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Integration of Social Media Into Small Businesses

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THE INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INTO SMALL BUSINESSES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of South Alabama
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Communication

by
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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to show the positive benefits that the integration of social media, specifically Instagram, can have on a small business in terms of user engagement. Small businesses require more word-of-mouth advertising or online sales than businesses with larger marketing budgets, multiple locations, and more employees. Without these strategies, small businesses are at risk of having a shortened survival rate. With the added layer of connectivity, targeting, and post-reach, information about products and brands travel more widespread with social media, compared to traditional methods. Social media increases engagement between users and a brand's page, which can help boost positive feelings about a brand and shape future buying behaviors of consumers. The results of the study show that specific content types can help drive engagement. Having more posts or followers does not always mean more engagement, but there is a significant relationship between engagement and post type. This research contributes to the communication and marketing field by connecting small businesses to the phenomenon of e-commerce and digital communication via social media

INTRODUCTION

Small businesses play an important role in the economy and create new means of entrepreneurship and income. They serve as an anchor for communities, especially downtown areas that rely on the consistent support of local customers. A small business is defined as an independent operation that has less than 500 employees. These are also referred to small and medium-sized enterprises or SMEs. As of 2020, there were nearly 31.7 million small businesses in the United States. They were responsible for the creation of 10.5 million net new jobs and have accounted for 65.1% of net new jobs since the year 2000 (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2020). Ranging from 1994 to 2018, 67.6% of new small businesses survived at least two years, while only 33.6% survived up to ten years. Additionally, their main method of traditional marketing comes primarily from word-of-mouth recommendations from customers and their personal networks (University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2018). These small businesses are less likely to incorporate emerging technology like social media or e-commerce compared to larger enterprises. This is due to the nature of small businesses having fewer employees, technical experience, fewer funds, or lack of knowledge of resources.

Although small businesses are slower to follow suit, there are many advantages to utilizing social media to create a brand identity and form customer relationships. This integration of social media could potentially increase the survival rate of a small business by growing opportunities for user engagement. User engagement creates relationships with the customer and the business through online interactions. This can be done through likes, comments, shares, hashtag communities, direct messaging, reposting of user generated content or general discourse about what is being said on a certain page or even offline (Chadwick, 2015). These attributes can directly impact the attitudes and behaviors of a consumer and perception towards a business. Additionally, these factors also contribute to helping a small business achieve organizational goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What once started out as a platform for smaller-scale workplace connections and personal entertainment platforms, has quickly become a hot commodity for businesses and organizations to leverage themselves against competitors. Through the evolution of technology, the web, and social media, we can see the shift in their multifaceted uses. Common definitions of social media refer to attributes such as digital technology, user interaction and user-generated content, modes of interaction, networking, and collaboration. Howard and Parks (2012) suggest that people - in the form of organizations, or groups - serve as a part of the social media definition. We both produce and consume the content, which creates the cycle of communication. In this sense of the definition, social media are not just software or a piece of technology, an audio or visual attribute, but consists of real people who bring in the social or conversational element. In this particular study, social media can be defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and all the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC) (Chung, et al., 2017). Social media is typically used in the form of social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, wikis, etc. These popular platforms act as the medium in which socialization occurs and is paired with interactivity among users

(Carr & Hayes, 2015). Currently, there are 4.62 billion people using social media around the world as of 2022, a 10.1% increase from 2020 to 2021 (Hootsuite Inc., 2022).

Due to the large uptick of social media use, digital advertising has taken a more prominent role than traditional advertising. The growing amount of active and passive time individuals are spending on social media makes for the ideal place for digital advertising. Businesses who choose not to participate in social media marketing are potentially missing out on thousands of viewers, daily. This method of marketing allows a business to create and maintain relationships among customers and stakeholders, which in return helps enhance value through facilitating interaction, sharing information, personalizing experiences, creating opportunities for electronic word of mouth (eWOM) advertising about products and services (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Social media and the internet in general have created a democratic and participatory experience for its users. This capability brings the users into the process of advertising and engaging with posts on a business's page. As most things have changed to include a digital experience, users expect to be a part of the social experience. By doing so, a symbiotic relationship is created between customers and businesses (Farhangi, et al., 2014). Social advertising can be a benefit to a business by allowing the capability to utilize free platforms and stretch marketing dollars (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). Social Media Marketing (SMM) can be defined as a process by which a business creates, communicates, and delivers marketing offerings online via social media platforms. Social media ads accounted for 33.1% of the world's total digital advertising spend, amounting to nearly $154 billion in 2021. This

