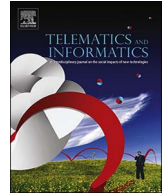




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Reflections of entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized enterprises concerning the adoption of social media and its impact on performance outcomes: Evidence from the UAE

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ABSTRACT

There have been numerous studies on the adoption of social media among individuals as well as organizations. Nevertheless, most of these studies were conducted in developed economies and focused on large organizations. This study, therefore, fills the gap by looking at the adoption of social media among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Middle East region; specifically, in the UAE. In addition, this study analyzes the adoption phenomena through word of mouth, viral marketing and social presence theory using in-depth semi-structured personal interviews with entrepreneurs of SMEs. Another significant contribution rendered by this study is its examination of social media adoption in terms of the business performance of firms.

1. Introduction

Social media (SM) is one of the most discussed topics in today's business domain even though its existence can be considered quite recent. It is already leading to the reshaping of the business setting where enterprises seek to harness the power of SM as a strategic tool to improve firm value, profits, and competitive advantage (Aral and Weill, 2013). Modern organizations are expected to develop an SM presence as a vehicle for advertisements and marketing campaigns, as well as for building relationships, and a portal for information sharing, education and interaction with the networked public. Often known as the next generation of Internet-based applications or Web 2.0, a term coined by O'Reilly (2005), interactions via SM between enterprises and the public may take place on channels that include online networks, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Xing; microblogs, such as Twitter and Tumblr; blogs, such as Blogger and WordPress; video/photo sharing platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and Flickr; and social bookmarking sites, such as Pinterest, Snapchat, Delicious, and Reddit. Recent studies (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2016; McCann and Barlow, 2015; He et al., 2014; Durkin et al., 2013) have shown that SM is a useful tool that could help businesses get closer to the customers and become more competitive. Despite optimism towards SM and the popularity of the topic in the business setting, the rate of SM adoption in the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector has remained relatively low because of a lack of knowledge of how to capitalize and realize the technology's benefits (Braojos-Gomes et al., 2015; Michaelidou et al., 2011).

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1.1. SMEs in the UAE

In the UAE, it was estimated that SMEs contributed 60 percent of GDP in 2015 and the government is aiming to boost the share to 70 percent by 2021 (John, 2016). The UAE government recognizes the importance of SMEs as being key to economic growth through their significant contribution to the GDP and provision of jobs for the majority of private sector employees. Given that SMEs have led the growth in productivity over the past decade, strengthening the hand of SMEs is now essential for the UAE to retain and improve its competitive edge among the dynamic global economies. However, an applicable study and framework to help SMEs identify areas where changes are needed for them to operate at a higher level of competence are lacking. This is critical, as, typically, SMEs have very limited resources. When facing massive uncertainty in today's dynamic and global economy, an SME's decision to transform its business operations is challenging and extremely risky. Hence, the need for a comprehensive investigation of SMEs' performance that aims to help them make assured and informed decisions to reposition themselves for competitive advantages.

1.2. SMEs and social media

There is a growing body of academic literature on the use of SM in a corporate context. However, most of the existing studies focus on larger enterprises that have a higher propensity for adopting new and innovative technologies. There have been modest studies on SM in the context of SMEs explicitly (see Meske and Stieglitz, 2013 for background). It is widely known that SMEs are often less likely to use emerging technologies due to their limited capabilities, lack of resources, absence of technical expertise, unstable organization structure, small number of employees and lack of capacity (e.g., Stockdale et al., 2012; Zeiller and Schauer, 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). SMEs have to make well-conceived decisions regarding the adoption of new technologies, such as SM applications (Boyles, 2011). With respect to the Arab world landscape, to the surprise of many of the Western counterparts, SM usage has been quite extensive (Klischewski, 2014). LinkedIn analysis into the SM adoption of 260 SMEs in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) found that 92 percent of companies are already on social media platforms, with a further five percent preparing to establish a presence (King, 2015). This rapidly accelerating trend among businesses in the GCC has strategically placed SM as an important element in today's comprehensive marketing strategies. In spite of having better encouragement in terms of technological development, high popularity and the commercial relevance of SM platforms (Dubai School of Government, 2012), there is surprisingly limited research on SM adoption and usage (Putzke et al., 2014), particularly studies exploring SMEs in the GCC countries. According to Straub et al. (2002), due to several contextual differences (organizational, cultural, and environmental) between SMEs in developed and developing countries, generalizing the results of prior studies on SM usage in SMEs to the developing countries context can be of some concern. To redress this academic gap, the main objective of this paper is to examine the reasons for SM adoption decisions by owners/entrepreneurs of SMEs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Subsequently, we will also look at the impact of SM usage on business performance. Given the paucity of previous studies, the current study must be considered as an initial exploration of the dynamics of SM adoption in the UAE, and a foundation for future research. To represent the perspectives and experiences of the research participants, the data for this study were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven SMEs in various businesses operating in the UAE that use SM services for their business activities. The findings of the study will help SMEs gain a better understanding of the determinants of SM technology adoption.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section provides relevant theories related to social media adoption by business organizations. Then we present the methodology and semi-structured in-depth interview approach that was used to collect data. We present the results of our analysis and conclude the paper with a discussion of our contributions, limitations, implications, and opportunities for future research.

