents. In multiple case studies, researchers use multiple data collection forms to acquire credible and reliable data to answer the study's research question (Yin, 2018). In this study, face-to-face and video conferencing, 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 help to maximize 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. Researchers should use a reflective journal during data collection to maintain a record used all the data collection processes used (Larivière & Kandampully, 2019). I employed a reflective journal to record notes and nonverbal cues from the participants during interviews. Audio recordings were undertaken with the permission of the participants during semi-structured interviews for the purpose of transcription.

The open-ended questions are beneficial during an interview as they offer the researcher a better understanding of how a participant viewed a specific phenomenon (Roberts et al., 2019). To conduct reliable and valuable interview researchers should identify with the following (a) acquire IRB approval, (b) acquire the informed consent from each participant, (c) stay focused, (d) record the interview, (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). Roberts et al. (2019) suggested that researchers should organized data using a database for easy retrieval. Qualitative multiple case study researchers collect data from multiple sources (Baškarada, 2014). Researchers should employ computer 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. NVivo^{12.0} software program was used to organize further the interview transcript and data collected from company documents as it coded and categorized the information needed for data analysis. Ethical

researchers maintain the participants' confidentiality by averting the use of any personal identifiers of participants within the published research paper (Rowlands et al., 2015).

To ensure the participants' confidentiality, providing and assigning codes such as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6, to 1 of the 6 participants aided in ensuring confidentiality. Each participant had an assigned 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 and participants' identities protection.

Presentation and Details of Findings

The objective 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 study population consisted of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. Yin's five-phase process and NVivo 12 software underpinned with the DOI helped to analyze semi-structured interviews and documentation to identify the Principal and Central Theme, notably content design and engineering.

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

Eight semistructured interview questions and follow-up questions resulted in data saturation. Using Nvivo software, aided in identifying various strategies using a thematic approach to group the data thematically

Principal and Central Emergent Theme: Content Design and Engineering

The consensus of participants was that customer behavior fluctuates in the buying process. According to the participants, content marketing in social media needs to be informative, persuasive, and engaging. P5 and P6 said that there are two types of content: informative and persuasive. According to P5, persuasive content consists of facts and emotion. P6 noted that persuasive content influence 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. According to P5, in 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. Participant 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 includes behind the scenes, animations, interesting quotes, industry news, teaser, memes, and press release. According to 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. 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 said the marketing content in social media needs to be functional to grow sales, add value, engage customers, and extend brand name. When asked to expand customer engagement through content engineering, the P3 noted the content helps them get closer to customers through two-way dialogue.

P5 noted that each social media platform has its own unique identity, so our content engineering needs to adaptive to the platform, meaning content needs to be friendly, trustworthy, and consistent.

All participants suggested that the content needs to inspire and inform customers rather than just pushing customers.

P2 said, our approach is to shift from passive to the empowered customer 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 their marketing objectives. According to P3, the RACE stands for Reach, Act, Convert and Engage. This participant said that the RACE comprises the entire customer journey. The participant presented a customer journey map that provides a visual representation of buyers' journey. The map constitutes various touchpoints in buyers' journey and how the SMM interacts with buyers through social media. 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, other channels to reach customers." P3 said 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, according to P3, engage 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. According to P4, the company brand adapted its content to Covid -19 while being sensitive to their customers. According to P6, 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 towards authentic news and

informative articles due to pandemics, so they do not add irrelevant ads, hard-selling, or bombard customers with advertisement. P6 stated that the social media platform needs to Sell, Serve, Speak, Save, and Sizzle. According to P6, 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. The participating company leaders develop a conversation unit with their marketing message that their customers feel circulating in the social media. 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. So, all participants use social media platforms to deliver a positive message because engaging customers through social media brings customers closer to the brand. Participants opined, that through customer engagement, and the positives stories reached people outside of the customer base. P3 presented a document relating to social media engagement benchmarks across industries. The report revealed that the company has total engagement per post, indicating that the company's marketing leaders are catching up with industry standards when engaging customers in social media.

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.

According to P1, the marketing content is important cause if we focus on our products or service, then we are talking in a language that would not resonate with our social media community.

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." P1 added that they see social media as a communication vehicle.

