

Does Service Marketing Enhance Supplier and Customer Contact in the Gig Economy Era? Case Analysis from Malaysian SMEs` Women Entrepreneurs

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Abstract - This research explores the effectiveness of service marketing strategies among Malay women entrepreneurs and how this service marketing strategy affects business performance. The study employs a qualitative method by interviewing a women entrepreneur and their strategies to compete in the market. However, with the right strategy, it is also a time full of opportunities for entrepreneurs. Descriptive statistics and interviews were used to analyse the data. The finding of this research revealed the significant role of information and communication technology (ICT) and social media in their service marketing effectiveness. Online business and social media have brought a significant improvement in the net income of these entrepreneurs, some by manifold. Therefore, women entrepreneurs must adapt to the use of ICT and social media in order to improve the sustainability of their businesses, as well as to attract the younger generation.

Keywords: service marketing, social media, online business, women entrepreneurs, business performance, gig economy

1. Introduction

Today's businesses are confronted with intense competition from various angles, both from direct and indirect competitors in the local and international marketplace. Business operators, particularly entrepreneurs, can no longer be contented with their present business performance, and wait for customers to walk in or inquire about their business offerings if they intend to maintain and later to increase customer loyalty. Regardless of their business whereabouts, entrepreneurs have to be more creative and innovative in order to attract their target market's attention and

conviction to purchase and use the products or services offered. Since success in business stems from a strong commitment to providing customers with satisfactory quality and value for money products and services, entrepreneurs have to continuously seek for the most effective strategies to outwit their competitors.

In this Gig Economy, consumer's preference and demand are ever-changing and easily influenced by information and communication technology (ICT) individually through the Internet and social media. Entrepreneurs have to equip themselves with the latest knowledge and skills on how to incorporate ICT into their business operations [1]. Having a business premise nowadays is not always the best strategy to attract prospects and to retain existing customers, especially those who fall in the category of generation Y. Undoubtedly, social media has become the essential mode of interaction between a marketer and the customer. Speed of service is now considered as one of the key to business success. The fast-paced lifestyle has rendered significant changes to how people in a society live. Due to the ever-changing needs and wants of customers in this information age, business models have changed accordingly, and customers are more than willing to pay higher prices in exchange for convenience and also to save time [2], [3]. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of every service provider is a customer's long-term loyalty.

Similar to any entrepreneurs in other parts of the world, Malaysian entrepreneurs are experiencing a growing concern on how to deliver their products or services to the right customers excellently. In most instances, the effectiveness of marketing practices is considered imperative in determining a customer's higher intention to purchase, and his or her continuance of usage of the product and service that had been purchased. With the

advancement of ICT in the local and global markets, today's entrepreneurs have to rely heavily on ICT to reach out to their target customers faster and more interactively, and later to service them effectively at any time. Thus, to survive in the competitive industries, entrepreneurs, regardless of age and gender, can no longer solely depend on their product's and service's quality and distinctiveness, but need to put more effort in developing an effective marketing strategy to push their products and services to the right market segments [4]. This is especially crucial for service lines as compared to product lines since service is intangible and complex, and customers cannot only compare one service to another unless if they have experienced the service earlier. Therefore, service providers should be more attentive to any issues and challenges that arise in the business environment because any small change that takes place in the environment may bring some negative implications to the service since people cannot merely believe about the service just by reading about the service information. Hence, a creative and effective service marketing is the right weapon to reduce the impact of any unexpected occurrence which may hinder the service success.

In almost all cases, effective service marketing is very much concerned about providing a satisfactory service to each customer, looking after the customer better than competitors, having a thorough understanding of who are the competitors and what are they doing, and also keeping up with the latest knowledge on business and the industry [5]. Thus, entrepreneurs need to develop a suitable operating system and process that allows them to keep updated with the latest information about their industry and the market trends, and be prepared to apply this business intelligence to develop and strengthen their product's and service's competitive advantage and market positioning. It is worth to note that, effective service marketing strategy does require more effort from the entrepreneurs to distinguish themselves from being just an ordinary entrepreneur to being an outstanding entrepreneur.