2. Theoretical background

Many companies have increasingly engaged in social media to build their own community where real-time communication with and among the customers can easily take place (Gensler et al., 2013). Given the recent dramatic influence of social media on business practices, several theories have been suggested as appropriate for the study of SM adoption by business organizations.

2.1. Word of mouth (WOM) theory

First, the traditional communications theory recognized "word of mouth" (WOM) as a means of interpersonal communication and as an influential marketing tool as it has a powerful influence on consumer behavior (Liang et al., 2013). It has been reported that the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) that takes place through Internet-based technology is more influential and an effective medium for users than traditional WOM for several reasons. First, the opinion sharing and exchange of information can be immediately disseminated to reach a potentially wider audience (Litvin et al., 2008). Second, recipients of the information actively seek a broader range of comments online (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Third, eWOM can be accessed immediately, and its digital footprint is usually kept for some time or can remain online permanently (Sun et al., 2006). Fourth, anonymity encourages people to publish reviews online, knowing that they cannot be identified (Phelps et al., 2004). Fifth, eWOM communication enables an individual to build up personal and social networks (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). Finally, consumers tend to increasingly rely on the consumer opinions of peers that are available online (Gligorijevic and Luck, 2012). The WOM theory suggests that the information communicated by friends and relatives is construed as more credible, perusable, honest, and trustworthy than that generated by marketers because the communicators are not compensated for the referral. A global survey among 28,000 Internet respondents showed that only 46

percent of participants reported trusting the traditional technique of advertising, whereas 92 percent reported trusting WOM from friends and family members, and 70 percent reported trusting online consumer reviews (Nielsen, 2012). The study by McKinsey showed that 20–50 percent of consumers regard WOM as the primary factor for purchase intention and consideration in decision-making (Bughin et al., 2010). With the attractiveness of the eWOM channel, it is becoming one of the favorite sources of consumer information.

Marketers used to focus on the 4 P's (Product, Price, Promotion, and Place), but now the focus has shifted to the three E's: Engage, Equip, Empower (Whitler, 2014). Companies need to engage customers by listening to what they like and dislike. This can be achieved by creating review channels through Twitter and Facebook. By doing so, companies can basically observe customers' reviews and adapt to their needs and requirements. Another key area is for the companies to give the community reasons to talk by understanding their customers and providing whatever they desire. Last but not least, companies need to empower customers by making them understand that their opinions are important. For example, in 2013, Frito-Lay held a campaign that attracted over 3.8 million submissions from customers, making it one of the biggest marketing campaigns in the history of advertising (Whitler, 2014).

Although it is true that consumers tend to give more WOM at extreme levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, various studies have shown that when people are relatively neutral about something, they still transmit high levels of WOM (Kimmel, 2012). However, companies tend to emphasize WOM that is related to either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Research has shown that consumers who have a neutral opinion about the product or service could easily be led to a tendency to be dissatisfied (Fiske, 1980). As such, it is important for businesses to address all types of WOM.

WOM occurs on a daily basis wherever people get together, and, increasingly, through the use of social media. People usually share their opinions about their experiences associated with brand and customer service through SM. Nowadays, most companies allow customers to share their feedback on the services subscribed by using their account on Facebook and Twitter.

2.2. Viral marketing

Viral Marketing can be defined as “the phenomenon by which consumers mutually share and spread marketing-relevant information in the form of emails, YouTube videos, and social media postings” (Mohr, 2014). It has taken over information systems today like a storm. The initial content is sent out by the marketing executives of companies to initiate and monetize on WOM behavior, which leads to an exponential growth in the outreach of the message (Van der Lans et al., 2010). It is natural for human beings to feel a sense of belonging to a new group or product, to show our peers our ability to keep up with current events, and, of course, to gain popularity. Viral marketing is far less expensive than traditional mass-media advertising as it “leaves the dispersion of marketing messages up to consumers” (Hinz et al., 2011). Peer influence has become the basic premise for the success of viral marketing. The early adopters are actively influencing the purchasing decisions of the late adopters and laggards.

In a normal day, for instance, we do not need to use rich media to achieve a communication target; the key is to select simple communicative wordings that would limit the chance of confusion and which could be delivered through a lean media. Hashtags, for instance, can expand the company's content reach, promoting the brand, and targeting the market through social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram. For example, in the USA, Mercedes-Benz launched a campaign on Instagram allowing people to customize a car. The main focus of this campaign was the company's interaction with people. The hashtags used led to Mercedes-Benz receiving 10,000 likes and nearly 20,000 new followers (Small Business Trend, 2015).

2.3. Social presence theory

The Social Presence Theory is defined as the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships (Short et al., 1976). This definition has been modernized and simplified to the degree to which a person is perceived as a real person in mediated communication (Gunawardena, 1995).