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means an increase in exposure of products for users worldwide (Hootsuite Inc., 2022, p. 16). In most cases, the main goals of a business can be summed up as the need for faster access, better communication, lower production or marketing costs, positive word of mouth and reputation, and higher turnover rates. A common issue that keeps these goals from being met via social media is a lack of understanding on how social platforms should be managed strategically, and the lack of established guidelines to help with social readiness or industry-specific best practices (Smith, 2015; Zhang, et al., 2017). This can be remedied by creating a social media marketing strategy (SMMS). Before social media marketing is conducted, a business must first decide if social media use, such as creating an Instagram business page, will serve as a benefit or liability. Not all social media exposure is good and can potentially hurt the business if it doesn't fit within the business model or stage of progression. In order to determine if it is a benefit, one should look at The Stages of Growth for E-Business, or SoG models. This model represents a picture of evolution, where the current stage can be understood in terms of historical patterns of success and shortcomings, and future outcomes and goals (Solli-Saether & Gottschalk, 2010). The five stages of the SoG model are 1. Experimentation and learning, 2. Rapid growth, 3. Formalization, 4. Consolidation and integration and 5. Institutional absorption. Each stage acts as a stepping stone for progression in order to meet the organizational goals of a business. Three types of organizations under the SoG model are introverts, extroverts, and ambiverts. An introverted business can meet its professional goals without having to implement social media technology into its strategy. An extroverted business begins with a heavy social media presence, such as a social media business page. Without

a business page, their reach and engagement could severely affect their success. An ambivert organization means they could go either way and aren't limited at any point during the SoG model stages. Overall this model shows that to implement social media successfully, organizations must identify what growth type they are in and must understand what to expect in the future. Lastly, they should know how to reach the next stage so they do not risk failing to achieve progression. To work through the presented model, a business must first establish its organizational goals (Holt, 2016; Chung, et al., 2017).

Once a business determines what its organizational goals are and where they stand in the SoG Model, it can better understand how to implement social media marketing through a strategic plan. Four distinct social media marketing strategies (SMMS) are social commerce strategy, social content strategy, social monitoring strategy, and Social Customer Relationship Management Strategy (CRM) (Li, Larimo, & Leonidou, 2020). The four parts of developing an SMMS based on the Consumer Engagement Theory, are *drivers, inputs, throughputs,* and *outputs.* Drivers are the business's objectives and the customer's social media motivations. Inputs are the business's engagement and the customer's behavior on social media. The throughputs are the method of interaction and connection while exchanging resources and information with customers. Lastly, outputs are the total customer engagement results (Li, et al., 2020). In addition to these four parts of developing an SMMS, one must also consider the different types of platforms and their functional features. It is easy to assume that all advertising on social media platforms can

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be done in the same way, but it must be specifically tailored to the platform's dynamic and audience. To successfully reach a target audience in a more effective way, the social media manager must understand both the medium and its metrics. Certain platforms are better for certain advertisements and receive different types of engagement (Voorveld, et al., 2018). According to the engagement experience framework, digital engagement develops from a consumer's digital experiences. This framework defines these types of experiences as emotional, intuitive experiences or perceptions when using a particular medium - also known as media experiences. Social mediums consist of seven main functions: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, reputation, and groups. Another set of differences among platforms is the modality, level of private versus public access to content, privacy parameters, types of connections, and content accessibility over time. Once these factors are explored they can be molded to fit with the goals of the business and adapted to use in social media. With better-curated posts, better feedback and engagement are more likely to occur.

Content engineering has become an important part of social media activity and digital marketing. The purpose of content engineering is to increase engagement as well as achieve organizational goals. While ads provide information about a product, they also provide more than that in terms of brand identity and building relationships. Ads or posts can create the opportunity for two-way communication and engagement. Rather than just focusing on what the content is, attention has shifted towards the actual design and presentation (Lee, Hosanagar, Nair, 2017). These formal features are what people focus on most. If a brand personality is established, consumers are also more likely to engage

and are more attracted to brands that align closely with their own personality, lifestyle, or beliefs. This can be in the form of emotional, philanthropic, or humorous content. Brand personality content has been shown to drive engagement which creates positive feedback for both parties.

