Setting Strategies in Social Networking Sites: Community-based Indicators for Small and Medium Industries in Malaysia

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Abstract — The constant growth of data on social media that deals with the business nature generated by online communities has inundated business owners and marketers with business-related conversations. The consideration, preference, and action stages about brands and products are easily influenced by the community members in social networking sites (SNS), making the flow of information become multidirectional, interconnected, and difficult to predict. Therefore, firms and brands are called upon to attract the attention of these communities by focusing on building, enhancing and maintaining interactions through an effective and strategic approach to SNS marketing. This paper will gain insights on such valuable information by integrating findings from both perspectives of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and engaged brand communities in SNS. Two distinct questionnaire surveys are conducted upon 30 SMEs and 30 active SNS customers in order to obtain more clarity. As a result, a spectrum of coalesced data was obtained and concluded that the firms, brands and the brand's community must always give each other's continual commitment so that the nurturing relationships provide satisfactory mutual benefits to all community participants in the interest of increasing the overall brand performance.

Index Terms— brand community, engagement, indicators, online customers, SME, SNS

I. INTRODUCTION

Communities in social networking sites (SNS) are highly considered as one of the key performances that need to be effectively managed online. Instead of brands and firms, the communities comprise of experienced customers, engaged customers who have recently used the brands and products as well as information seekers who are looking for other valuable product reviews and knowledge shared by peers.

SMEs in an emerging marketplace such as Malaysia are also taking in the many benefits from the presence of SNS in the digital arena. An official source from the Malaysian government has recently certified SNS as a focus tool for most online small-scale marketers due to the large crowd of customers that rely on that platform. The survey conducted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia [1] for the usage of mobile phones and computers reveals that SNS has topped the list with 84.3% respondents including using it for business purposes.

The popularity of SNS in engaging customers with firms or brands has redefined the role of customers to be active players in brand communities. For existing customers, they benefit the brand and firm by sharing their product experience with prospects and writing positive reviews about the products on their personal blog. At the new customer level, on the contrary, can delight their favourite brands by delivering positive comments to contacts in SNS. Customers perform multiple reactions at the SNS panel interface to express their behavioural engagement with the brand or product they are involved in when accessing the information of the respective brand activities. Some common reactions include *like*, *share, mention*, *comment*, and *follow* [2] – [4] which undeniably give a tremendous impact on multi-way communications in the online community.

II. PRIOR RELATED STUDIES

In describing the aspect of SNS online community, this paper divides reviews of relevant studies into three important domains; SNS role as the cornerstone of digital marketing among brand community, SNS as a strategic driver for publishing ads, campaigns, messages and product reviews within the SME environment, and indicators used by SMEs to address SNS community engagement online.

A. SNS Marketing Roles in Brand Communities

SNS marketing refers to the use of SNS technology in order to conduct a firm's marketing activities. Firms usually initiate their own brand or product pages by employing SNS dashboard elements and allow these pages to represent them in branding and marketing activities. Many firms have accepted social media to facilitate the creation and maintenance of brand communities [5] – [6]. It is very profitable when the formed society in SNS empowers the existing and future customers to heavily converse to share experience [7], to convey thought and opinion [8], to expose satisfaction with brands and firms [9], to express the sentiments [10], and to benefit [11] in the eWOM circulation. Establishing and developing online brand communities are strongly urged for firms as these platforms

provide valuable insights into customers' perceptions on the products [12].

The recent government agency report in Malaysia asserts SNS germination as a very effective brand marketing tool. A significant number of SMEs (85.4%) have been reported to sell products and services online via SNS such as Facebook and Instagram [1]. In a similar tone, recent scholars have recognised the prominence of Facebook as the most examined platform [13], [14]. This leading site has served as an effective avenue for many top brands to establish brand communities in order to connect customers and maintain two-way relationships [15], [16]. To add more perspective, Instagram, Twitter, Google Plus and LinkedIn are following Facebook as a popular site with a growing number of users and forming a current business culture in Malaysia.