Due to the importance of ICT in businesses, the Malaysian government formed an agency called the *Multimedia Development Corporation* (MDeC) in 1996 to monitor business activities that deal with ICT and to support entrepreneurs who are involved in e-business and e-commerce and any online business activities [6]. More importantly, the advancement of ICT enables the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia to use ICT and stand firm in the market and boldly compete with bigger and more established competitors [1]. As at to date, billions of Ringgit have been invested by the government in various entrepreneurship programs via several ministries, government agencies and associations, such as the Ministry for Women, Family and Community

Development (MWFCD), especially Department of Women's Development (DWD); Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD); Department of Community Development and Department of Agriculture (DOA); SME Corporation Malaysia (SMEcorp); women entrepreneur association such as Federation of Women Entrepreneurs Association Malaysia (FEM); National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia (NAWEM); the Women's Wing of Malay Chamber of Commerce (WWMCC) Malaysia and so forth. These ministries and government agencies provide support to women entrepreneurs in terms of funding, physical infrastructure and business advisory services [7]. As a result of the active involvement of the government in helping entrepreneurs, 98.5% (907065) of the business establishments in Malaysia are comprised of the SMEs of various sectors and sizes. From this figure, about 89.2% (809126) of it comes from the service sector, which implies the significant role of the service sector in the country's economic development and expansion. However, only 20.6% of the total SMEs are owned by women which indicates the need to increase the number of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia [8] (see figure 1)

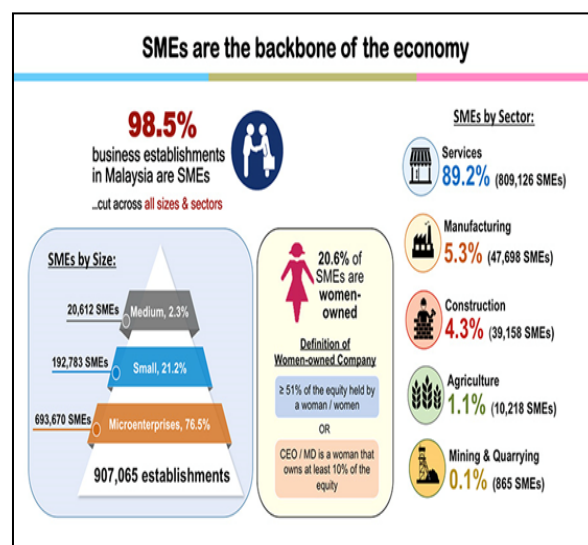


Figure 1. SMEs Statistic (2016)

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia

Services are found to be the most important business sector in SMEs and yet women entrepreneurs are still lagging behind the men, despite the various types of monetary and non-monetary support offered by the government. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the impact of service marketing strategies employed by Malay women entrepreneurs in Malaysia on their business success.

2. Literature review

2.1 Service marketing

Service marketing has gained its importance in the 21st century due to the growth of service industries worldwide. A lot of organisations invested in service initiatives and promoted service quality as part of the strategy to differentiate or distinguish themselves and to create their competitive advantage. The organizations believe in serving the customers well, and providing excellent service quality will generate a better business sense [9], [10]. Service can be defined as an activity or a series of activities of a more or less intangible nature that generally, but not necessarily, occur in the interactions between the customer and service provider and physical resources or goods, and systems of the service provider, that are provided as solutions to customers' problems [11]. Services marketing can be defined as any performance that a person may give to another party that is mostly intangible and does not require the ownership of anything and includes actions, procedures and performances that are value for money from the customer's perspective.

Services marketing also focuses on delivering processes, experiences, and intangible values to customers rather than focusing on a mere physical good. In other words, service marketing can be referred to as a set of processes for identifying or creating, communicating, and delivering a certain idea or value to customers [12]. Unlike a tangible product that can be touched and seen by customers, a service, on the other hand, is an intangible activity that is performed by a service provider, manager or entrepreneur to fulfil a customer's needs and wants. It has four distinct characteristics, namely intangibility, perishability, variability, and inseparability, which highlighted in an organization's promotional strategy to create a competitive advantage of a service offering to attract the prospects and customers. Among the examples of service are banking, telecommunication, tourism and hospitality, counseling, training, personal care service, bridal service, pest control, delivery service, catering and so on. Since a service is more complicated than a product, the service marketing mix is more comprehensive as compared to the product marketing mix (4Ps) which comprises typically of product, pricing, place of distribution, and promotion [13]. The service marketing mix, however, is an incorporation of the different components of service marketing and use to communicate their services, organizational and brand messages to customers. The service marketing mix practically consists of the seven P's namely product, pricing, place, promotion, people, process and physical evidence [14], [15].