Brand awareness has been taken to a whole new level in the age of social media due to the amount of online exposure. While not all organizations and businesses utilize social media in the same way per the SoG Model, it is a great opportunity to elevate themselves and create an image that is distributed across a huge platform of viewers among various social networks. This is how a brand can stay relevant and compete in the heavily saturated market. Brand awareness occurs through the repetition of memorable content to a consumer in mediums such as the logo, name, slogan, aesthetic, or style. This increases brand familiarity and *brand knowledge* (Langaro, Rita, & De Fatima Salguerio, 2015). Establishing brand awareness requires more strategic planning and finding cultural breakthroughs. A relatively new phenomenon known as crowd-culture has changed the way content is viewed and engaged with, if it's engaged with at all. Crowd-culture now has formed social movements and circles that have begun to challenge the conventional approach to most things, especially marketing and communication. This new method can bring together groups of people, both sub-cultures and art worlds, that would otherwise be geographically isolated (Holt, 2016). Cultural context also affects the way advertisements are perceived due to various levels of individualism-collectivism

(Wu, 2020). Social media is also able to bypass mass culture gatekeepers and push content directly onto the social channel. Now consumers don't have to wait on media and societal gatekeepers for things like film, television, printed media, or fashion trends to be repurposed and presented in new ways, they can do it themselves and push it out instantly. Cultural branding helps build iconic businesses and brands by choosing an ideology on which to base their marketing tactics. This study focuses on small businesses and retail specifically, where products are often chosen by what the community or general society popularizes at the moment. By locating the cultural opportunity, the consumers push the idea to the mainstream if it's important or innovative enough, immediately elevating the business (Holt, 2016). Then a brand should continue to target its desired demographic and further diffuse the ideology. When the idea sticks, the crowd-culture can help drive the profit gain and media exposure elsewhere.

Social media and its users help to establish brand awareness, customer loyalty, and positive electronic word of mouth, eWOM. Different from traditional in-person, word-of-mouth advertising or WOM, eWOM communication is one of the most useful information sources for consumers and is extremely beneficial for small businesses. Existing research shows that eWOM plays an important role in influencing a consumer's purchase intention and attitude or perception of a brand (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Consumers are able to partake in eWOM among their own network of friends, as well as anonymously, which makes social media the ideal place for finding a brand or product information and leaving reviews. User activities that relate to brands on social

networking platforms can greatly impact the operations of a business. To make these impacts more positive, understanding the motivations behind a consumer in terms of engagement is an important step. The online interactions that occur between the users are more impactful than traditional media, due to the constant flow of communication that continues even when the user is logged off (Saridakis, et al., 2016). To create more positive user attitudes certain considerations must be taken into account when planning or implementing marketing strategies, like understanding the general uses as well as types of users. Three general uses of social media include content consumption, content contribution, and content creation. Consumption in this context means that users are not creating or contributing to content, they are just viewing it. Content contribution involves the actual engagement between both account holder and user. Content creation is the actual distribution or uploading of brand-related content. With these three uses come six types of social media users: inactives, spectators, joiners, collectors, critics, and creators. Motivation factors include information, entertainment, personal identity, integration & social interaction, empowerment, and remuneration (Li, et al., 2020). These are further influenced by personal beliefs or values and then to conceptualized social pressures (Farhangi, et al., 2014). By acting as pseudo marketers, these positive or negative attitudes and behaviors of consumers can influence both online and offline sales or perceptions (Celebi, 2015; Li, et al., 2020).

The Theory of Planned Behavior is used to predict an individual's intention to engage in certain behavior based on the risks and benefits associated with the variable (iSALT Team, 2014). Attitudes are generally affected positively by posts or ads that are

more emotional, informational, or entertaining in nature. Because social media and ads

are also the biggest information source, it is crucial to know how to speak to the audience

when guiding them to make purchasing decisions or framing what you want them to think

about (Yoon, et al., 2018). The more time someone spends on a social media platform the

more likely they are to engage with it. This leads to more purchases and success for the

business or brand being promoted (Yoon, et al., 2018). Users tend to associate

themselves with a certain brand or identity meaning they will either discuss it more on

the site through eWOM or will be more likely to recommend it to friends. Explained by

the Logical Act Theory, synthetic attitudes are created based on perceptions of a brand.

This discourse increases exposure across other platforms both online and offline

(Farhangi, et al., 2014).