B. SNS as a Strategic Performance Driver for SMEs

Compared to large firms, SMEs are lagging behind in many ways including business size, resource and knowledge limitations, reliance on a small number of customers and for the lack of multi-skilled employees [17]. However, the role of Malaysian SMEs will be increasingly critical as a major stimulus to achieve a balanced and inclusive economic growth [1]. These small enterprises are urged to transform the traditional way of business processes and operations to achieve their full potentials [17]. They need to innovate quickly, including utilising SNS's strategic mechanisms to ensure significant results. While having limited resources to engage in internal marketing activities or in good consultants [17], SMEs are able to compete healthily and streamline their performance by employing SNS which is well known for its low-cost investment and lack of technical dependence [18], [19].

C. Customer-based Indicators in SNS Community

Scholars pay close attention to the concept of trio relationships among customers, peers, and firms or brands in the online community [6], [12], [20], [21]. It truly makes sense to evaluate the efficacy of each member's engagement in virtual brand community for acquiring relational outcomes [22]. With the same pattern, surveys in emerging marketplaces such as Malaysia have revealed the need to improve the ability for engaging and retaining online customers [23] – [25]. The need to emphasise the measurement process associated with community engagement has proven to be important by scholars and practitioners [19], [26], [27].

The quantification elements on SNS platform have served well by designating visible and traceable features towards engagement indicators. Plenty of research in the literature have equated engagement exclusively with online behaviours by customers or prospects since it reflects specific actions that customers take in response to brand messages (for instance, [20], [28], [29]. Engaged people are those who visit the site often, spend substantial time on the site, or have many page views, hence can be visibly translated as visitors, unique visitors, time spent, and viewers [28]. On the other hand, [29] asserted that measuring engagement in Facebook brand page can be performed with a combination of brand community and transactional behaviours, including frequency of brand community visits, content liking, commenting, and news reading, as well as frequency of playing and money spent.

The supportive SNS features have accelerated the gauging practices on marketing activities by SMEs on the channels. The engagement indicators to capture customer behaviour such as *likes*, *followers*, *shares*, *fans*, and *comments* are frequently used upon the published ads, messages or campaigns posted at any time [2] - [4]. Basically, the community participants' behavioural engagement is manifested through the functionalities of SNS offers [22], [29]. These components are provided by most SNS such as Facebook, Instagram and Google Plus interfaces to reveal enumeration that significantly shows the firms' achievement in the SNS community. With limited resources, SMEs often employ free and easily visible indicators offered in quantitative formation, such as the ones provided by Facebook Insights or Google Analytics [30].

III. METHODOLOGY

The data of this study were obtained from two-fold questionnaire surveys. The first one led to achieving the extensive data from 30 SMEs in the southern region that were actively participating in SNS marketing and consented to share details. The firms' profile was provided by SME Corporation Malaysia (Malacca branch) from the manufacturing and services sectors. Meanwhile, the second questionnaire sought active customers' information of the SNS brand page by choosing people in the southern region of Malaysia following the geographical area of SMEs.

Systematic scholarly quantitative techniques posited by [31] were adopted. The sections in the SME questionnaire were broken into parts of addressing their profile and SNS adoption including the investment, the channels and frequency of use, and also the gauging activities that were linked with engagement indicators, business objectives and goals. In one corner to another, the customer questionnaire was developed to address the online communities' profile and experiences in their favourite brand page of one specific brand.

The questionnaire instrumentation has gone through the content validity and construct validity [32] stages concurrently. A total of four academicians in the specific domain (two are social media experts and another two are marketing area experts) and six practitioners (four are SMEs and two represented active online customers) participated in validating the questionnaires. The collection of small-scale data has taken two months, starting from August 15, 2017 and ending on October 25, 2017. After the critical phase of the data collection, the data were analysed to generate a demographic information based on the average and frequency values.

