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The Use of Facebook as a Customer Engagement Tool by Newspapers in the UAE: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract—Social media has become very powerful nowadays as an easy way to approach, connect share or exchange information all around the world. Many of the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are being used as engaging and communication tools by corporations including newspapers. This is done to enhance the quality of services and to attain new customers. Facebook and other social media have also become the primary source of news for readers. Six local UAE Newspapers-*Al Bayan, Al Emarat Al youm, Al Itihad, The Khaleej Times, The Gulf News and The National*-have been analysed to find out the impacts of their Facebook pages on readers' engagement. The findings confirm the importance of having a newspaper account on Facebook to positively impact customer engagement and increase ROI and brand awareness.

Index Terms—newspaper, social media, Facebook, customer engagement

I. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social Media is rising swiftly as a platform for customer engagement and interactions. There are millions of customer interactions taking place every day on Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This is anticipated to grow exponentially as the number of active users of Social Media increases. As a result, use of social media as a customer engagement tool has become mandatory [1] Social media platforms are not just a meeting place for marketers and current customers but also for potential customers. The platform also allows customer-to-customer communications. This has encouraged companies to get more involved with their customers and to engage with, support and stratify them utilizing social conversations for their business benefits.

In 'Advertising 2.0: Social Media Marketing in a Web 2.0 World' Tuten adds that social media offers a medium

for communication between consumer to consumer, businesses to consumer and business to business [2]. The author stresses how digital marketing has enabled organizations to innovate and communicate to targeted audiences inexpensively. Unlike traditional media, interactive new media has enhanced the relationship between the product and the audience. Qualman provides an example of inexpensive marketing in his book *Socialnomics* [3]. Burger King's 'Whopper Sacrifice' promotion offered a free Whopper to any customer who sacrificed ten of his Facebook friends. Over 45,000 friends were sacrificed in a week's time and the company spent less than \$50000 to get returns of \$32 million instead of \$400,000 on traditional media.

Some of the challenges faced by social media marketers include the difficulty of measuring the return on investment (ROI) from social media customer initiatives. Brodie et al and Qualman explain that many companies have treaded carefully on social media marketing terrain for this reason [4], [3]. Industry specific measurement tools and platform specific measures have made it easier in recent times to measure ROI. Further, many companies have established social media customer engagement departments without taking into consideration existing IT resources. A robust network system and trained costumer engagement specialists will help in using social media further.

II. THE USAGE OF FACEBOOK

Facebook crossed the one billion subscriber milestone in 2014. Fb.com boasts of "968 million daily active users on average for June 2015" and "844 million mobile daily active users on average for June 2015" [5]. Facebook subscribers include individuals, private companies and government entities. *The Guardian* reported that an average individual is likely to spend around 20 minutes each day on Facebook [6]. In addition, more than 50% young adults log in to Facebook when they wake up in the morning.

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According to a survey by Ristova, half of all Facebook users are constantly logged in and users spent a total of over 700 million minutes a month on Facebook in 2011 [7]. In the Arab region Facebook has been identified as the most popular social network, followed by Google+ and YouTube. The Arab Social Media Report found that 90% respondents from the UAE were on Facebook and 93% of them accessed it daily. Facebook was also identified as the most used social network for business. The Arab world has a high mobile penetration rate of around 110 percent and more than 71 million active users of social networking technologies [8]. The narrative is continued in the UAE. The World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology Report 2015 ranks UAE 23rd in the world on the Network readiness Index 2015 [9]. eMarketer.com reports 70% mobile penetration and 57% smart phone users [10].

III. FACEBOOK BENEFITS

Engagement can be measured using Facebook data analysis application - Insights. Facebook insight provides rich data on several aspects of posts. Overview records how many people engaged and interacted with posts and how it is progressing; Likes let you know who liked your page, from where and through whom; Reach reveals how many people you reached; Talking about shows how many people engaged with your page in seven days; Check in provides you information about the number of people that checked in to your geographical location through different devices within the past seven days [11]. Other web analytics services like the free Google Analytic and paid Social Baker allows competitors to assess each other. Through audience insight provided by Facebook you will exactly know who you are with and where you can reach them and when. It is possible also to know demographic and psychographic details like age, location, gender, interest, and behaviour, which will help you to know the characteristics of your people groups to support target specific engagement.

Attractive and informative content aids engagement. Carvill and Taylor explain different ways to achieve this. Content should reflect what you are through sharing articles, videos, pictures, blogs, and news feed. Raise questions that may interest fans, pass comments and respond to comments achieving the engaged conversation [11].