No matter if a business is active on a social page or not, customers are discussing

them publicly on their personal pages, amongst other consumers. If a business has a

social page, it would be able to direct what is being said about them, or even partake in

the conversation directly (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013). A business needs to plan

strategies ahead of time to combat any potential risks to its reputation because the wrong

strategies can further fuel social media crises or negative perceptions. Most users turn to

social media platforms to express concerns or complaints for others to see, rather than

discussing offline in a more private manner. Users expect that an organization should be

honest, transparent, and reliable, and refrain from hiding anything they don't want the

public to know (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). The way a business manages its reputation

online can also correlate with how employees engage on social media. The effects can be both positive and negative. Often a business's success is linked with how well the employees have internalized a brand and its values and how their actions align (de Chernatony, 1999). Notable ways that employees commit themselves to their workplace or organization is through their work practices, working in a healthy work environment, and encouraging others to live the brand (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). When these things happen, they can be translated positively onto social media, thus elevating the business's brand and reputation. Recruiting people that showcase these core values and traits that fit the brand, inside and outside of the workplace, is a productive way to bring on ambassadors for a business. All employees are also in a way marketers, as they are always representing the business. Social media, reputation, and employee roles all form a balancing act, meaning that there has to be certain boundaries that accommodate workplace policies and freedom of self-expression (Rokka, Karlsson, & Tienari, 2013). The benefit to having employees on social media is that they help achieve transparency and the behind-the-scenes that are very important to other consumers.

Trust is an important component of viral advertising and marketing practices. Most viral advertising is closely related to the interactions and relationships among consumers, creating ad diffusion (Borah, et al., 2020). Trust is defined as the willingness to rely on another person when uncertainty and risks are present (Roy, et al., 2017). The more trust a person has in an endorsement or brand, the more likely they are to purchase the product online despite not having seen it in person before. More trusted brands have a larger following and more positive engagement. The Social Exchange Theory identifies

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how consumers tend to form relationships with things or people that provide more

benefits than risks, and lower cost (Kozelnkova, et al., 2017). In terms of e-commerce

and brand loyalty, it is important to market the benefits and reduce potential concerns or

anxieties to create larger communities of consumers (Morrison & Firmstone, 2000).

When a company depicts the more personal side of its brand, it is showing a more

genuine and honest insight for consumers. This makes consumers feel as if they have

some kind of personal connection with the brand or influencer, which increases loyalty

and satisfaction. Generally, people are very active on social media and typically have a

large network or list of friends or followers. Parasocial recommendations can influence

how a consumer receives certain information from their followers and friends (Errman, et

al., 2019). Unlike marketing tactics, friends are less likely to have ulterior motives and

have nothing to lose if you decide against a product or reject certain information. When

friends endorse something, the buyer feels more sure about it therefore both parties

benefit as well (Hildebrand & Schlager, 2018). Users looking to fulfill needs of social

bonding or engagement are also more likely to either trust ads on social networks or even

click on a post. When conceptual persuasion knowledge is activated then attitudes are

persuaded too. The persuasion knowledge model is activated when these types of

marketing-related situations arise, whether it be from friends or direct advertisements.

This model explains that over time consumers develop persuasion knowledge and use it

as a defense with persuasion attempts. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) define persuasion

knowledge as "beliefs about marketers' motives, strategies, and tactics; effectiveness and

appropriateness of persuasion tactics; psychological mediators of tactic effectiveness; and

ways of coping with persuasion attempts." Therefore, these types of recommendations help lower skepticism and distrust against a brand or product.

Generation Z has quickly evolved into a large target audience for small businesses. In the book "Marketing to Gen Z", Fromm and Read explain that Gen Z is on track to become the largest generation by 2020. They will represent up to 40% of consumers and $44 billion in direct buying power (Fromm & Read, 2020, p. xvii). Because this generation makes up a large part of the online presence, the buying structure within the traditional family is changing and shaping how dollars are spent. With vast product knowledge and tech skills, parents are looking towards their younger kids to help make decisions on what to buy, especially in fashion and retail (Fromm & Read, 2020, pg. 90). Members of Gen Z also make more conscious purchases, buying from brands that closely align with their values. They have high expectations for brands to be authentic, inclusive, trustworthy, reliable, and useful. This is crucial to understanding future consumer trends, which includes the digital realm. Different from Millennials, Gen Z expects to be a part of the digital and social experience of a brand. Gen Z typically uses social media as a way to promote a certain image, to become educated, to be entertained, shop, and as a way to launch themselves into a professional career. In addition to being cognizant of how users perceive content on social media, businesses must also transform their strategies through user-generated content and user-first experiences. User-Generated Content refers to any content that is created by people, rather than brands, which is then reshared to the brand's page (Hootsuite Inc, 2022). These variables have also helped to

construct the concept of influencer culture, where users of a platform utilize their

personal branding and following to self-promote. This quickly became a hot marketing

tactic for businesses on Instagram. Instead of using celebrities or high profile people,

micro-influencers are now used as a way to keep authenticity and representation (Appel,

et al., 2019). These are referred to as social media influencers, individuals who typically

have a large following used to promote their expertise on a product or service. When a

consumer feels a sense of personal connection with certain influencers or brand

ambassadors who are endorsing a brand or product, a parasocial relationship is formed.

