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A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ONLINE BUSINESSES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract: Social media is not only used for entertainment and personal communication. It is also utilized in transactions of businesses and interactions with customers. This research explores the perceptions and experiences of online business owners concerning the role of social media in their businesses. Narrative inquiry was used as a research design. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews online. The study used purposive sampling to identify people who are willing to share their perspectives and experiences. The results show that business owners attribute the increase of their consumers' reach and consequently growth in sales to social media. While business owners believe in the essential engagement of social media in businesses, they offer a caveat to be observant of the comments inputted by the people who interact with their online business presence because they can make or break the business reputation.

Keywords: social media, online business, narrative inquiry, Filipino business.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Social networks are a special multimedia platform [Brogan, 2010]. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, make it possible to communicate with other people even at a faraway distance. They allow users to exchange ideas, connect with others, get an insight into various issues of the world and share their views [Gillin, 2008]. Social media can be used for different purposes, for example for education, communication, entertainment, news — and even the sales of goods and services.

Because people can conveniently use smartphones and various kinds of gadgets to access the Internet, the number of social media users is increasingly growing [Siddiqui & Singh, 2016]. Today,

there are about four billion people worldwide who use social media [Brogan, 2010]. Meanwhile, social media is one of the fastest channels for reaching more consumers from an economical point of view. It is used as a marketing tactic that enables customers to learn about the goods and services for which they are ready to pay. It improves revenue, customer loyalty makes it easy for sellers to get reviews and more business connections [Gillin, 2008].

A business owner will potentially get a general view of goods and services with the help of social media. This can be seen as a tool for improving the usage of data to align them with consumer preferences, which makes it possible to reach more new customers. Online, certain businesses look fine but do not have good products and services. If a business does not achieve customer satisfaction, it can be conveniently bashed online. The name of the business will quickly be ruined, meanwhile the consumers' trust is hard to recover.

1.2. Objective of the study

The prime goal of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of online business owners concerning the role of social media in their businesses. Gaining knowledge and a deeper understanding of how social media aids in business can be a significant thinking tool for those who are in the same field and for those who want to undertake the same business style.

1.3. Literature review: social media

The term “social media” can be described in a variety of ways. It is a set of web-based features that enable users to (1) build a public or semi-public account within a confined system, (2) establish a list of other users with whom they interact, and (3) browse and traverse their list of links as well as those generated by others within the structure [Boyd & Ellison, 2007].

Although researchers presume an inherent grasp of social media based on existing technology, there is no widely recognized description of what social media are, both operationally and philosophically. Nonetheless, the social media ecosystem includes all social networks – user-generated material, blog posts, video, music, news, photos, and tweets – that collaborate with digital technology [Safko & Brake, 2009].

Social media is any platform that enables users to create meaning together [Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009; Baym, 2015]. As a result, social media, by definition, is relational since people can generate meaning on this platform. Social media may take numerous forms, but the most common are interactive and engaging [Rosenauer & Filak, 2012].

Optimistically, social media may be used to boost good causes, therefore helping to change the world for the better. Because social contact is the way by which we build our very worlds, social media, as a free site, may assist to enlarge the worlds in which we live. At their best, social media would empower us to create better worlds [Baym, 2015].

1.4. Literature Review: Social Media and Online Businesses

According to Giray, “social media is not beneficial nor malevolent; it is neither neutral since it is only a medium of whatever one wants to convey” [Giray, 2021c, p. 23]. This is a view that is related to instrumentalism, according to which technology is only a tool and the controller of the impact it may have is the human being himself. This view is different from the Luddite philosophy maintaining that technology can lead to the decay of civilization. Many people do not subscribe to

that thought anymore because of the positive impact technology development makes on the current world.

In fact, the twenty-first century is witnessing an expansion of Internet-driven communications disseminated via social media [Cavinder et al., 2017]. These messages have become a key influencer on consumer behavior in such areas as procurement, post-purchase communications, and assessment. Users of social networking sites utilize them for a variety of objectives, including leisure and advertising goods and services [Mangold & Faulds, 2009].