IV. RESULTS

Empirical studies require the discovery of enriched results with information that will help develop future literature. In conjunction with that, this study in hand has combined data collection and analysis from two perspectives (SME and customer) that have close relationships in the context of brand-related and product-related collaborations. Two classifications of findings were obtained; the first referred to the demographic

information of SMEs in regard to experiences of leveraging and gauging SNS premier activities in brand pages with the aim to market brands and products. On the other angle, the second finding captured participatory information of online customers' activities in the brand-pages communities and the engagement indicators in their imperative SNS channels.

A. Results of the SME Survey

Data collected from the SMEs in the first section were somewhat proportionate to the demographic composition provided by SME Corporation Malaysia. The services group comprised of 70.0%, followed by microenterprises at 53.3%. Food and beverages under the manufacturing sector formed the largest industry group (23.3%) identified from the sampled respondents, while the business and professional services, service providers as well as education and training accounting for 40.0% belonged to the services sector. As seen from the business point of view, as many as 30.0% have exceeded the 10-year maturity period, while most of them comprised of the middle-class (2 to 10 years of operation) period.

The study also managed to track SMEs' experience in utilising SNS as their virtual marketing medium. The survey has revealed the SMEs' engagement with SNS including the type of SNS channel used, the duration the channels have been used, and the frequencies of posting, sharing and servicing customers.

Fig. 1 shows the top most popular channels used by SME respondents. Facebook has so far surpassed the platform for brand marketing in Malaysian SMEs as widely alleviated by many of the literature [33], [34] with 100.0% utilisation practices, followed by Instagram as the second most important with 60.0%. Google Plus with 16.7% consumption and Twitter with 13.3% proved that two more SNS platforms are likewise popular in the Malaysian context.

Although many firms are over 10 years old, the duration of their SNS usage is still new and expected to have a lot of space to grow (Fig. 2). Meanwhile, marketing actions of SMEs were observed through the activities of creating, publishing and disseminating ads, messages and campaigns on SNS brand pages and their commitment to respond to the customer community and prospects within the platform. The value of 40.0% (Fig. 3) for the frequency of the above-mentioned activities illustrates that SMEs rely heavily on committed efforts in SNS's intermediaries to be recognised and continue to compete with competitors through branding and product creation.
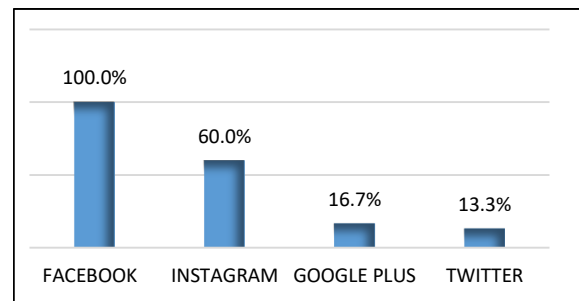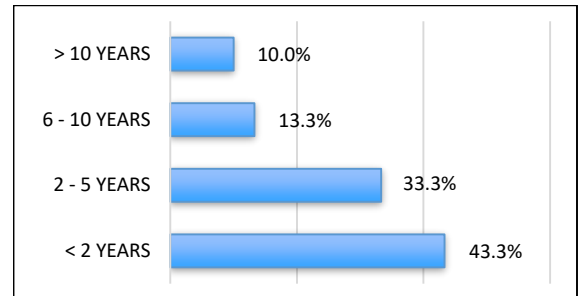

Fig. 1. SME popular channels.

Fig. 2. SME adopted years.