Although the influencer isn't necessarily aware of the attitudes and feelings of the

consumer, the assumed relationship contributes to a consumer's engagement on a page.

This can lead to positive attitudes in the sense that this influencer can be trusted and the

information they give is reliable and useful to the consumer, increasing engagement (Tsai

& Men, 2014). Additionally, this increases the likelihood of the consumer getting to

know the brand personality of a business and forming a more personal relationship with

it. However, if someone has negative opinions about the influencer of choice, they may

dissociate with the brand altogether.

Brand ambassadors and influencers can help with shaping conversations about

products, which are then discussed on other platforms by consumers, called *social buying*

(Hund & McGuigan, 2019). In addition to influencer marketing and choosing brands that

help form identities, social media has also created a *shoppable life.* This term refers to the

phenomenon in which social media users can follow aspirational lifestyles, and buy the

elements that are presented straight from the post through embedded links (Hund &

McGuigan, 2019). With the increased use of social media sharing, consumers want to share these perceived lifestyles in a glamorous way. In return, this cycle of user-generated content promotes a brand and the user's self-identity through tagging of products or relevant hashtags or even eWOM recommendations across other platforms. Small businesses can use these findings to elevate their brand awareness and social media marketing to captivate this new generation of consumers.

The idea of shopping has changed drastically over the last decade, partially due to the rapid increase of social media use, influencer culture, and Gen Z. The actual act of shopping has changed as well, shifting from in-store browsing and interactive elements to online scrolling. Both still hit different demographics and preferences, but e-shopping is becoming more popular and the most mainstream way of purchasing goods and services. Internet traffic increased more than 500% to social commerce websites in 2007 and is still growing in the year 2022 (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). Because more than 82 million people around the world shop online (Yadav & Rahman, 2017), almost 60% of internet users across the globe bought something online every week in 2021 which equates to $591 billion or an 18% increase from 2020 (Hootsuite Inc., 2022, p. 23). Thirty-nine percent of consumers on social media use their page as a way to find product information (Yadav & Rahman, 2017), and nearly 27% of teens and young adults expect to be able to shop directly through social media accounts rather than through search engines. Specifically, on Instagram, this is the method in which younger demographics are

choosing to also find shopping inspiration. 66% of people say inspiration is critical to helping them decide what they should buy (Hootsuite Inc., 2022).

E-shopping can be done through various methods such as websites, apps, and other social networks. As most shopping has shifted to social media pages like Instagram, *social commerce* has taken over. This evolved as a new concept in 2005 and can be described as the act of exchanging goods and services that use social media as a mediator and converges in environments both online and offline (Wang & Zhang, 2012). "Four defining characteristics of social commerce are: (1) sellers are individuals rather than larger firms, (2) sellers create and sell as personalized online shops, (3) sellers can hyperlink between personalized shops, and (4) sellers' profits are based on commissions from sales made by their shop" (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). These factors create an opportunity to merge online shopping and social networking, as well as connecting sellers and shoppers in virtual communities (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). In 2006 the idea of social commerce shifted again after learning that consumers do not always know what they want to purchase, or where to purchase products. Social commerce helped form ways to create a space for collaboration among businesses and consumers to provide ideas on what to buy. This helped to enhance the consumer's overall shopping experience (Tedeschi, 2006). In addition to social commerce, social shopping is a term often used to describe online shopping by simply sharing shopping experiences with others. This leads to the term *social shopper*, which is a consumer on social media who seeks and exchanges information from peer recommendations and reviews (Wang & Zhang, 2012). Social bookmarking became popular in 2008, also known as wishlisting. Bookmarking

has become a popular way of shopping or planning through sites like Pinterest that have buyable pins. Instagram now has the same capabilities, which serve as the ideal platform for visual e-commerce shopping. These types of sites show visual ideas and vision boards that are linked directly to the sites you can buy the items from. This combines personal likes and interests, with the act of shopping and social networking. Six aspects of social commerce evolved in this era: social shopping, ratings and reviews, recommendations, forums and communities, social media optimization, and social ads and applications (Wang & Zhang, 2012). Marketing through social media only amplifies the success of social commerce for small businesses that utilize it (Hossain & Kim, 2020).