We can note that both definitions focus indirectly on the interpersonal emotional connection between the communicative parties. There have been various methods for measuring the social presence; however, the most common one is the Social Presence Scale (SPRES), which measures the immediacy concept (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997).

The use of Internet technology, in general, and SM, in particular, has become an important source of competitive advantage for most business organizations. SM not only pertains to the idea of online socializing, but has reached a point where customers search for reliable products. The ongoing and increasing demand of online customers has confirmed the concept that reliance on social media is considered to be the main driver of the success of the products or services offered by the companies. For companies, connecting through SM with the community increases exposure, reduces marketing costs, increases customer base, and develops the brand image. Both small and large businesses realize the influence of social media influencers on public opinion (Karr, 2014). The effect of SM on businesses impresses on the fact that companies can rely on such data to conduct their consumer behavior and marketing research studies. It comes as no surprise then that companies look for these influencers on various social media sites and send them free product samples to review (Karr, 2014).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection

The choice to employ a qualitative research approach for this study using in-depth semi-structured personal interviews was made

due to the exploratory nature of the research to gain insights into the field of study and related organizational contexts. [Strauss and Corbin \(1991\)](#) claimed that interviews are an effective method to use to understand the underlying reasons behind the complexities of human decisions and behaviors. Furthermore, they enable predetermined topics to be discussed while allowing unexpected responses to be explored in more detail as they arise ([Anderson and Kanuka, 2003](#)). In the context of this study, this method was chosen for various reasons: First, the usage of SM by enterprises is a relatively new phenomenon and is in its initial stages ([Braojos-Gomes et al., 2015](#)). Second, despite research on SM being well recognized ([Lee and Phang, 2015](#)), there is a lack of relevant literature concerning the study of SM for small and medium-sized businesses, as scholars have conducted limited research in this area. Third, studies on this topic in the Middle Eastern region are limited, which calls for an exploratory study that can be best achieved through interviews.

The UAE is selected as the context for this study due to its unique position of being both (a) an emerging developing country with the fastest growth of Internet and social media use in the Middle Eastern region ([Dubai School of Government, 2014](#)), and (b) a country that has seen remarkable growth in the number of new small business enterprises in the past few years ([The National, 2014](#)), many of which are based on social media platforms for business activities. These SMEs are mostly founded and run by a new generation of young entrepreneurs who are revolutionizing the future of the region.

The companies were selected based on their fit with the aims of the study. We relied on purposive sampling by focusing on enterprises that have a presence on SM, as well as their willingness to participate in our study ([Fraenkel and Wallen, 1996](#)). In view of that, our main selection criterion for the case enterprises was their respective self-reported acknowledgment that they had adopted SM for the past two years. Based on the researcher's contact with the Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development, a government institution that was established in 2007 to help develop local enterprises, a preliminary analysis was carried out to identify enterprises that have been using SM for business activities. Based on the list given by the institution, several companies were then contacted via email inviting their participation. This initial contact was followed-up through telephone and email contact, and, subsequently, seven SMEs expressed their willingness to participate in the study. These SMEs were visited on site, so that the researcher had the chance to observe the business environment closely.

The study participants were provided with a list of questions several days prior to the interview to allow time for consideration of their responses. The interviews were conducted in English, lasted about one hour, and, with the permission of the participants, were audio-recorded. The transcripts were examined through thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes that emerged from the data ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). The subsequent coding process was carried out manually by assigning keywords, grouping codes with different colored markers, highlighting quotes with colored highlighters that supported the codes, and then establishing themes from the codes.

3.2. Background of SMEs

Company A is a UAE based firm for an “Italian theme” café. The café offers a variety of products, such as gelatos, frozen yogurt, coffee, crepes, waffles, cocktails, milkshakes, and pastries. Company A started to use SM in 2013 through Facebook followed by Twitter and Instagram.

Company B is an award-winning Travel Company based in Abu Dhabi specializing in adventure travel and tour programs in the UAE. The company offers a variety of carefully planned tour programs, innovative desert safari trips, overland tours, tailor-made round trips and study trips, adventurous expeditions, exploring sea-safaris, relaxing dinner-cruises, individual fly and drive programs, and corporate events and launches. The company primarily operates across the GCC region. Company B started its SM presence in May 2013 with Facebook and uses support platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram.

Four young Arab women who were passionate about the fashion of their region and were inspired by international trends launched company C in 2009. The company offers trendy *abayas*, dresses, *jalabiyas*, and wedding gowns for women who value a personalized approach to fashion. With the suggestion from one of its business partners, company C started its SM presence in 2012, which started with Facebook and followed by Instagram and Twitter in August 2013.

Company D is a well-known beauty care and salon in the UAE, established by a female entrepreneur with more than 25 years' experience in the beauty service industry. The company offers all types of beauty service – make-up, hair style, facial, nail care, hand and foot spa, massage, waxing services and many more. Initiated by one of her staffs, the company started to use SM in 2011, with its first presence on Facebook. Later they moved to other platforms, such as Instagram, blogs, and Twitter.