Although various data format variations exist in the SNS application interface, SME marketers use indicators commonly used by most of the competitors who are in their category. They envisioned the 'biggest' success of marketing results in SNS by the increase of *like, share, mention, follower, post,* and *comment* indicators which dominated the respondents' choice (refer Fig. 4). It was also found that SMEs used analytical instruments available on their SNS interface such as Facebook Insights, Google Analytic and Instagram Insights (refer Fig. 5) to assess the involvement of communities. This is in line with [30] who asserted that SMEs often use built-in dashboard indicators because they are easier and inexpensive. Through advertising fees imposed by platform providers depending on audience reach and other optional attributes, these instruments are believed to have the simple indicators they need without relying on the technical skills of the marketing staff involved.
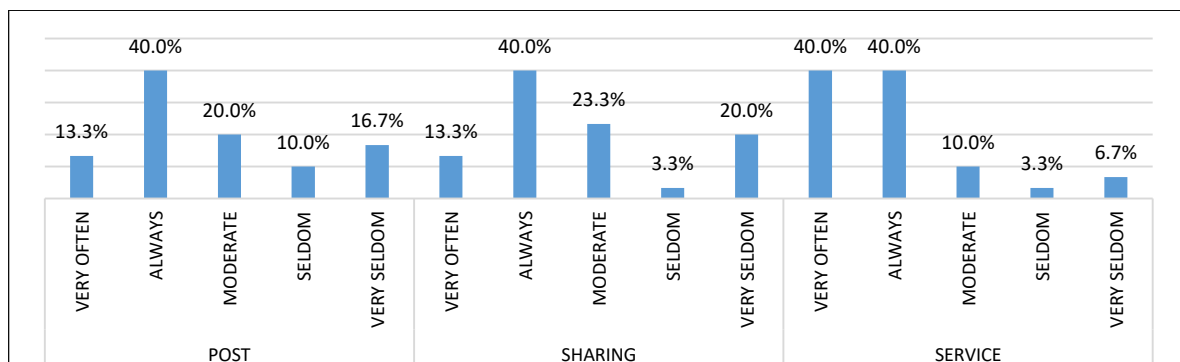

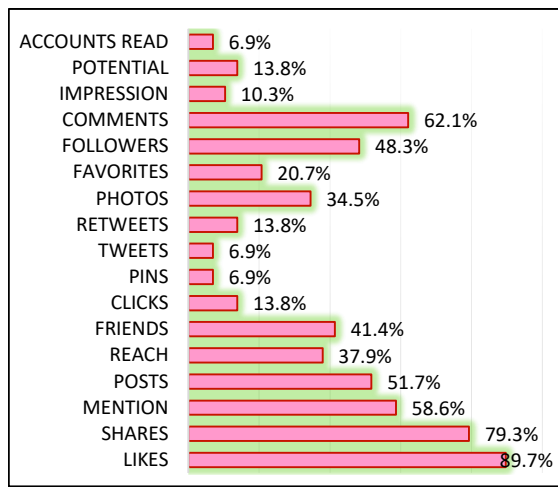Fig. 3. Frequency of brand post, post sharing and customer service.
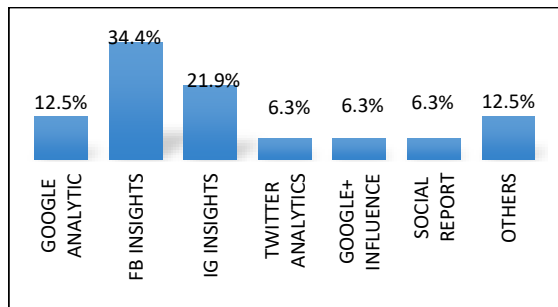
Fig. 4. Metrics for engagement (SME)

Fig. 5. Common analytic tools

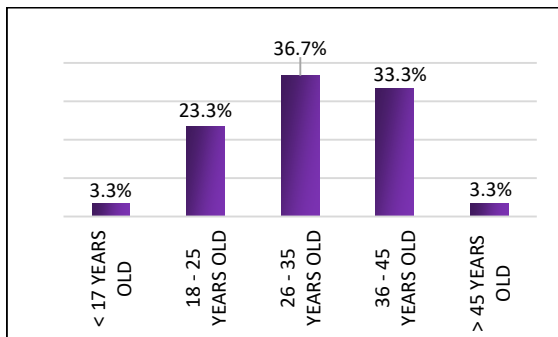Fig. 6. Community members' age

B. Results of the Customer Survey

The demographic information on customer community in relation with age, years of adoption, SNS channel used, and common activities are presented in details by Fig. 6 to Fig. 9.