In most instances, products and services in this gig economy have to be delivered fast to the customers, with the most straightforward delivery method without compromising the quality of the offerings. Regardless of whether an entrepreneur is selling a product or a service, he or she has to adopt an effective service marketing strategy to ascertain a higher customer satisfaction which will generally lead to higher customer loyalty [16]. Thus, to improve the effectiveness of service marketing, the Internet is widely used in businesses since it can provide a practical path of speedy and cheaper communication especially for new entrants in an industry. Furthermore, social media has made it easier for entrepreneurs to interact with a broader span of customers, and the communication process has become easier and faster [17].

2.2 ICT and Social media

The development of social media in this gig economy has benefited various industries and entrepreneurs, by attracting customers to interact. Interaction with customers via social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has built up positive attention and affection towards brands and stimulates customers' desire to purchase their products [18],[19] Besides that, by using social media applications, customers can engage in social activities such as discussing the quality of food and drinks, as well as giving compliments and complaints and providing feedback to the seller.

Today, social media has attracted millions of people worldwide by providing a platform to interact with anyone from all parts of the world and has attained remarkable popularity among entrepreneurs while at the same time has gradually changed the business environment. Thus, the contributions of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+ among other online platforms, have opened the horizon for business activities with endless prospects. Moreover, usage of smartphone regardless of age also concurrently increased usage of smartphone for the purpose internet activities such socializing, shopping and each other. It is reported that about 42% of the world's population are connected to the Internet, whereas more than three billion users use social media globally [20]. Furthermore, Facebook highlights that more than three million businesses are actively advertising on it, and more than fifty million businesses are utilizing services of free pages via this platform. In addition to that, social media can also act as a marketing tool to provide a platform for companies to socialize globally and to attain more extensive opportunities [21]. Hence, businesses should no longer depend on traditional marketing and media channels to communicate with consumers as variation in strategies is mandatory for business success [22].

In most situations, social media provides entrepreneurs with access to resources that enhance supplier and customer contact along with the tilling of strategic partnerships. Entrepreneurs, new and existing, mostly in the developing countries, are encouraged to learn and understand how social media can act as a tool to enhance their business, in order to be able to benefit from it entirely. In addition, social media helps entrepreneurs to obtain psychographic information which measures customers' attitudes and interests, and also helps them to analyze the reason behind customers' purchasing decisions and makes it more convenient for entrepreneurs to understand these psychographic differences. Hence, they can easily target people who share similar attitudes and interests [23].

Customer loyalty grows when the best value products or services are consistently delivered to the customers. Customer loyalty can be increased through improved satisfaction towards a product or service. Social media provides an interactive channel between sellers and customers [24]. Consumer-retailer loyalty increases as the customer usage of social media increases. Companies can use social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram to provide updates on their products and promotions and allow customers to provide feedback on their products and services. With overwhelmingly positive feedback from customers, it creates a high level of brand awareness among them and thus, it can help retailers position themselves at the top spot of their target market. Loyal customers will continue to have a positive purchase behaviour which in turn improves the company sales performance [25].

2.3 Malaysian women entrepreneurs

Most women choose to participate in a particular business sector based on their experience, interest and perceived ability to handle the business whilst some women choose a sector that they feel suitable for them as a woman [26], [27]. Studies found that women entrepreneurs in Malaysia regardless of their ethnic background can transform their initial business hobbies into a successful business entity that is able to capture the international market. In recent years, similar to other developing countries, women entrepreneurs in Malaysia have started to utilize Internet technologies in small and medium-sized businesses in order to streamline the process with effectiveness and innovation to keep abreast with the latest information about the business, industry and the market trends [28]. They also use social media, particularly Facebook, as a remarkable mode of communication between them and their customers, and to accelerate the sales process of a product. Malaysian women entrepreneurs who previously depended solely on traditional marketing strategies, i.e. using telephone to fix appointments with customers, flyers and pamphlets, electronic advertising,

etc., now have to change their present mode of operations by using social media in order to upgrade their service marketing strategy. This is to enable them to reach the right target markets faster and cheaper while enhancing their service quality and competitive advantage to outwit their competitors.