In a survey performed by Cavinder and colleagues [2017], the majority of the participants (84.4%) used social media platforms to promote the reputation of their companies and around 93.1% of those respondents believed social media had a favorable influence on the business, with Facebook being the principal social media platform that the business owners use.

In addition, according to a survey carried out among tour operator clients who used Facebook to interact with the travel companies, customer relations with tour operators are built online, and online special offers and discounts can help create allegiance through social networking sites [Senders, Govers, & Neuts, 2013].

However, using social media membership information, another study shows that social media has a noticeable negative effect on economic growth, and that social media raises data search costs and increases labor-related to leisure substitution, which has an undesirable effect on economic growth [Dell'Anno, Rayna, & Solomon, 2016].

Social media may prove beneficial for a company if used appropriately. By clarifying their message, preventing confusion, and guaranteeing that their online image fits with the brand image, businesses can use social media successfully [Venkateswaran, Ugalde, & Gutierrez, 2019]. Businesses view social media as a gold mine for business development and construction [Gutierrez, Venkateswaran, & Ugalde, 2019].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

People are species that share stories that lead historical lives personally and collectively [Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019]. Thus, narrative inquiry was a tool used in this paper. The aim is to examine stories to explain how they interweave to construct a wider historical framework [Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007]. It is these tales that owe world significance to people who strive to grasp the reality of life and construct their lives and societies. Stories enable us to discuss reality as a phenomenon [Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019].

2.2. Data Generation Method

This research utilized semi-structured interviews to gather perspectives and experiences from online business owners. A semi-structured interview does not exclusively follow a strict list of queries. Instead, it asks more open-ended questions, encouraging the interviewee to discuss, instead of just asking and answering questions from the interviewer [Galletta, 2013]. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. There was no time limit since data saturation was used as a guide [Fusch & Ness, 2015]. The following questions were addressed to the participants:

- What is social media to you?
- How often do you use social media in your day-to-day life?
- How do social media help you in your everyday life?
- What made you decide to start up a business with the use of social media?
- How do you communicate with your customers and prospective clients?
- Does having an online presence have a negative effect on your business?
- Is there any other matter you would like to share?

2.3. Sampling

This study used purposive sampling to identify people who are inclined to share their perspectives and experiences concerning the use of social media in their online businesses. Creswell and Miller [2000] advise that one or more people who are available and prepared to offer information should be found in a narrative study. This research covered three businesswomen who use social media as part of their business. All are Filipino. At the time of this writing, one participant is single, another is engaged, and one is married.

2.4. Participants

Table 1. Demographic Information about the Participants

Name	Age	Marital Status	Duration of Online Business
Abegail	20	Single	6 months
Thara	24	Single	1 year
Karla	35	Married	1 year

Abegail

Abegail is a college student at Polytechnic University of the Philippines. She is 20 years old and her major is Office Management Technology. She rents a house in Taguig City to easily go to university. Abegail originally lives at Dolores, Quezon. When the pandemic struck, she decided to go back to the province. There, she ventured into an online business. She sells different foods, e.g., traditional Filipino rice cakes. She also sells clothes, home items, and other varied products. She is the eldest and does online selling to help her parents with sustenance.

Thara

Engaged and has one child. Thara graduated from college with a degree in communication arts at Assumption of San Lorenzo. After graduating, she wanted to have a stable job. She desired to become a boss as she wanted to have a more flexible schedule to be able to concentrate on taking care of her daughter. Hence, to concretize her aspirations, she started her own social media agency. Her agency provides services like graphic designing, copywriting, and commercial support. Thara also hires people to make her business work. She utilizes social media to advertise her business, as well.

Karla

Karla holds a degree in nursing at Southeast Asian College. She is a nurse by profession. At the same time, she is a businesswoman. She worked abroad in Saudi Arabia for 10 years. She returned to the Philippines and got married in January 2020. After getting married, she saw an opportunity to

open up a business in the Philippines. She set up and now manages a small food business in Laguna, just near her house. There, she sells Japanese foods like *chap chai*, *takoyaki*, *dim sum*, and beverages like milk tea. One year later, she got the opportunity to go back to Saudi Arabia. While she is away, she still supervises the food business through the use of social media.