OBJECTIVE

Social apps have made the realm of e-commerce and social commerce grow rapidly, creating a big opportunity for traditional brick-and-mortar small businesses to expand their advertising and marketing strategies. Since its debut in 2010, Instagram has created a huge social and economic impact on society and only continues to gain popularity due to its visual aesthetics and sense of community. It is one of the fastest-growing social apps to date, with over 2 billion monthly users as of December 2021 (Rodriguez, 2021). The highest percentage of users range in age from 18-24 at 29.8% and 25-34 at 33%. The percentage of users at the time of this study remains nearly an even split of male and female. Fashion or retail accounts are the most interacted with industry at 25% (Instagram, 2021, p. 4). This platform was made with the goals of connecting people, helping build influence, and providing a platform to create compelling content (About the Instagram Company, 2022). It also is a way for businesses or individuals to share and grow their business, by establishing a brand personality. Instagram sets itself apart from other social platforms based on the way it is utilized and formatted through its single thread of photos and videos, as well as the filter features. The lack of formalized community structures like groups or forums make the sense of community flow through comments and hashtags through descriptions, or captions creating "hashtag conversations" (Rogers, 2021). Based on the literature review, the findings show how

small businesses can benefit from utilizing social media marketing accompanied by social commerce, especially through Instagram. The Theory of Planned Behavior and Logical Act Theory both explain the foundations of understanding consumers' attitudes and behaviors and how businesses must present content accordingly. The Social Exchange Theory further provides insight on how to leverage these findings to form deeper relationships, which will bridge the gap between corporations and consumers. In order to maximize the potential of these social media platforms to meet organizational goals and better understand the attitudes and behaviors of consumers, Instagram will be the primary platform of focus in this study. This research will show how utilizing social media, specifically Instagram, in a small business will increase engagement or brand awareness based on content.

METHODOLOGY

Existing research shows how social media is beneficial to consumers and as a general marketing tool, but it is important to further understand how exactly small businesses can use specific content to increase user engagement and positive attitudes. The purpose of this study was to answer:

R1: What are the benefits of social media, specifically Instagram, in small businesses?

The following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The integration of the social media platform, Instagram, will increase user engagement through various forms of content.

Unit of Analysis and Coding

The participants for this study consisted of three small businesses located in South Mississippi, along the Gulf Coast. These businesses typically operate on a Monday through Saturday schedule between the hours of 10:00 am - 5:00 pm. These particular businesses were chosen for this study because they share the same kind of retail merchandise, demographic, geographical location, and business model. Each business's Instagram page and timeline posts were analyzed. Instagram was chosen as the platform

for analysis since it is the top social app used by consumers due to the visual format of displaying products and social commerce capabilities (Rogers, 2021). This specific platform helps to provide insight on current social media marketing strategies in terms of content and frequency, and engagement levels among consumers. To reduce any potential risks or direct identification of the specific businesses, each was assigned alphabetically, such as Business A, Business B, and Business C. All three businesses are classified as a clothing boutique.

The study was observational and quantitative, using content analysis as the instrument. This method was chosen due to the necessity of assigning data categories based on the subject of the social media posts. The content analysis was conducted on each business' Instagram page for a period of three months October - December 2021, with ninety-two days total worth of content. These Instagram pages were used to collect data and insight on the business's current use of Instagram and consumer engagement trends by categorizing content in each post. The independent variables or unit of analysis were the various forms of content categories present in the posts - Faces, Brand Ambassador, Stock Photo, Graphics with Text, or Product only. These categories were chosen due to the frequency of common themes in each business's posts. The dependent variable was the amount of engagement (E), defined as the total number of likes (L) and comments (C) per content category on each business's page (L + C = E).

Two coders, this primary researcher and another graduate student from the University of South Alabama in the Communication program, independently coded the first twenty posts from October's data set of Business A were used, accounting for forty

coding decisions. Once the coding instructions were given (see Table 1), Scott Pi's

reliability method was then used to determine the degree of reliability of the nominal data

findings between the two coders using the equation π = Pr(a) - Pr(e)1 - Pr(e).