Facebook is a tool that can reach different groups of people internationally. Carvill and Taylor add that Facebook helps advertisers define specific groups and reach them, unlike the old media forms that reach masses indiscriminately [11]. It helps to know the audience well to create efficient engagement. Benwell explains the efficiency of the social media acting as a communication tool for customers [6]. Facebook is considered as one of the best media for targeting the audience especially if the target is youth.

IV. NEWS CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Qualman observes that the digital shift has influenced communication and marketers should understand that it is

no longer enough to build existing customer database but it has become important to have direct communication with fans and consumer database. Traditional media houses should rethink their media strategies and study how people consume news. Qualman warns that if newspapers did not adopt new approaches it would lead to their decline [3].

Carvill and Taylor write that thousands of people around the world are opening their Facebook first thing in the morning to get news instead of browsing sites or browsers making Facebook the "NEW Newspaper" [11]. Facebook applications on mobile phones, I pads, tablets, and other smart devices makes this possible. Local English daily *The Gulf News* published an article last year titled "Facebook "Newspaper" spells trouble to media" [12]. The article suggests that Facebook has become a news source to many people. Facebook makes it possible to modify content according to audience interest providing variety of news with different styles.

A study by Al Jenaibi reports that "when queried about the ability of social media sites to credibly and accurately relay information as compared with traditional media, far more either agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (25%), than disagreed (21%) or strongly disagreed (8%) that such sites were reliable..." [13]. A survey by the Arab Social Media Report on the Arab region showed that the internet is the primary source of news for 36% of respondents. The survey also indicated that approximately 29% of the respondents get their news from social media while 28% get it from traditional media sources [14]. The 2015 edition of the report states that 67% of respondents were keen to follow latest news on social media [15]. In the span of three years interest in following news on social media has doubled.

The concept of real time engagement on social media makes it even more appealing for customers or readers who are not only are providing feedback and comments but also engaging in real time with the event. People on Facebook can engage with news while it is unfurling [4]. Social media providers are also constantly innovating with new formats and media. Apps like Meercat and Periscope which offer real time news videos, permit replay and comments are a real challenge to traditional newspapers.

V. CONTENT AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Content is the undisputed king on social media. Quality of engagement is more important than quantity or how much you post. Carvill and Taylor identify key reasons why content is important for engaging customers including online recognition, keeping your presence alive and for building relationships with customers to add to credibility, interesting content, contests, advertisements and offers keep the customers engaged [11]. The best measurement of engagement is the interaction of readers on the page not the number of fans. They highlight that social media gives continuity to the conversations originating in traditional media.

VI. NEWSPAPERS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Print media is experiencing unprecedented integration of technology including social media and news readership is progressively shifting to digital platforms. Printed newspapers in the region are facing huge competition from the digital form and from social media integration. Social media represents the news source for different professional news websites in Arab region. As a result print leaders are going to invest in the digital platform.

With the emergence of the digital age, many newspapers acknowledged the trend of online readership and started utilizing that. This led to increase in the online readership and decline in the print readership globally. In terms of online traffic, the websites of *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph* and *The Sun* in the UK ranked within top 50 websites in the country. In the US the top 25 newspapers on Facebook are *The New York Times* to hit the first place with 781,655 likes, followed by *The Wall Street Journal* with 140,505 likes [16]. Meanwhile, in the Arab region, publications have increased to 71% in the media industry [17]. However, newspapers in the Arab region have succeeded in attracting sizeable online readership. As mentioned in the Arab Media Outlook 2011- 2015 online news consumption across the UAE, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia is between 36% and 67% weekly. The report cites that 25% respondents read a newspaper/magazine online more than 5 days a week; 26% read 1-4 times a week and 23% read 1-4 times a month [14].

To encourage citizen journalism some of the news organizations adapt their newsroom to include a good online platform. Across some major regional titles the newsroom is being re-organized with a focus on better coordination and the optimal use of cross-platform opportunities.

The two formats of the medium function differently. Hard copy newspapers are just for news; they do not help to connect with others. On the other hand Facebook presence of newspapers does not provide the pages in our hand. Newspapers fall short when it comes to targeting specific consumer segments. In his article 'How newspapers can use Facebook to build their audiences' Furler discusses how APN News and Media Ltd. of Australia have utilized the potential of Facebook to increase their readership. He cites the example of the Sunshine Coast Daily a newspaper owned by the APN, which caters to the needs of the Sunshine Coast region of Queensland, Australia. The newspaper started its Facebook page in 2008 and by 2013 the Facebook page had 100,000 followers. According to Furler this huge following is the result of the newspaper's effort to engage its audience day and night. *The Sunshine Coast Daily* instead of posting a link to a story on its website concentrates on creating dialogues around that topic by means of debate topics and status questions, posting photos and embedding videos. The newspaper even asks followers to share photos on its page as part of Weekly photo competitions. Some of its best photographs were contributed by its followers. The newspaper's followers

by posting 50 messages within 10 minutes, helped in unfolding the breaking website story of a flash flood in March 2012. The newspapers' success on Facebook can be attributed to the fact that it keeps readers engaged in discussions and it also delights, surprise and keeps them informed [18].