3. Methodology

This study involved only the Malay women entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur, the national capital of Malaysia. "Malay" is the biggest ethnic group which predominantly inhabit Malaysia. The other two main ethnic groups namely Chinese and Indian were not invited as participants in this study because the researcher is trying to gain an in-depth understanding of the Malay entrepreneurs' business activities. The list of the Malay entrepreneurs was obtained from MDeC, and their names also appeared in the SMEcorp's entrepreneurs list, since both the government agencies are providing support to the same entrepreneurs. By using the purposive sampling method, 15 Malay entrepreneurs were selected to become the participants of a focus group discussion which was held in one of the hotels in Kuala Lumpur. The focus group session took about 4 hours, starting from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm.

Focus group is used in this study as the primary data collection method because it can provide various information related to the participants' experience, attitude, idea and belief which are beneficial to the researcher. Focus group is viewed as an essential tool to explore how a particular issue arises and how the issue is viewed and emphasized during the group discussion [29]. Furthermore, this method can also be applied to obtain the latest information on a particular issue or to search for a new idea of new or subsequent research [30]. Focus group will significantly contribute beneficial information which is needed in a decision-making process [31] or required by experts and stakeholders who genuinely need the information.

4. Findings

The following tables exhibit the findings from the focus group discussion. The names of the participants are not revealed but replaced with the capital letters of the participants' first name.

Table 1. Participant's Business Type and Years of Business Operation

No.	Name	Business Type	Years of operation
1.	Ms N	Part time wedding planner	7
2.	Datin Z	Dietitian	5
3.	Mrs. F	Religious short course trainer	6

4.	Mrs. H	Cake and Hampers Supplier	13
5.	Mrs. FA	Preschool care centre	6
6.	Mrs. S	Food Delivery	4
7.	Mrs. R	Baby products supplier	7
8.	Mrs. J	Food Delivery	7
9.	Mrs. RY	Health Consultant	5
10.	Mrs. RS	Preschool centres	12
11.	Mrs. AD	Traditional delicacies supplier	4
12.	Mrs. I	Mobile Saloon and Spa	7
13.	Mrs. JM	Beautician	6
14.	Mrs. KM	Makeup artist	7
15.	Mrs. NY	Bakery instructor	7

Table 1 provides the types of business that the participants are currently involved in, and total years of their business operation in the industry. They first operated their business activities using the traditional marketing methods, and gradually embraced e-commerce and online business to expand their business in the local market, and some of them have successfully penetrated the international markets, especially to the neighboring countries i.e. Brunei, Singapore and Indonesia. Thus, they have experienced both the traditional marketing methods and ICT in promoting their product and service offerings to customers.

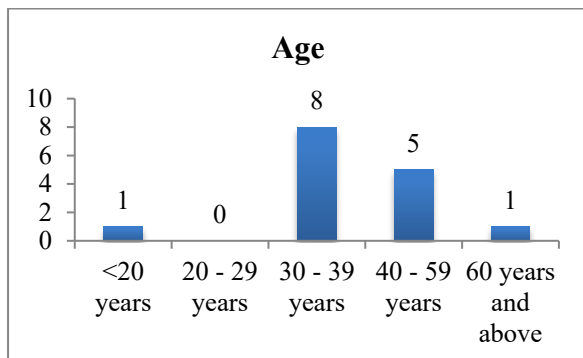


Figure 2. Participant’s Age (N=15)

Based on Figure 2, the majority of the participants (8) are at age between 30 to 39 years, followed by 40 to 59 years (5), and only one participant aged below 20 and another one is above 60 years. Thus, it implies that more than half of the participants are easily adaptable to both traditional and modern business methods, as people in that age category are susceptible to technological change.

Table 2. Marital Status (N=15)

Status	Frequency
Single	0
Married	13
Divorced	1
Single mother	1
Total	15

Table 2 reveals that most participants (13) are married, only one of them has divorced, and another one is a

single mother. This implies that marriage does shape a woman entrepreneur’s maturity and desire to have a well-balanced life in both career and family.