The percentage of coded categories were as follows: 1 = 35%, 2 = 40%, 3 = 0%, 4 = 4%,

and 5 = 21%. Total expected agreement was 32%.

$$\text{Pi} = \frac{\% OA - \% EA}{1 - \% EA} \quad Pi = \frac{90\% - 32\%}{1 - 32\%} = \frac{58\%}{68\%} = 85\%$$

Once an agreement of at least 80% was achieved, the study continued with the

operationalized categories in the pretest. A post test was conducted after 10% of the data

was coded. The percentage of coded categories were as follows: 1 = 33%, 2 = 42%, 3 =

0%, 4 = 4%, and 5 = 21%. Total expected agreement was 49% and the final degree of

agreement was 80%.

Each category was operationalized and coded as shown in Table 1: **1 = Face**

defined as imagery with a model's face in the shot. **2 = Brand ambassadors** defined as a

model who is photographed in actual products of the brand, but may not have their face

in the shot or face is obscured. **3 = Stock photos** defined as imagery that does not depict

a local brand ambassador or direct tie to the small business. Stock photos have a third-

party brand logo or copyright, that is clearly depicted on the image reshared by the small

business. **4 = Graphics with text** defined as images in the form of quotes or memes, or

special announcements. Lastly, **5 = product only** defined as imagery of tangible products

that are not showcased on a model or are simply displayed. Categories 1 and 2 can overlap, where the face is visible on a brand ambassador. In this case, a tally was given to each category. In the case of a video, the subject was coded according to the five categories.

Table 1. Codebook of category descriptions to be assigned to each post to seperate into themes, to determine which of the five will receive significant engagement.

Category	Definition
1 = Faces	Imagery with a model's face in the shot.
2 = Brand Ambassador	A model who is photographed in actual products of the brand, but may not have their face in the shot or face is obscured.
3= Stock Photos	Imagery that does not depict a local brand ambassador or direct tie to the small business. Stock photos have a third party brand logo or copyright, that is clearly depicted on the image reshared by the small business.
4 = Graphics with Text	Images in the form of quotes or memes, or special announcements.
5 = Product Only	Imagery of tangible products that are not showcased on a model or are simply displayed.
** 1 and 2	Brand ambassadors should be tallied as 1 and 2, if the face is present in the photo.

To answer the research question of what are the benefits of using social media in a small business, a content analysis was conducted on the three months' worth of Instagram content of each business by categorizing post type. Once each post was coded, engagement was also calculated. This was achieved by adding the comments and likes, and then totaled (L + C = E) for each content category. The data was analyzed through an analysis of variance, or ANOVA test to determine the significance of the engagement per content category. This method showed if there was any causation linked to engagement levels and content categories posted on Instagram. This data analysis yielded results appropriate for a conclusion of how much a business benefits from using social media, specifically Instagram.

RESULTS

Small businesses rely on the support of the community, word of mouth advertising, and innovative ways to market and advertise on a smaller budget. The purpose of this study was to show how to achieve that through the utilization of social media. Hypothesis 1 predicted that the integration of the social media platform Instagram, will increase user engagement through various forms of content. To answer this, a content analysis was conducted on the three businesses' Instagram pages. The content was divided into five categories based on the frequency of occurrence: Face, Brand Ambassador, Stock Photo, Graphic with Text, and Product Only. Once analyzed, the posts were assigned a number 1-5 and then calculated by frequency into a cumulative total for the three months. The data was further analyzed using analysis of variance, or ANOVA, to determine the significance between engagement and the use of different content categories. The subsequent tests were done by LSD procedure. For all procedures, significance was set at p≤05.

The effect on engagement of various categories was significant [$F (4, 1467) = 9.97$, $p = .000$]. As seen in Table 2, engagement in category 4 (M=135.45) and category 5 (M=110.53) scored significantly higher than the other categories, but was not significantly different from each other. Categories 1 (M=72.77) and 2 (M=60.83) fell in between the other three categories, which were significantly different from categories 4 and 5, but not significantly different from category 3, or each other. These findings

show that the research hypothesis was supported, that the use of certain content categories will increase user engagement.

For additional measures, significant differences emerged in three categories (see Table 2). In category 1 engagement was significantly lower than engagement from category 4 (M=135.45) and category 5 (M=110.53). Category 1 was significantly higher than category 3 (M=4.19) and was not significantly different from category 2 (M=60.4).

For category 2 engagement was significantly lower than category 4 (M=135.45) and category 5 (M= 110.53). Category 2 was significantly higher than category 3 (M = 4.19) but was not significantly different from category 1 (M=72.77).