Liz Heron, Head of journalism partnerships at Facebook, expressed the view that newspapers are trying to bring Facebook journalism onto the main page [19]. Newspapers are looking for ways to ensure their content gets distributed more and more and at the same time they try to get back interesting information from their readers. Newspapers are trying to engage users by means of gamification which is a technique used to engage people and encourage them to socialize. Facebook is one of the networking websites that serve gamification models. Some of the social engagement tools that newspapers use with readers on their Facebook pages are contests on photo caption, votes, essays and photos.

According to LaMothe there are various ways in which newspapers can use Facebook to engage readers. First of all, there is a need for the newspaper to use Facebook for engaging people instead of pursuing its stories. The newspaper should try to focus on doing things that gives people a reason to visit its page. Newspapers should refrain from posting automated messages or messages that sound like they are auto-posted on its Facebook as people are "more comfortable engaging and sharing if they feel like they're talking to a person" [20]. There is need for newspapers to be as conversational as possible on their Facebook page as they represent the voice of the readers and community. The newspaper should not use its Facebook page primarily for advertising as it will have negative impact on the number of followers. The Facebook page should be used mostly for sharing news and information, discussions and engagement. The newspaper should actively address the complaints posted by the followers on the Facebook page. This will make them feel that the newspaper cares about the readers concerns and is taking measures to overcome these.

News sites which are utilizing Facebook comments see an increase in quality discussion and referral traffic. Facebook comments help the newspaper articles to reach large number of people as comments from readers get posted on their news feed along with the newspaper article. This feature limits the number of inappropriate comments and fewer number of staff is needed by the newspapers to monitor the platform [21].

The New York Times is one of the newspaper organizations which uses Facebook to gain more young readers. Creating the New York Times Facebook page helped to gain more than 8,562,167 fans in 2014 while in 2008 it had only 10,000 fans. Different applications like Quiz app helps customers rank the up to date news among their friends [22].

VII. NEWSPAPERS IN THE UAE

There are many newspapers in several languages which are being read by the people of the United Arab

Emirates. *The Khaleej Times*, *The Gulf News*, *The National*, *The Arabian Post* and *The Seven Days* are some of the English newspapers in the country. *Al Itihad*, *Al Bayan*, *Emarat Al youm*, *Arabian Gulf*, *Al Fraj*, *Al Waseet* and *Al Watan* are the popular Arabic newspapers of the United Arab Emirates. Marketers advertise their products or services through these newspapers, as their reach was the best compared to any other source of communication. A survey conducted by the UAE Telecommunication Regulatory Authority affords insights into figures for 2012. It presented the UAE with the highest percentage of internet usage by individual and confirmed that 72% respondents read online newspapers and magazines. United Arab Emirate residents are still reading newspapers for news but the impact of Facebook is visible as the number is decreasing rapidly. A million newspapers are sold while the population of the UAE is 5 million [23]. At the same time Facebook users are exceeding 1.5 million.

Arab Media Outlook presented information about online services provided by selected publications in the Arab region. Many different online services are being provided such as advertising, web feeds, online polls, member registration, access to archives, advanced search and social media support. Also it is noticeable that most newspapers in the Arab region provide various online services to their readers; however newspapers in the UAE have the lead in the most services provided as shown in the figure below.

The Gulf News was named as the most read Newspaper and the most visited news website in the UAE *The Gulf News* took over *Al Khaleej* Arabic's position in 2012 to become the most read Newspaper. *Al Emarat Al Youm* Arabic daily came third with 31.6 per cent and *The Khaleej Times* came in the fourth position with 27.7 per cent [14]. *The Gulf News* offers links to various articles on its website and allows readers to comment on these articles on its Facebook page [24]. In addition to *The Gulf News* there are several other UAE newspapers such as *The National*, *The Dubai Post* etc. which have their presence on Facebook.