It is clearly shown that the biggest respondents are under the age of 26 to 45 years old and have used SNS, especially Facebook and Instagram in average for 2 - 5 years. The top activities are *liking* and *following* ads, campaigns and messages posted by brands, firms or other community members because these groups are keen to find information about brands and products, thus frequently check the reviews as well as the status of comments and brand post sharing in the cyberspace. All these three activities supported more than 50.0% each.
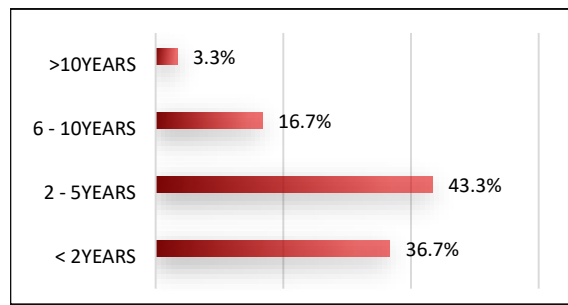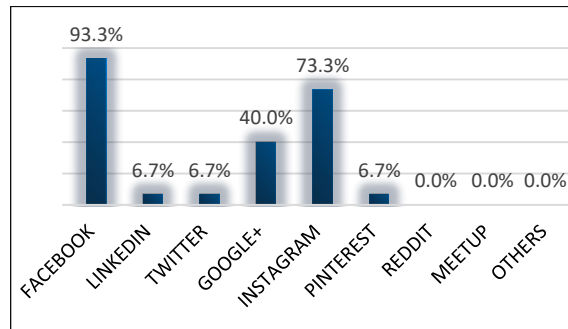

Fig. 7. Customer adopted years
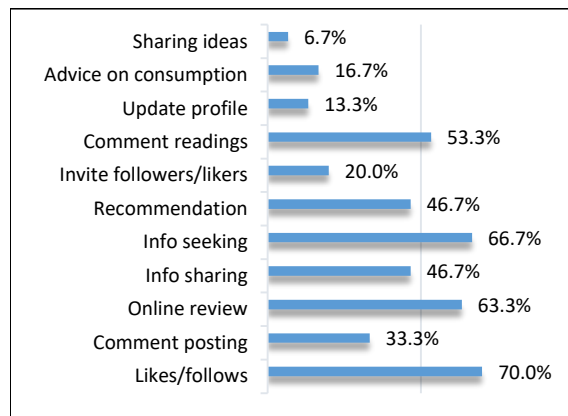

Fig. 8. Customer popularity channels

Fig. 9. Community common activities

The next analysis revolved around the frequency of SNS use and the intended use period. From Fig. 10, it was found that one-third of respondents used SNS for brand-related activities more than once a day. Half the community used SNS moderately and the rest was considered to be less active. In terms of the time spent (refer Fig. 11), the highest percentage fell on the usage period of 1 to 2 hours in a day. This was considered a reasonable period to resolve brand-related affairs such as product reviews, product search queries and more. It can be observed that communities to brands usage also had a non-uniform use pattern on SNS. A large number of customers spent more time in the evening until late at night during weekdays as their leisure deals with brands after a busy day of work (refer Fig. 12). The six most frequently clicked community indicators are *like, share, comment, mention, follower* and *post* with the frequency of respondent choice exceeding 40.0% as displayed in Fig. 13.
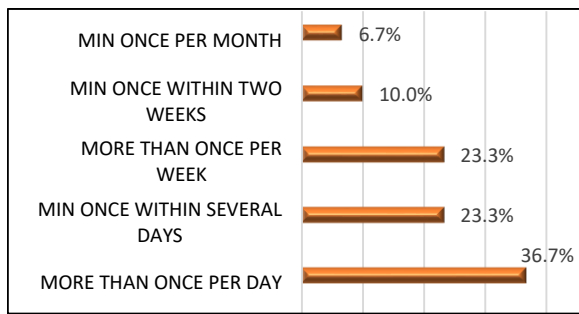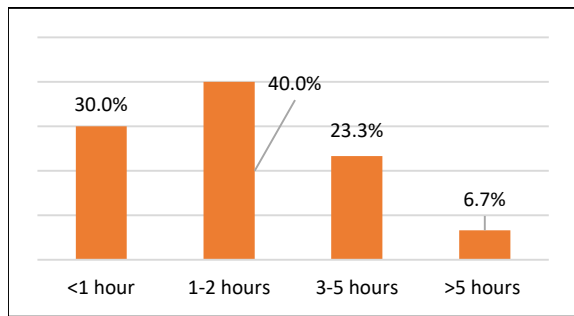
Fig. 10. Frequency to participate