3. Results and Discussion

The Narrative of Abegail

Abegail said that the meaning of social media to her is very wide. It helps her to communicate with other people. She gave examples of such situations when the family is not together, social media can help them to communicate and feel reunited. From time to time, she checks if there is an update about class papers or even news since she is in college. She does not often use a television; instead, she uses social media to know what is happening in the country. In this time of the pandemic, social media is very helpful and useful in her studies. On social media, she gains knowledge through online learning classes.

Since the pandemic began, she decided to set up a business through online selling which she does on social media. Even though she stays at home, she earns money. It is convenient for her to sell online for the fact that she does not need to go outside just to sell items. An avid fan of cooking, for the first three months she just sold *puto* and *kutsinta*, both Filipino rice cakes. Later, she started to sell other items like clothes and other household products.

She mainly uses Facebook to advertise her products. Typically, her customers are her friends and friends of friends on Facebook. She posts and advertises her products with descriptions using Tagalog or the English language. Commonly, she uses Tagalog if the post is about rice cakes or other foods to make it relatable. Meanwhile, she uses English if it is for other products. To entice prospective customers, she uses qualifiers like *matibay* (durable); *kahanga-hanga* (amazing); *masarap* (delicious); and *de kalidad* (of high quality). According to her, such a technique motivates clients to purchase. Also, she responds to questions in the public and private comment section in either English or Filipino, depending on the language used by the inquirers.

She acknowledges that social media is a big help for her. She says that it has no negative effect on her business. Instead, it helps her to get new customers and update her loyal ones. She keeps the record of the products she sells to know exactly how much she earns. She tries to balance the online business with her studies. According to Abegail, her business is not a hindrance, and it even encourages her to reinforce her skill in time management and prioritization.

In this time of the pandemic, she aims to raise more money through her online business so that when there is an emergency, she could feel secure. Her advice to young people who want to start up a business with the use of social media:

“Do not be afraid to try because there is no such thing that we can easily see succeed. Continue posting on social media and the right time will come.... We just need to become persistent. For sure, it will pay off. Many times, it will be unexpected. Loyal customers will help continue to intensify the business.... Continue to do what you love doing.... Successful people do not just wish—they start!” [sic].

The Narrative of Thara

Social media is a huge part of Thara’s day-to-day life. It helps her to manage her own business and to communicate with her team, especially since her business is a social media agency. Without social media, she thinks she would not be able to have a thriving business. The drawback of online

business, in her opinion, is that everything can happen in an instant. For example, the government may start to ban Facebook. She is worried about what will happen to all people who are in a digital marketing business. She also mentioned how social media made an impact on her:

“I was not a businessperson, I hated selling but when I saw the potential of this kind of system that you can sell, I got hooked to it.... I am in charge of selling. Almost anything can be marketed and be sold. Everybody needs social media.... Everybody is on their phone. We use all these stuff—laptop, computer, phone and tablet. If you want to share something about yourself or your business, social media is the easiest way. And it is cheaper than the traditional advertising.” [sic].

In conducting her digital marketing business, Thara uses various social media platforms, including but not limited to, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, and especially Facebook. She primarily utilizes the English language in her posts and dealings with the customers. The language she uses in her documents, videos, and presentations is also English. She believes that this puts forward credibility. Besides, this makes even foreign customers understand what her business is about. According to her, this does not prevent most Filipinos since they know English as it is one of the official languages in the country. She makes sure that when she posts or advertises, brevity is considered. Readers tend to dismiss lengthy posts. She makes sure to follow the “KISS” strategy, which stands for “Keep It Sweet and Simple.”

Her goal is to keep her business stable. She still considers herself as a start-up. However, in the long run, her goal is to become the number one social media agency in the country. She positively thinks that anything can happen. She also believes that not all people utilize the power of social media. Her advice is: “Find something that you want to do or what interests you the most that even though you are not going to be paid well, you pursue what you want in life and make money out of it!” [sic].

The Narrative of Karla

Karla uses social media almost every day. She spends a lot of time on it because she loves keeping up with her friends and family. She wants to be updated on the happenings with her loved ones. For her business, she uses some applications that are connected to her store cameras to monitor the customer flow for security purposes.