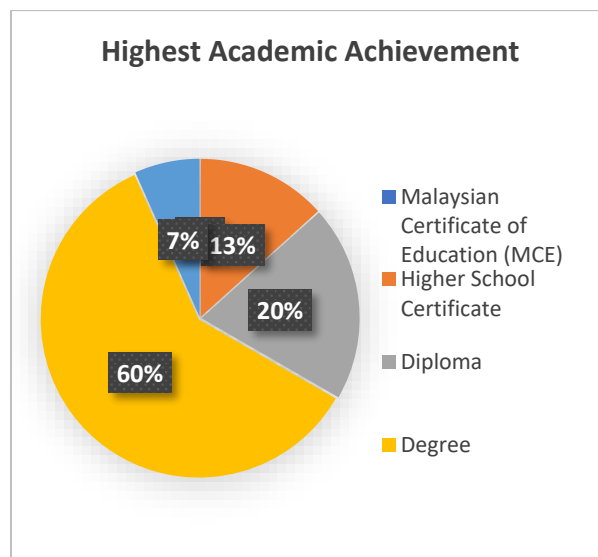


Figure 3. Academic Background (N=15)

Figure 3 shows the highest academic achievement of each participant. The majority of them (9), has a degree from various field studies, followed by a diploma (3), higher school certificate (2), and a Malaysian certificate of education (1). The participants seem to have adequate academic achievement before their involvement in the business, which helps them to quickly learn and adopt the technology so that they can be a better business decision-maker and entrepreneur.

Table 3. Business Form (N=15)

Business Form	Frequency
Partnership	7
Sole proprietorship	8
Total	15

As depicted in Table 3, relatively, there are partnerships (7) and sole proprietorships (8) businesses. Both types of business forms contribute almost equally to their entrepreneurial success.

Table 4. Contributing Factors of E-commerce and Online Business Involvement (N=15)

Factors	Frequency
Personal initiative and innovativeness	13
Bought over the business from a third party	0
Business Partner	0
Influenced by spouse	0
Influenced by others i.e. government promotion, support, advice from the agency, etc.	2
Total	15

Table 4 indicates that participants’ involvement in the business is contributed mostly by their personal

initiative and innovativeness (13). However, remaining participants are being influenced by other factors such as the government’s promotion, support and advice from the government agencies that deal with entrepreneurship programs.

Table 5. Family Member’s Support (N=15)

Support	Frequency
Yes	13
No	2
Total	15

Table 5 shows that almost all participants (13) received some support from their family members or they depend on their family members when operating the business. Only two of them do not receive any support from family members.

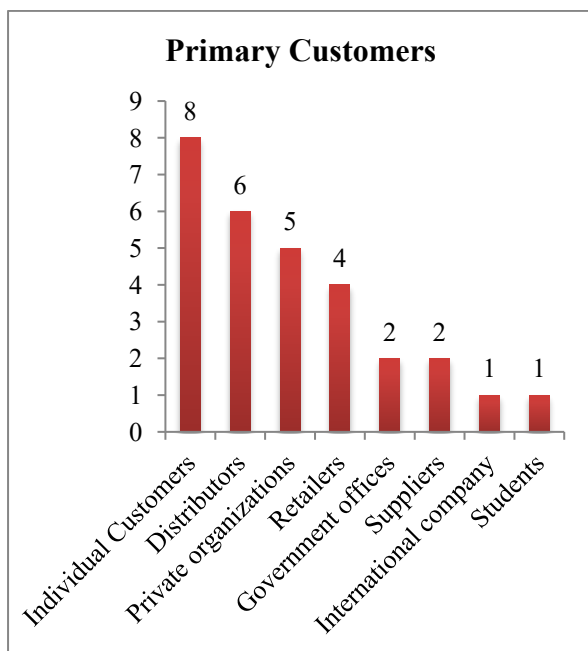


Figure 4. Main Customers (N=15)

Figure 4 indicates the participants’ primary customers. Individual customers or end-users are the highest (8), followed by distributors (6), private organizations (5), retailers (4), government offices (2) and suppliers (2), international company (1), and students (1). They seem to have various customers and some of them serve more than one segment of customers.