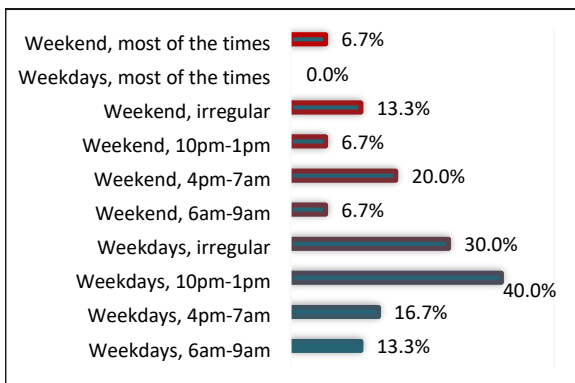Fig. 11. Duration to participate (per day)

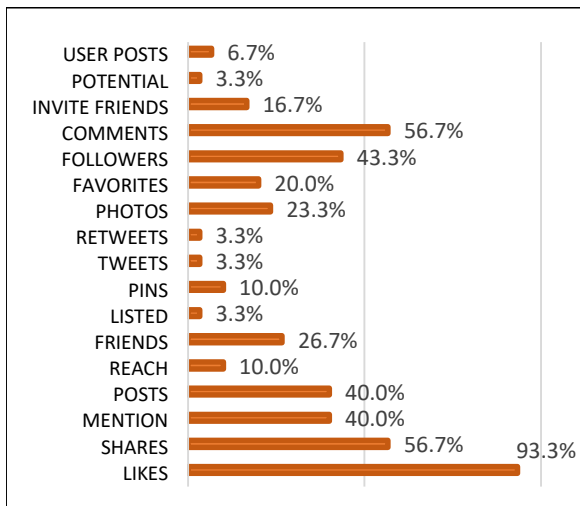

Fig. 12. Best times on SNS use

Fig. 13. Metrics for engagement (customer)

The findings confirmed the fact that although their businesses are established, SMEs have not necessarily leveraged SNS technology in their operations. These could be contributed by two situations. Firstly, at the beginning of the business establishment, the firms struggle for stability in terms of finance and operations. SMEs in Malaysia particularly have limited resources to undertake in-house marketing activities or to engage a good marketing consultant [17]. Assuming the use of SNS requires investment and technical know-how and firms' decision to adopt it would depend on their level of business stability. Secondly, the rapid development of technology makes it difficult for firms to cope with changes.

As a result, online marketing assumptions have no significant impact on firm profits and some are still left behind to practise it, even though the business has long been established. Nevertheless, SMEs should not see this pattern as a threat. Instead, they need to update the understanding of SNS functionalities as this medium is becoming increasingly important and growing [35]. SMEs should note the importance of seeking the best practices to employ and strategise the adoption practices with knowledge and skills.

About 30.0% of all community respondents were very active participants as they spent more than three hours a day on the SNS brand page. This was potentially contributed by those with high IT literacy, were highly educated and had long-term careers, and could be amongst the Gen-X and Gen-Y (millennials). Fig. 6 clearly shows that 70.0% of them are in the range of 26 to 45 years old. This is consistent with the generation traits classified by [36] as well as [37] saying that the millennials are smart technology users and often outperform online behaviour. The interesting features of SNS's interface and dexterity in learning new things have effectively tied the millennials to last longer in the app.