Company E is one of the top event management companies with its headquarters in Dubai. It was established in 2007 with the support of 40 plus professional employees from 12 nationalities. The company owns, organizes and produces conferences, road shows, gala dinners, product launches, birthday events, corporate events, and parties in the UAE. Company E started using SM in 2010 with its first presence on Facebook. After a year, the company started to use other channels such as YouTube and Twitter.

Company F is a luxury Pet Hotel in Abu Dhabi. The hotel initially started to operate in 2009, with two huge wings consisting of 39 rooms for dogs and 34 for cats. The overwhelming reaction to the concept and the large demand resulted in a further expansion of the facility in 2013 to accommodate 50 dogs and 40 cats on any given day. The owner started its SM usage with a blog site and then moved onto Facebook and Twitter. The company also uses support platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Company G is the first ‘mobile bistro’ with the distinctive concept of serving drinks and snacks with a touch of modern style. The bistro serves *karak*; an Indian tea that is becoming increasingly popular throughout the Arab world. The root of this spectacular drink lies in the South of India. It is also known as masala tea or masala chai. Realizing the importance of social media for marketing campaigns and reaching out to customers, one of its business partners established its presence on social media since its inception in 2014 on Instagram. Today, the company also uses Twitter, has a Facebook fan page, and posts videos on YouTube for advertising its products.

Table 1
Profile of Companies Involved in Data Collection.

Organization	Type of Business	Year of Establishment	Year SM Initiated	Social Media Channel
Organization A	Café	2011	2013	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Organization B	Travel & tours	2006	2013	Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram
Organization C	Boutique	2009	2012	Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram
Organization D	Ladies beauty care and salon	2008	2011	Facebook, Instagram, Blog, and Twitter
Organization E	Event management	2007	2010	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter
Organization F	Pet boarding/ hotel	2009	2012	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram
Organization G	Mobile bistro	2014	2014	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram

Table 1 shows the brief information concerning the companies interviewed and SM tools they use.

Overall, all the SMEs in this study have a Facebook page, followed by Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. It can be concluded that the enterprises started to use SM as early as 2010. An initial review of the enterprises' SM sites showed that English is used as the primary language. Although Arabic is the official language of the UAE, English is widely used for speaking and writing. However, in order to cater to the needs of the local population, some SMEs posted some information in both English and Arabic.

4. Research findings

The primary objective of this study was to understand why and how SMEs adopt SM for business purposes. The themes originating from the interview data revealed that SM is used for various purposes. Table 2 shows a summary of our findings; more in-depth discussion is provided next.

4.1. Social media usage

4.1.1. Branding, advertising, and promoting.

The findings reveal that the attitudes of owners/entrepreneurs of SMEs towards SM usage were grounded in their perceptions of the benefits of SM. SM was recognized as an essential platform for branding, advertising, and promoting their products and services. SM allows these companies to design their advertising materials using rich, dynamic, and interactive media at minimal cost (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). For example, the respondent from company B claimed that:

“SM has made an immediate contribution in promoting my business. It helps my business to be more recognized. Overall, strategically, it helps ensure the sustainability of my business.”

For Company C, SM has specifically helped the company in its marketing initiatives.

Table 2
Social Media Usage among SMEs in the UAE.

Themes	Category
Advertising, promoting, content delivery, brand position (Company A); referral, enhancing customer service, promoting products, interaction with customers (Company B); Publishing information, customer engagement, updating product lines, improving brand position (Company C); attracting new customers, fast customer service, increasing brand recognition (Company D); serving existing and new customers; fast customer response; disseminating information about products/services interaction with customers, fundraisers (Company E); updating location of business, organizing activities; promotion, brand awareness (Company F)	Enhancing brand visibility
Spreading awareness about the companies; dialog with the public; engaging with customers (Company A); distributing and sharing information (Company B); sharing customer feedback, enhancing customer engagement; analyzing sentiment of comments (Company C); engaging with customers; customer review; service experience (Company D); sharing stories and experience, creating awareness (Company E); faster information access, response to queries, creating awareness (Company F); improving interaction, informational sharing (Company G)	Leveraging community service, and improving interaction and information sharing
Enhancing customer relationships and experience, improving customer service (Company A); building trust and reputation, showcase contents (Company B); staying connected with customers, creating social interaction, understanding customer insights (Company C); fast sharing of information, close monitoring of customer needs and interests, identifying customer demand (Company D); grabbing the attention of customers, tracking customers comments; generating more leads (Company E); connectivity, sharing thoughts and feedback (Company F); fast sharing of information, uniting loyal customers (Company G)	Building customer relationships and social interactions
Reaching new customers, increasing social reach (Company A); expanding new market, broader area of business (Company B); reaching wide range of potential customers (Company C); reaching new clients (Company D); market expansion (Company E); reaching potential customers (Company F); new potential business area (Company G)	Reaching broad range of customers and expanding existing markets

“SM has changed the landscape for our business advertising and marketing campaign. We are now able to post, share and republish information easily and quickly at lower cost.”

The same is true for Company E. SM has been strategically used to help them promote their products and services in the region.