The Middle East Forbes Magazine, carried out a study from August 2011 to August 2012 to evaluate the online presence and social media performance of printed newspapers in the Arab world. The magazine reports that there is an incredible progress where conventional media is harnessing the power of social media. For instance *The Al Bayan*, is classified as the first Arabian Newspaper with a social media presence [25]. *The Khaleej Times* and *The National* too have joined the list of social media users. Emirati news website 24.ae purely depends on social media in publishing news. The site is known for news credibility, transparency and customer engagement.

The Gulf News leads the social media use in the UAE with nearly 1 million followers. Social media became an integral part in its news processing with pro-active reader's engagement. *The Gulf News* got nearly 700,000 'likes' on Facebook to be the leading Emirati Newspaper in social media use and online presence. *The Gulf News* started their Facebook page in 2011 with an incredible

increase in fans from 28,000 to 60,000 within one month, which shows high level of reader engagement. Also it does provide opportunity to have conversations with a wider audience across different countries, which needs to be round the clock to deliver the best relevant content twenty four seven [26].

VIII. METHODOLOGY

This study has used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The collection of primary data was done through focus groups, interviews, and observation of six local newspapers' Facebook pages (*Al Bayan*, *Al Emarat Al Youm*, *Al Itihad*, *The Gulf News*, *The Khaleej Times* and *The National*). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed manually. Five Facebook accounts analysed by Social Baker in the period from 1st to 30th November 2014 have also been considered. Secondary data were collected from varied resources like books, academic journals, reports, and newspapers articles.

IX. DISCUSSION

A. Social Media Presence —Benefits

After analysing the data, we found that the six newspapers in this study utilise their Facebook page to target their local and global online customers. *Al Bayan* and *Itihad* are using Facebook as a marketing tool as well, in parallel with engagement, interaction and brand awareness. Data gathered in this research reveals that 50% of customers are drawn from social media, with 30% being drawn through Facebook. Facebook represents an important source of news nowadays, through approaches such as socializing, advertising and promoting. It is very important to provide different services that support the Facebook page and traffic concept, which *Al Bayan* and *The Gulf News* do by offering a Facebook mobile application. Carvill and Taylor state that, globally, most people access Facebook each morning to update themselves with the latest news. Various commonly used technological tools, such as Ipads and mobiles, make access to Facebook easy [11].

All participants agree that Facebook is a tool for engaging and socialising with customers who find and read the news there; as *The National* stated "Facebook people don't mind reading the news there while twitter is surrounded with people interested in newsrooms". This point has been raised by Hennig who explains that this trend in socializing and sharing news is multi-dimensional from company to customer or customer to customer interaction which in turn influences company—customer relationships [1].

All participants agree that integrating the social media and online strategies within their businesses is best achieved through having a separate department. For example, *Al Bayan* has a separate online department with clearly defined strategies. *The Gulf News* is one of the leading newspapers with social media interaction and a set of strategies based on the belief that no newspaper can exist without social media integration. Qualman

discusses the digital shift in sharing news, and having access to a “friends” customer database in one click. Qualman also states that the structure and marketing matrix of any traditional media tool should be reshaped to include a social media unit; if newspapers did not recognize the importance of this evolving new approach to the devolution of news, this would be to their own detriment [3].

B. Content Development to Attract Customers

Through data gathering and analysis, different content strategies have been adopted to engage and increase customer numbers. For instance, *Al Bayan* and *Al Ittihad* are using the competition approach to engage customers, and to market themselves as well. *Al Ittihad* newspaper has launched the aerostat competition to advertise their new identity, incorporating the colour RED instead of BLUE. *Al Emarat Al Youm* always employs new ideas in terms of content. For instance, they use a discussion platform like “Good Morning”, involving photo sharing and live chat. The English newspaper, *The National*, has launched a Facebook page in Arabic to engage their Arabic audience, noting that the content of their English pages is not the same as their Arabic pages. These different formats have been provided due to Facebook flexibility, and ease of customer interaction and engagement.

This emphasizes what *The Gulf News* believes, “Social media is important in newspaper organizations to keep a finger on the pulse of readers”. Carvill and Taylor highlighted that social media keeps the conversation going on about traditional media forms like the newspaper, TV, and radio [11]. Social media has created two way channels to keep the conversation going on and not to let the customer forget the identity of the product. This allows us to have direct conversation with our customers and interact with them. Social media is filling the gaps between traditional media like newspaper, radio and TV.

On the other hand, Qualman explains the concept of engagement for social media; it is not only that the customers or readers are giving feedback and comments but they can also be engaged in the real time of the event [3]. If you are watching a game or talk show on the TV you can easily engage and interact with it in real time. *Al Emarat Al Youm*'s Facebook page provides the opportunity to readers to interact with news on the spot. A news programme to enable journalists to write the article on the spot—“scribble live” and post it in social media” was also created.