For category 3 engagement was significantly lower than all other categories (M=4.19), category 1 (M=72.77), category 2 (M=40.83), category 4 (M=135.45), and category 5 (M=110.53).

The results from this study show that there was a significant relationship between focusing on the product or information rather than stock photos or images with a brand ambassador and can be concluded as the most effective strategy among the five. Category 4 had the highest engagement, which included graphics with text. These posts were tied to an announcement of a sale, upcoming event, giveaway, quote or meme. Using a brand ambassador and including their faces to show personality is typically assumed to drive the most engagement, but the results show the opposite in terms of significance. One

possible explanation could be the focus on the product is lost in the post and is no longer

beneficial to the consumer. Additionally, using stock photos was the least effective

strategy in comparison to the other four categories. A possible explanation for this result

could be that consumers prefer an authentic post that either includes brand personality or

the product itself. More research is needed to understand the specific attitudes and

perceptions behind less authentic or organic posts. A business that utilizes categories 4

and 5, or graphics with text or only products have found an effective social media

marketing strategy based off of their stage of growth, as mentioned in the SoG model

(Holt, 2016; Chung, et al., 2017). Additionally, theories of attitudes and behaviors have

been applied, considering the positive relationship between the brand and the users that

have been created and maintained.

CONCLUSION

To maximize the potential of a small business, meet organizational goals, and to better understand the attitudes and behaviors of consumers, social media provides a place to accomplish these tasks. This study looked at how the strategic integration of social media, specifically Instagram, affects engagement or brand awareness based on content type and frequency of posting. By looking at table 2, the connection between effective strategies and engagement is evident and findings were significant. Businesses that integrate social media, specifically Instagram, have the opportunity to increase engagement and views on its page. Although the engagement to follower ratio collectively is low, it is possible that users are still viewing the content but not necessarily engaging. This is still beneficial for brand awareness and digital marketing, especially for electronic word-of-mouth advertising and sharing to other platforms.

Based on this study, the three small businesses do see high traffic on their pages based on their follower ratio, which means the digital aspect of their business has created opportunities for brand awareness and positive relationships with users. It is inferred that this social media strategy could also positively impact sales or eWOM that was not previously present prior to their implementation of Instagram. This is beneficial for small businesses to increase their survival rate, and not risk becoming a statistic for premature closure. Social media can also help to achieve organizational goals by continuously

growing audience reach, providing faster access, better communication, lowering

production or marketing costs, gaining positive WOM and eWOM, and seeing higher

turnover rates for sales. This is a positive attribute for moving ahead in the SoG model, as

well as reaching the new generation of shoppers and technological advancements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research could focus more on the specific content and sentiments in user engagements, such as comments. This prompts the question of how a social media user can get a follower or consumer to actively engage by commenting or sharing, rather than passively liking a post (Chwialkowska, 2018). What are the possible motives behind this, that could expand upon the Theory of Planned Behavior, Logical Act Theory, or even the Uses and Gratification Theory as it pertains to attitudes and behaviors? Given the proper analytical tools, studying the views, impressions, and post reach is also important to understand how to increase the follower-to-engagement ratio.

Additional studies can focus on how the ongoing 2020 COVID-19 pandemic impacted small businesses and encouraged businesses to pivot their traditional business models to an online platform or even incorporate social media. This particular study can add to ongoing research by showing how digital engagement is driven by platforms like Instagram and can elevate small businesses. As small businesses continue to incorporate digital technologies and lean into the social commerce world, new theories are likely to emerge as the phenomenon continues. Critiques of this study that need further research are the consequences of creating an e-commerce only platform via Instagram, or any other social media platform. Like all things, social media sites can have an expiration date or obstacles when it comes to having access to the internet, algorithms, ownership,

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privacy, rights, and terms of use. Other instances consist of periods of "blackouts" where

the entire platform is down for extended periods. These factors play a critical role in the

uncertainty of social media, but do not downplay the benefits it can have for a small

business.

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Table 1.

Mean Engagement per each content category and indication of significant measures, throughout the three-month analysis period.

Category	Engagement
1 = Faces	72.77^a
2 = Brand Ambassador	60.83^a
3 = Stock Photo	4.19^a
4 = Graphics with Text	135.45^b
5 = Product Only	110.53^b

Note. Comparisons are vertical only. Means having different superscripts differ significantly at $p<.05$ by LSD test.

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