“Our goals are multiple: to disseminate news, promote products/services, deliver information about our companies, interact with customers, provide online customer service, and create an online presence.”

Based on the comments that we received from the companies, we can conclude that having SM where thousands or even millions of people can interact offers these companies new ways to market and advertise their products and services. SM is an ideal venue to employ viral marketing techniques, i.e., to build brand awareness for the companies. SM enables the customers to forward advertising brochures, messages, and promotions to their friends and family members very easily. SM advertising helps businesses to leverage user dynamics, such as peer pressure, recommendations, and likes (Narayan et al., 2011).

4.1.2. Leveraging community networks and information sharing

The respondents also claimed that they use SM to leverage community networks and share the organizations' information with the public. The entrepreneur from Company A stated that:

“With SM, we have better interaction and encourage the exchange of information and dialogue. It makes it possible for our company to communicate with many potential customers.”

Similarly, company F believes that:

“Facebook is a friendly network. We have fan pages where we try to communicate things that are interesting for the target market.”

Companies B and G strongly think that SM helps them in reaching out to a huge number of customers and enables a large-scale consumer-to-consumer interaction that puts them in the spotlight.

“We encourage our potential and existing customers to visit our company profile on Facebook, and to “follow” our business activities on Twitter. As a result, customers are becoming better connected to our company and other customers, and more knowledgeable about product and service selection resulting in customer loyalty and retention.” (Company B)

“When potential customers are planning to purchase a product or service, they require accurate information. Naturally, potential customers consult internal sources of information, such as their own experiences and accumulated knowledge, and then turn to external sources if the internal sources prove insufficient. SM provides potential customers online places, where they search for information or ask the opinion of other users. Social Media could play the role of collective intelligence.” (Company G)

In the current era, people usually research a product or service based on reviews from customers. Research has already shown the effectiveness of consumer-generated stories in the context of eWOM (e.g., Liang et al., 2013). SM is a perfect platform for consumers to exchange stories. For example, someone wrote on SM about a product she has loved using for the past month and highly recommended. When people in her network read about this and make an effort to investigate in detail, the company's image immediately improves. In turn, they may share the same story with their network of friends. Whether or not the follower likes this particular product, is a separate story. The company has already gained recognition. Consumers are empowered by SM and are more likely to share their experiences with their friends on SM (Chu and Kim, 2011). In addition, new connections between consumers could easily be established when people exchange their experiences and further share the stories with other consumers. Companies can use SM to attract customers to meet other customers. For example, in addition to providing company information, Company B uses Facebook as a portal for customers to meet and communicate with each other and then tweet about their success stories to their customers. People are increasingly utilizing SM for ratings, reviews, and recommendations given by others. Human behavior is innately social and typically influenced by people in their social content – a crucial concept that is effectively used in SM.

4.1.3. Building customer relationships and social interactions

Nowadays, companies in modern developed societies are expected to have an SM presence in order to better position themselves among their customers (Braojos-Gomes et al., 2015). Companies set up their own social networking profiles to interact with potential customers and listen to what social networkers are saying about their products, and obtain valuable feedback from consumers. In addition, SM provides businesses the opportunity to listen to the concerns and issues of customers. If customers do not like a product or service, they can quickly share their concerns with the companies. At the same time, a company can show sensitivity towards customers by attending to them promptly. As explained by Company F:

“Customers expect us to have a SM platform and to be able to converse with the business online. I know that I feel disappointed if I want to look at a product or service but there is no website.”

Companies are aware that customers are now more empowered; therefore, they closely monitor SM not only for the negative comments but also for opportunities to improve customer relations. Empowered customers choose how they interact with the companies and have high expectations concerning their experience with the companies (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Company D acknowledged the importance of SM when it comes to their customers.

“Social Media allows immediate contact with our fans/followers and provides us with the opportunity to get our message out directly. It can

give you a very good read of the public's response to something you're doing".

SM provides many opportunities for businesses to reach out to their customers. SM helps companies to discover who likes or dislikes their products. It also allows businesses to turn disgruntled customers into loyal customers. For example, Qantas Airlines changed their policy regarding musical instruments after a group of passengers posted complaints on Facebook (Tonedeaf, 2013). This action sends the message to customers that the company cares about them and that their advice is valuable. This has subsequently gained them loyal customers.

4.1.4. Reaching a broad range of customers and expanding existing markets. Social media platforms also enable contemporary information to be delivered rapidly to a wide audience – domestically and internationally. As indicated by Company F:

"SM has given us an inexpensive but reliable way to communicate with members and fans. With this technology, we can reach a wider range and number of customers on a personal level, each and every day".

This responsiveness and improved market knowledge has also enabled several enterprises to access new markets and extend their geographical area of business. For Company C, SM has helped them to open markets to new customers. They are now able to reach new customers who were previously not available or too expensive to reach.

"We have now got an international customer base instead of virtually all local customers. It's still small, but growing, accounting for approximately 5 percent of all sales at the moment."