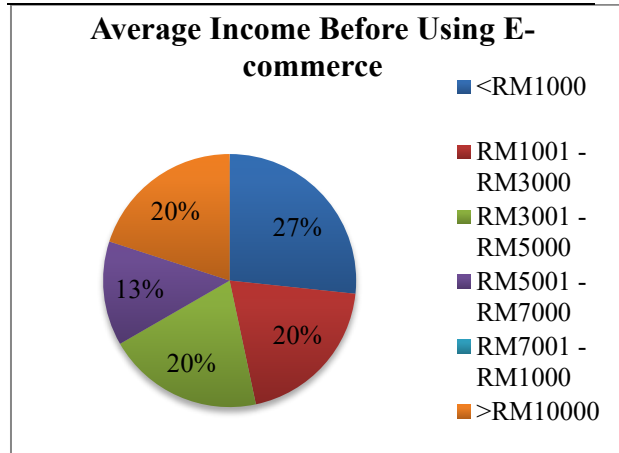


Figure 5. Average Net Income before using Online Business and Social Media (N=15)

Figure 5 exhibits the average income earned by the participants before they used e-commerce and social media to promote their business and to service their customers. Four of the participants earned less than RM1000.00 per month; three of them earned between more than RM1000.00 to less than RM3000.00 per month, another three earned more than RM3000.00 to less than RM5000.00 per month, and another three of them earned more than RM10000.00 per month. Finally, only two of them earned between RM5001.00 to RM7000.00 per month. Before using e-commerce and social media, they mostly depended on traditional marketing efforts, i.e. conducting marketing campaigns and advertising via flyers, radio, newspapers, product catalogues, booths, and each other.

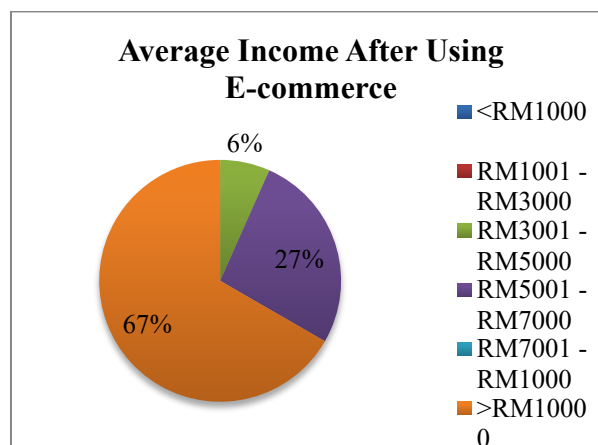


Figure 6. Average Net Income After Using Online Business and Social Media (N=15)

Figure 6 shows that participants’ average income earned per month increased after they used e-commerce or social media to promote their business

and to service their customers. The majority of them (10) earned more than RM10000.00 per month, i.e. a 47% increase, while four of them earned between RM5001.00 to RM7000.00 per month, and only one of them earned more than RM3001.00 to RM5000.00 per month. This scenario indicates a significant improvement in their average net income per month after using ICT.

5. Discussion

Based on the focus group discussion, the participants mentioned that they are mostly involved in the business that they like best, or because of their innate passion in a specific hobby. Others may select a particular business due to specific unresolved issues that they had faced before they embarked on the business. For example, difficulties in getting a right preschool for her children or getting the best traditional delicacies for a particular function or event. Regardless of the business type, they seem to be having almost similar problems that gradually forced them to make a significant change or turn. For instance, problems with customers, dealers, suppliers, and delivery system.

During the initial business stage, the participants mainly depended upon the traditional marketing strategies, i.e. personal selling, product flyer, telephone, facsimile, electronic advertising, and others. In the early days of operating their business, they received lots of complaints from customers, lost their customers to competitors, dealt with inefficient public delivery systems, delayed business transactions and each other which dampened their targeted business goal at that time. Consequently, they were experienced negative experiences due to their ineffective service marketing strategies. Indeed, many authors agreed that effective service marketing is crucial to business success [15], [16], [32].