The statistical output seen in Fig. 3 supported a very active SNS community involvement as described in the previous paragraph. SMEs employ high commitments to the creation and posting of ads, messages and product campaigns, as well as serve inquiries from customers. Such a commitment is necessary because the customer or community members are allocating frequent and long periods of time to surf information on brands and products per day. Taking into account the findings of two best periods of time for customers at SNS's interface on working days as shown in Fig. 12, SMEs have the awareness of practicing digital marketing strategies by traversing the most frequent time of their customers' community of branded sites at SNS. This serves as an urgent call confirming that businesses must take immediate steps to participate in the SNS social media effectively because of the large size of the involvement of customers and prospects in the horizon of this technology [3], [9], [38] – [40]. Responsible SME marketers need to emphasise branded content by delivering informative, entertaining and vivid messages, ads and campaigns on the brand pages, and this has been proven by many studies [41], [42]. These elements will motivate customers to positively respond to the posting of such messages, ads and campaigns and stimulate them to engage with brands and brand communities.

Interestingly, the study found two similarities between SME and SNS brand community. Facebook, Instagram and Google Plus are ranked as the most popular technology intermediaries

for the benefit of both populations. This is in line with the statements reported in 2016/2017 SME Annual Report about a discernible increase in the usage of social media to promote and market firms' products and services to 85.4% (1Q 2014:12.1%, 1Q 2016:78.2%). SMEs and brand-page communities also confirm that indicators such as *like*, *share*, *comment*, *mention*, *follower* and *post* always lead the list of online community ratings. This confirmation is clearly shown through Fig. 4 and Fig. 13. As [2] and [30] stated, due to popularity, metric components of Facebook and most SNS interfaces such as *like*, *share*, and *comment* reveal enumeration significantly to present the social interactions on customer engagement in the community. Previous studies (see [2], [43]) also claimed *like* as a key quantitative indicator to represent the community's involvement aspects of the brand.

Simultaneous findings of these two surveys can be summarised as prominent information providers to assist Malaysian SMEs in emphasising good judgement to reach wider community members, thus monitoring key site activities such as responding to feedback from customers and partners, organising new content, branded strategic ads, messages and campaigns, and so on. As a result, the findings have complemented the objective requirements of this article and directed new knowledge for future studies.

V. Conclusion

Two implications have been detected based on the relevant survey analysis and relevant literary exposures. From a practical point of view, SMEs gain knowledge about the culture of SNS use by today's community of customers. If they are committed to listening and tracking the voice of customers on this platform, much effort can be made to improve the strategy of addressing challenges in the cyberspace. For example, SME management can provide full-time dedicated staff to manage the queries and needs of members of the brand page community. A larger budget should also be provided to the Research and Development (R&D) unit on designing mechanisms that build and promote advertising elements in order to attract viewers of the brand community (those who are not customers). Looking from the social implications, discussions in this manuscript can be the borders of SME policy makers such as SME Corporation Malaysia and MDEC in drafting policies that help SMEs in upgrading their digital marketing elements.

SMEs are expected to continuously face the large data waves that increase exponentially in the SNS dashboard. Agency and industry reports in Malaysia are striving to provide a conceptual framework that elevates guidelines to prepare SMEs to face this new challenge. This is because SNS utilisation in business operations is heavily influenced especially by the customer community on brand pages. As a result, digital marketers will follow the tendency of customers and their prospects for brand-related affairs.

Customers have rationale antecedents that motivate them to engage in branded pages triggered by firms [44] and indeed the consequences of the behaviour of the engagement manifestations [45]. Therefore, firms need to be critically sensitive and knowledgeable about effective strategies to address the demand and the behaviour of their target groups in SNS. Without setting aside the usual indicators, firms may be able to do research to identify indicators that can improve the procedure to assess the effectiveness of their marketing aspects. The incorporation of qualitative indicators need to be considered with the expectation that this type of indicator can compensate for the lack of practical assessment which depends solely on quantitative indicators. More conceptual models based on empirical work should be carried out by future researchers in the field of social media to balance the integration between qualitative and quantitative indicators. This is important to address bulk data challenges in various forms such as image, audio, and video as input and output of the app, regardless of time.

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