People are social beings, so it is not surprising to find people using SM to fulfill their need to connect with other people socially and professionally. SM lets people connect with each other and exchange information easily and quickly with a larger circle of people than through any other medium. Therefore, it is quite strategic for companies to attract sales through SM, as people are spending more time online (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

4.2. Social media impact

The SMEs explained that SM usage had contributed to an improvement in their performance in various ways – increased connectivity, improved customer clientele, improved brand awareness and reputation, reduced communication and marketing cost. It also enabled them to generate revenue, and create competitive advantage. More in-depth discussion about the impact of SM is provided below.

4.2.1. Increased customer clientele

Increased online presence, specifically on SM sites, leads to increased consumer clientele and the prospect of searching for the business on the web (Chu and Kim, 2011; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). SM allows people to like, comment, and share information with each other thereby helping businesses reach and bring in new potential customers. As Company B puts it:

"We work on the keywords we use online to be more accessible to customers and get more referral hits in searches."

Company D uses SM, specifically blogs, to share e-newsletters and other beauty tips with their customers. As a result, their existing customers always come back to them for beauty supplies and ideas that they can do at home. Customers also share their posts with their friends through social networks, leading to new customers for the company. According to the owner, her business is doing really well with both new and existing customers as a result of her online contact with them.

4.2.2. Increased brand awareness, loyalty, and reputation

The more people are aware of the company through SM platforms, the more the company's reputation strengthens, and the profit potential and overall brand value increase simultaneously. This leads to people becoming more loyal due to the increased brand image. By closely communicating with clients on the social media level, the company becomes a trusted source of information, which makes it a great asset when creating company awareness and loyalty (Agnihotri et al., 2016). In addition, SM allows companies to be active visually and enables them to engage with millions of potential customers worldwide. SM has been proven to expand promotions and increase brand awareness for many businesses (Braojos-Gomes et al., 2015; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

The direct interaction between businesses and customers is a key feature of SM since it allows a direct bond and supportive network between these two entities that did not exist before (Agnihotri et al., 2016). The constant and instant communication via SM helps to establish trust and build customer loyalty. Loyal customers advocate the brand and can drive traffic to the business through SM (Mills and Planger, 2015). At times, customers can encounter dissatisfaction, but, if their voices are heard and quickly rectified, a once dissatisfied customer can regain confidence, trust, and loyalty (Tonedeaf, 2013).

4.2.3. Reducing communication and marketing costs

SMEs benefit from Internet technologies and SM because these firms are extremely limited in accessing their customers via more traditional methods because of cost. The advantage the Internet has over offline media is that if a campaign is not working well the costs of taking down billboards and posters, and stopping ad runs are not incurred (Velazques, 2011). SM represents a low-cost tool that is used to combine technology and social interaction with the use of words (Braojos-Gomes et al., 2015). For most SMEs, creating brand awareness and marketing campaigns on a limited budget can be very challenging. SM is a great way for SMEs to reduce

marketing and communication costs compared to other traditional advertising and marketing methods (Braojos-Gomes et al., 2015).

As acknowledged by Company D, “Given our limited budget for marketing, Blogs are just wonderful. It allows us to introduce our products and services to the customers in the most economical way.”

4.2.4. Revenue generation

By using SM, businesses can add value that can translate into more interest and higher revenue from digital ads and sponsorship. Studies have shown that SM has proven to drive traffic to the company’s website, subscriptions to the list server, and pass-along for the e-newsletters (e.g., Mills and Plangger, 2015). SMEs can also benefit from SM by allowing the customers to purchase through a user-friendly platform at the click of a button. SM also allows businesses to offer deals and specials that are exclusive to their SM followers based on the level of customer or the frequency of purchase. For example, Company C offers coupons for SM followers that provide a 30 percent discount off their purchase from the new collection, while Company A provides a 50 percent discount for every fifth purchase. According to these companies, SM helps them to actively encourage their customers to repeat their purchases.

In addition, SM can help businesses drive revenue from existing customers by getting them to spend more on each purchase (Munger and Grewal, 2001). For example, giving out coupons such as \$15 off a \$100 purchase at each purchase. According to Company C, this exclusive deal works very well with their SM fans and followers. The company uses SM to drive awareness of the offerings with a clear call to action.

4.2.5. Attracting new customers

SMEs can attract new customers on SM by creating pages that are tailored to the requirements of potential customers by allowing existing customers to share their views on their experiences, thereby enhancing the SMEs goals and targets. This has led to a new phenomenon known as social contagion. Social contagion can be defined as an event that “occurs when adoption is a function of exposure to other people’s knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors” (Van den Bulte et al., 2010). Social contagion arises when people in a social structure rely on one another to manage uncertainty regarding future purchase decisions (Goffee, and Jones, 2000). In other words, individuals from around the world are bound by their respective social structures. This has always been the case, as human beings have always had the need to belong, but social networks today have made this affiliation a lot easier, not to mention globally. Social structures are now more accessible to individuals across vast geographical boundaries.