The concept of engagement in social media is not only that customers or readers are giving feedback and comments but also that they can be engaged with the event immediately. For instance, it is easy to engage and interact in real time while watching a game or talk show on TV.

C. Brandbuilding

The six newspapers in this study have acknowledged the role of Facebook in helping them to be recognized by larger audiences. *The Khaleej Times* stated that it is

important to be where their customers are and facilitate their access to the newspaper. *The Gulf News* also has agreed on the importance of Facebook in maintaining and sustaining the conversation between customers and the newspaper. Carvill and Taylor argue that existence on social media helps to engage more customers with a minimal budget and in less time [11].

Feedback and Comments features from Facebook are an integral part of the newspaper Facebook content as well. *Al Emarat Al Youm* and the other newspapers commented on the importance of prompt replies and being online 24/7 through hiring the required people. This is in line with Carvill and Taylor who suggests that any business organization has to be on-line all around the clock and have skilled employees who are able to reply promptly and professionally [11].

According to Tuten, old media is not that interactive with the audience compared to the social media. The new media have enhanced the relationship between the product and the audience [2].

D. Return on Investment

All six newspapers agree on the importance of getting positive return on investment (ROI). All participants confirm that joining Facebook has affected their sales positively though there is no budget in place for social media in general. Facebook is firstly an engagement tool but can be a marketing tool as well. Many departments are involved in measuring ROI including the Marketing Department. Qualman outlines the importance of measuring ROI of social media and its cost effectiveness. For example, he states that Burger King has announced that for introducing 10 Facebook friends you will get a free Whopper. This process did not require more than \$50000; while it costs \$400000 in traditional media [3].

E. Social Media Strategy

Qualman and Carvill and Taylor explain that businesses should blend their social media strategy with their overall business operation, as it affects different aspects of the organization [3], [11]. Having a direct communication channel with customers helps with the marketing of the company. Rather than split the traditional and social, there can be a complementary model.

Qualman argues the importance of hiring digital natives as it is important to utilize the young generation who grew up with social media [3]. This generation is able to work remotely and get the job done. After the integration of a social media strategy, any company should reap the benefit of hiring such people who are different to the older generation in their lifestyle.

F. Target Audience

The six newspapers in this study analyse their target audience psychologically and demographically, in order to improve their content and appearance. *Al Bayan* has mentioned very clearly that they have 75% male focused content, and only 25% female focused content. This has caused them to rethink their content strategy and to try to present more interesting topics for women.

In this regard, Benwell outlines a successful business plan as being based on a comprehensive analysis or evaluation of different audience elements, like psychology and demographics [12]. This will identify weaknesses and strengths that should be studied in devising the best plan to reach the largest audience. Facebook has its own method of evaluation, like other social media. There are also different websites which can provide an analysis of Facebook insights.

Three of the participants identify that the age range with highest presence is 24 to 35, which is the same age mentioned by Carvill and Taylor [11]. All six newspapers agreed that it is easier to reach specific groups on Facebook, instead of any other traditional media tool, as some advertisers request advertisement for a specific geographical audience. Through social media you can target one group unlike the traditional media that reach massive audience with huge budget.

Arabs prefer to access the news through Facebook accounts while the English newspapers their find audience accessed their websites through google.ae and the website itself. Due to cultural constraints Arab women are not as active as men in sharing videos and links as Facebook users.

X. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that Facebook is a customer engagement tool for newspapers and their websites, which supports the concept of having a continuous conversation between customers, and customers and the newspaper. The UAE in comparison to other Middle Eastern countries, has the highest per capita penetration of Facebook users. This has been utilized by local newspapers in establishing their Facebook page as one of the key news sources for individuals and professionals. In addition, Facebook has been recognized as a tool to increase and expand targeted audiences, both locally and globally. This study has also revealed that social media and online strategy are embedded within the newspaper business in the UAE. For instance, varied strategies have been utilised by the six newspapers in this study to ensure customer/audience engagement, community interaction, and brand awareness. This study has further revealed that most UAE newspapers are utilizing the flexibility of Facebook content by publishing what their audience is interested in, and giving them the opportunity to share, engage and interact through different formats and approaches. In this study, Facebook was one of the first sites that customers in the UAE visit, before accessing the Newspaper's own online website. This study has successfully demonstrated the processes, procedures and nature of Facebook's role for newspapers as a customer engagement tool.

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