The participants' age cohort and education background also seem to affect their business offerings. Some businesses require active interaction with clients or customers via telephone or face to face communication, deal with various parties with different backgrounds, diverse knowledge and skills and each other. Therefore, their ability to resolve unprecedented issues wisely and faster is a bonus for them as an entrepreneur who continuously faces different challenges while running a business, mainly when they handle every task by themselves. Concerning this, a previous study on a profile of innovative Malaysian women had also discovered that women entrepreneurial innovativeness are very much affected by their age, education, as well as the type, location and size of business [33]. Furthermore, the amount of experience in business also helps them to sustain in the industry.

The 15 participants had shared their experiences, ideas and thoughts about the impact of the ICT on their

business performance, which can be viewed in Figure 5 and 6, respectively. They unanimously agree that online business and social media could significantly improve their service marketing effectiveness and their overall business performance. They start to earn higher income after adopting online business and social media in their business operation. Their incomes were very much lower when they utilized traditional marketing strategies to promote their business and service offerings. Besides being the simplest, cheapest and fastest promotional strategy, social media can help to service their customers more effectively since the interaction between the entrepreneur and customer is more personalized, convenient and interactive and does not incur a lot of additional costs to both parties.

This study implies the importance of ICT, particularly online business and social media in providing an effective service marketing to customers in this gig economy where many younger particularly generation Y customers, who mostly prefer to conduct business transactions via online, with Facebook as the primary mode of interactive communication with the customers. Despite various challenges that come together with ICT such as spam, hackers, inefficient delivery system, cheated by customers and online banking issues, the entrepreneurs still have to depend on online business and social media to operate their business due to various benefits. ICT will help them save operating time and costs. Most of the women entrepreneurs in Malaysia do not have many employees and some of them even single-handedly run every business activity without any assistance or support from family members or friends.

Pertaining to this issue, Mrs. N stated that;

"...Due to time constraint, I have no other better alternative to serve my customers without involving a face to face interaction rather than using social media. Using Facebook, I can interact with all of them at the same time..."

Mrs. R mentioned that:

"...online business helps me to expand my business because the public will notice my business activity and my customers will get to know me better. ..."

According to Mrs. FA,

"...I started online business after years of using phone call, pamphlets and personal visit. I realized that things are getting better now since I am able to get connected with my customers at any time..."

In relation to the impact of online business and social media on business performance, all participants unanimously agree that they experience more successes after employing these marketing strategies. Their business performance improved between 20% to 100% within less than four years. Thus, we may claim that

online business does provide a positive impact on their business, and it becomes an essential mode of business operation that allows the entrepreneurs to serve and service their customers effectively. Implicatively, the Malay women entrepreneurs may be able to build their brand and strengthen their business image in the marketplace. However, they may need more time to expand their business overseas due to financial and human resource constraints.

In relation to this, Mrs. F stated that;

“...At first, I was able to serve about 30 customers a month, but with online business, I am able to serve about 300 customers in the first month after employing this business mode...”

Whereas Mrs. H stated that;

“... Through online business, I can double my business since my customers trust me more and continue to order again and again...”

The findings lead us to understand further the importance of online business to the women entrepreneur's success. Their service quality is significantly influenced by the positive perception of their customers who are satisfied with the products and services that the entrepreneurs rendered to them.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the impact of ICT on SMEs in Malaysia for Malay women entrepreneurs is apparent and robust. Through optimum utilization of online business and social media, these entrepreneurs able to improve or turn around their entire businesses. Furthermore, an exciting finding to take note of is that age does not seem to be a barrier to enter the online business world. Despite initial traditional business models, the entrepreneurs were able to transform their already established businesses with the help of ICT, particularly social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This marketing medium has played an important role to fulfil the entrepreneur's effective service marketing strategy.

Hence, with SMEs as the backbone of the country, more businesses should employ online strategies to supplement their existing business models for higher sustainability in the industry. In addition, the setting up of a Facebook, Twitter or Instagram account is elementary to do and manage while incurring the lowest cost of operation. This should also spur the government bodies to continue supporting these business initiatives that could further strengthen their business image, which will later impact Malaysia's economy. Most importantly, using ICT and social media for business is no longer an option, but a necessity in order to survive in this fiercely competitive marketplace.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this study, it is now can be concluded that social media and ICT usage in the business provides entrepreneurs with access to resources that enhance supplier and customer contact along

Therefore, more studies should be conducted in the future to truly understand the effect of online business and social media on service marketing strategies of all entrepreneurs from various ethnic groups in Malaysia.

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