The more followers, likes, comments and sharing that occurs on SM, the higher the search ranking ability of the company. As such, the more active a company is on SM, the more leads it generates towards the company. According to Company F, “*We are getting more new customers now more than ever due to our regular updates and interactivity on our social media accounts.*”

4.2.6. Competitive advantage

Positive customer experience can encourage customers to become an active brand advocate, increase brand loyalty and referrals, and, ultimately, boost the company’s revenues and profits. SM can help to strengthen the SME’s brand image and awareness if they are seen as being genuine, honest, and transparent with their customers online (Agnihotri et al., 2016).

SMEs can dig into the vast amount of SM data to analyze and discover new knowledge, such as the most popular brand and trend, understand what their competitors are doing, and how the industry is changing. They can use the findings and their improved understanding of their customer behavior to achieve competitive advantage over their competitors (Dey et al., 2011). In addition to using the market and competitors’ information as an inspiration for new services and product development, SMEs can also examine their own customer “trends” and use them to develop new products or services, and make informed strategic and operational decisions.

Research has shown that valuable data from SM can help organizations to realize strengths and weaknesses, enhance business effectiveness, and improve customer satisfaction (e.g., Dey et al., 2011). In a survey conducted by the CMO Survey, the most common metric that businesses use to track and analyze their SM activities is “hits/visits/page views” followed by the “engagement metric,” such as the number of followers, product/service ratings and buzz indicators (Moorman, 2015). SMEs can take advantage of all the available information, such as customers’ opinions, product prices from competitors, and the reviews of services and products available on SM to identify the trend and predict what will happen in the immediate future to stay ahead of their competitors.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings in this study have corroborated the major findings of numerous agencies concerning social media adoption and usage within the Middle East region. The *Arab Social Media Report (2015)* indicated that the dominant social media platform in the Middle East region is Facebook, with nine out of ten national Internet users using it (90 percent), followed by WhatsApp at 82 percent, and Instagram (56 percent). Twitter comes fourth with the UAE having 51 percent active users in the country, and, finally, YouTube with 50 percent. The decisions of enterprises to adopt specific SM applications were influenced by the popularity of the market adoption of such technologies.

The results gathered from this research also indicated that the decisions of SMEs to participate in a social media platform were a strategic choice (Dutot and Bergeron, 2016). As illustrated in the interview transcripts, the decisions of SMEs to partake in SM activities were a proactive choice that redefines how entrepreneurs pursue their goals (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007). The process was also incremental in that all the enterprises used Facebook as their initial SM platform due to the popularity of the application. However, unlike the issues faced by majority of the SM early adopters, these enterprises successfully recognized and ‘measured’ the impact of SM on firm performance through significant indicators.

Interestingly, none of the SMEs simply concentrated on the ‘bottom line’ indicators but also used other qualitative indicators. Dutot and Bergeron (2016) argued that key performance indicators should not be limited to the amount of money that customers spend (sales) but should also measure their customers’ worth on a lifetime basis (Groeger and Buttle, 2014), such as improved customer relationship, brand awareness and firm’s image, and better networking opportunities.

Finally, despite the SMEs inexperience and initial foray into SM domains, they managed to appropriately utilize the SM applications to their advantage. The SMEs integrated their main aim or purpose of utilizing the SM applications with the users’ habits and application of such tools. For instance, communication with others is the primary purpose of users to use Facebook (63%), while Twitter users primarily use it to find and share news (46%). Meanwhile, the main purpose of YouTube users is to find and share entertainment (60%). Consequently, the share of respondents who say their choices are influenced by social media ranges from 64 percent of 18 to 24 year-olds to 28 percent of those who are 45 years and older.

This study achieved its main objective of determining the reasons for the adoption of SM applications by SMEs and its impact on firm performance. It is widely acknowledged that a significant number of studies have looked at SM usage and its benefits from an individual’s perspective (Scholtz et al., 2017; Weller, 2016), whereas research on the organizational setting, particularly small businesses is relatively minimal (Dutot and Bergeron, 2016). Therefore, this study contributes to the academic literature by investigating the use of SM in an organizational business context. Although the research was exploratory, various purposes of SM usage and its impact on business entities have been identified, which can be used by other researchers for further investigation in an attempt to develop a holistic theorization of SM usage in the SME business setting. The findings of this study also answer the call for research on the adoption of SM by firms to clarify how SM is used by businesses to determine its usefulness or effectiveness (McCann and Barlow, 2015).

In conclusion, this study attempted to investigate qualitatively through in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs/owners to understand the impact of SM usage among SMEs, which has led to several significant findings. First, this research demonstrates that SM represents a potential vehicle to strategically assist SMEs to create better brand awareness, better relationships with customers, and increase sales. The owners/entrepreneurs of SMEs understand the impact of SM on, for example, developing intangible relationships with customers, improving information sharing, and creating a market presence in order to remain competitive. Second, the interactive nature of SM has created effective two-way communication tools between organizations and the customer, which has helped them to improve their business relationships and information accessibility. Finally, the identification of impact factors enables entrepreneurs/owners to understand the real importance of SM. As revealed by the study, it also helps them to understand that proper and effective use of SM will improve the performance of the businesses in various aspects.