P2 suggested that their secret for 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 just outside at the edge of the boundary, then marketers contemplate 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 their 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. Participants cautioned

about posting the content on social media sites. 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

The Principal Central Theme is about content engineering. Participants used informative and persuasive marketing content type to foster customer engagement in social media. A participant indicated that customers' journey constitutes many touchpoints, and for each touchpoint, the marketing content type needs to have 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 informed, that posting informative and persuasive marketing content in the schedule and provide helpful links and giveaways to engage customers, so they become brand advocates and recommend products through eWOM. Shrestha et al. (2019) noted that social media users prefer helpful links to aid them with their buying decisions. Fernandes and Moreira (2019) recommended developing marketing content regularly and timely, including giveaways to engage customers. Participants identified segment through 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 is to harness creativity to foster desired outcomes (Cooper et al., 2016). In the details falling under this Principal and Central Emergent Theme, it was found that participants had discussed various marketing content types to improve customer engagement. The proposition in DOI was congruent with the adapting processes to foster innovative ideas and improve communication (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). The DOI concept congruent with the Principal and Central Emergent 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

Many small business leaders have started to recognize the benefits of social media. However, they encounter challenges to exploit opportunities effectively presented by social media (Fink et al., 2018). The challenges SBM experience includes designing the marketing content, using the social media platform, and utilizing business intelligence tools to maximize ROI in social media. Scholars recommended the adoption of social media engagement (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). However, limited research has been undertaken specifically on the interface between SMM and business-consumer or consumer-to-business relationship settings in social media.

The findings of this study could potentially contribute to filling a void in contemporary literature through the identified strategies, and may offer strategies to engage customers in social media. The study resulted in a Principal and Central Theme in content engineering. The identified strategies have an application to business practices. The Principal and

Central Theme consists of content engineering focusing on content types, which are informative and persuasive. Consumer engagement is the psychological state of consumers, and through informative and persuasive content, SBM could provide a feeling of being an essential part of the firm (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016).

Informative and persuasive content could result in customers advocating company brand, image, and product through WOM. Positive WOM increased brand trust, brand commitment, and quality of consumer-brand-relationship (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018). In the data from which the Principal and Central Theme was derived, it was found that participants expressed, that multichannel communication uses persuasive and information marketing content throughout various customer journeys. Gill et al. (2017) stated providing the correct information for each type of touchpoint giving customers an enjoyable positive experience along their customer journey. Content engineering affects consumers' behaviors leading to motivation to engage and attach to the brand (Abusamhadana et al., 2019).

Societal and Beneficial Implications of Study Knowledge

The study findings may be further developed into marketing strategies for small business leaders to improve consumer engagement. The marketing strategies could cover valuable insights to frame strategies and contribute to content engineering, utilizing social media platforms, and the leader's involvement and technological tools. The favorable implication of effective marketing strategies includes SMM able to reach consumers and engage with appropriate content, resulting in sales. Successful businesses are likely to grow by providing employment opportunities to people in the local communities. Shibia and Barako (2017) stated new job creations could eliminate poverty and improve living standards.

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. The local government could improve local schools, senior housings, and parks and recreation facilities benefiting people. Successful business is likely to fulfill corporate social responsibilities by philanthropic contribution to charities of choice such as cancer research and environmental protection.

Strategic Prioritized and Actionable Recommendations

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). Based on this record, small businesses are a significant contributor to the U.S. economy, and its success is imperative for the country's GDP.

The strategies that participants identified have potentially positive ramifications, in improving marketing, 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 enable consumers to experience a pleasant journey in the buying process, improving company image, brand loyalty, and reaching a wider audience.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future researchers could explore the effective SMM strategies that small business leaders employ to exploit possible benefits and assess the social media tools and strategies which are most beneficial to remain sustainable (Bouranta et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2017). Marketers employ social media podiums, such as Facebook and Twitter, to enhance consumer engagement by using online comments and posts to engage consumers (Galati et al., 2017). The effective development and implementation of SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement, however, remains a problem for some SBMs due to 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 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. The Principal and Central Theme is about content engineering. Participants indicated from their experiences, that informative and persuasive content is a conduit to foster customer engagement in products via SMM. Participants explained that the use of 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 thorough experience, that the use of informative and persuasive content such as messages via logos which carry unusual information, influenced consumers to engage in a product or creating awareness for consumers to adopt the product as a form of appealing for logic. Marketing practitioners frequently categorized content that attempt to persuade and promote relationship building in this manner as persuasive content. Several participants indicated that in the customer journey, there are many touchpoints, and for each, the content must be crafted with emotional appeal for customer engagement. The failure rate is high for small businesses within the first 5 years of operation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Identified SMM strategies could help business leaders to increase brand recognition, customer retention, and engagement and prevent businesses from failing.

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