6. Theoretical implications













This study provides a clarification of some of the theoretical underpinnings influencing SM adoption by enterprises. Primarily, the findings demonstrate the influence of eWOM information on SM influencing the perceptions and purchase intentions of consumers. In contrast to traditional WOM, consumers accept, or, to some extent, are comfortable with anonymous online reviews when evaluating information and making decisions. While the effect of eWOM through SM on consumers’ product perceptions and purchase intentions has yet to be fully proven by existing studies, this study has made a contribution to the limited existing theories by highlighting the role that eWOM plays in promoting, influencing, and acting on the decision to purchase a particular product or service. This corroborates some of the assertions made by scholars that WOM has a significant influence on people’s expectations (Anderson and Salisbury, 2003), attitudes (Bone, 1995), and purchase decisions (Iyengar et al., 2011). Therefore, a critical question is whether eWOM has the same or higher “influencing power” than traditional WOM considering that eWOM “possesses unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion” (Cheung and Thadani, 2010). This is a significant issue since eWOM, through SM, is a newly developed phenomenon for which many aspects have still not been deeply examined (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

The findings also highlight the tenets of SM in terms of the speed of information diffusion and credibility. The notion of viral marketing and social presence theory is reflected in the way that information is spread virally through SM (Holahan, 2007) and has a significant impact on online marketing effectiveness (Pai and Tsai, 2011). In fact, some scholars have even defined viral marketing “as eWOM whereby some form of marketing message related to a company, brand, or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way – often through the use of social media applications” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011, p. 253). Therefore, eWOM and viral marketing tend to duplicate in terms of their functions. In addition, unlike other platforms that are highly anonymous, SM applications like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter feature real identity, consisting of pre-existing social networks, and also newly-created “friendships.” This is considered to be more credible and trustworthy (Hu, 2015) thereby highlighting the social presence theory.

7. Managerial implications

In addition to the theoretical implications, the findings of this study are also useful to managers and practitioners in this field. The literature argues that eWOM is actually the same as WOM, albeit with the further ability to reach many more customers (Prendergast et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2006). With the current studies proving that traditional WOM abilities are essential in shaping consumer behavior (Anderson and Salisbury, 2003; Iyengar et al., 2011), practitioners should take advantage of SM applications in their marketing tactics. This research demonstrates that eWOM through SM works in an influential way in terms of consumers’ product perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions. SM platforms like Facebook and YouTube are suitable mediums for product-related opinions and reviews. Customers through eWOM could reach out to other potential customers by influencing their perceptions and intentions positively or negatively. Therefore, enterprises should monitor and respond to their customers’ queries since eWOM has

Table 3
Summary of the SM Relationship.

Usage	eWOM	Viral Marketing	Social Presence	Impact
Branding, advertising, and promoting				Increased brand awareness, loyalty and reputation
Leveraging community networks and information sharing				Reduced communication and marketing costs
Building customers relationships and social interactions				Attracted new customers and competitive advantage
Reaching a broad range of customers and expanding existing markets				Increased customer clientele and revenue generation

the ability to spread fast through SM. In brief, the determinants provided by this study allow marketers to understand the dynamics of eWOM through SM. Thus, marketers can develop better marketing strategies by understanding the mechanics of each SM platform and the intended objectives.

Finally, another takeaway from the findings of the study is regarding the choice of SM platforms. The most widely used SM applications were simply social networking services. This corresponds with the study of [Batikas et al. \(2013\)](#) on SM use by European SMEs. On a similar note, the SM applications also correspond with the most popular SM tools among users of the respective market (or country). In addition, it is noted that SM applications are suitable for external activities, such as marketing activities (i.e., promotion, and branding). This correlates with the findings in the study of SM used by European SMEs in which almost 72 percent of users place importance on SM for external activities as compared to only 33 percent for internal activities ([Batikas et al., 2013](#)). [Table 3](#) illustrates the relationship of the SM purpose and effects on company performance, utilizing the specific SM applications adopted in the study. As illustrated in the table, Facebook tends to have the best fit in terms of eWOM, viral marketing, and social presence followed by Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

8. Limitations and future directions

The limitations of this study provide some interesting ideas for future research. The small sample size of seven SMEs may be seen as a limitation. It may be interesting to conduct more interviews with entrepreneurs/owners, especially from various industries, such as tourism, education, agriculture, apparel, accessories, and healthcare. While providing a starting point, generalizations outside the scope of this study are to be done with caution, as they may not fully reflect the entire organization. Second, the research uses information provided by one key informant per firm, who were the owners/entrepreneurs of SMEs, albeit they are the ones who fit the selection criteria, which has made the results susceptible to method bias. In order to have statistically validated and quantifiable data, future research should collect empirical evidence using a quantitative method. The final limitation related to data collection was that it was largely exploratory and conducted in a single country. It would be interesting to replicate this research in a wide variety of SMEs spread over several geographical areas and regions to allow generalization of the results and comparison of results between enterprises and countries.

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