She uses social networking sites like Facebook and Viber to communicate with her staff. She also utilizes social media to contact suppliers about the deliveries of stocks needed in her business. She employs social media to transact with her favourite customers. Although she has an brick-and-mortar local store, she has decided to put up her business online. By doing so she hopes to gain more customers and increase her sales.

“During the pandemic, we saw the opportunity to open a business. Since people cannot go out of their homes, it is good to bring food to their homes. Voila, Kaimee Infusion Delights [the name of the food business] was born!” [sic].

Furthermore, she utilizes both English and Tagalog in her communication. Mainly, her posts are in Taglish, which refers to the combination of Tagalog and English. It is organically utilized in day-to-day communication. Such an approach is very relatable to the readers and is working well, according to Karla. She adds that sometimes she incorporates make-up words like *Instagrammable*, which means worthy to post an Instagram, and *delibest*, which is a portmanteau of *delicious* and *best*. She does that to catch the attention of prospective customers. She finds this socio-linguistic strategy effective in attracting customers, leading to increased profit.

For Karla social media is a double-edged sword – something that has both favorable and unfavorable consequences. Social media can easily be accessed by almost everyone, and people may believe whatever is posted online. For her, leaves a negative commentary about her products, it could spill over to other customers, leading to a decrease in revenue, and it is also detrimental to the reputation of the business.

When she operates the store and learns that her stocks are not sufficient enough, she can easily contact her suppliers and quickly get her order of supplies – and that is through the aid of social media. Meanwhile, her short-term goal is to increase the revenues of her online business. For the long-term goal, she wants her online business to be known by many people.

Karla intends to build up an excellent brand so that other business people wanted to franchise her store. She hopes to have additional branches in many parts of the Philippines. Online business for her is tiring but, at the same time, it is very rewarding. She maintains that managing an online business just needs the right balance of passion, profit, and patience.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study presented the narratives of three business owners. All of them utilize social media in their own lives and their respective online businesses. They all concur that social media is incredibly useful and view it as a means to communicate with customers and to carry out transactions. Customers get to know their products and services through the information posted on social media. When questions arise, clients do not need to phone the business, they may send a message to the social media account of the company. It is used as well to replenish stocks by contacting the distributors and other related organizations.

In terms of the languages used in communication, the above-mentioned business owners utilize English and Tagalog, the two official and widespread languages in the country. They also use a mix of the two, which is known as Taglish, for convenience and organic communication to their customers and readers. Meanwhile, the use of qualifiers in the descriptions of the goods can give readers more information about the products. This strategy reduces uncertainty about the nature of the products and helps the clients decide whether to purchase or not. The use of the socio-linguistic strategy consisting in the mixing of words or coming up with new terms to better convey an idea seems to make the readers curious and attracted to the products.

Business owners attribute the increase of their consumers' reach and consequently the increase in their sales to social media. They see it as a powerful tool that should be harnessed if one is venturing a business since almost everyone uses social media. While they believe in the essential engagement of social media in business, they offer a warning. As almost anyone can express anything they want on social media, including things that are untruthful and illogical, it is only appropriate for business owners to be aware of these remarks.

If there is a spike in negative feedback or grievances, it can harm a business's success. In such situations, online business owners must possess proper strategies for dealing with reactive customers or prospective clients. Some of them even have impulses like entitlement and disinhibition [Giray, 2021a], which can be debilitating for online businesses. The owners must be quick to find ways to solve the issues or fix the damage done since at stake is the reputation of their online business. If the business owners are not quick to intervene, the company's credibility may be harmed. These criticisms, truthful or made-up, are normal in a business. Business leaders must be patient and resilient to avoid hasty actions which may affect the image of the business. "If a leader remains in a negative emotional state for too long, they may mutate into a terrifying mental monster capable

of devouring and destroying the confidence of those and relationships with those who work under them. Therefore, this is definitely an unhealthy environment for an organization that intends to flourish” [Giray, 2021b, p. 103].

The research shows that the pandemic has propelled the respondents into building online businesses in order to support their families. Instead of seeing the pandemic as a hopeless situation with lockdowns and restrictions put into place, they find a way to become productive and concretize their dreams of having a business. Social media, which has helped them in their endeavor, serves as a tool that they utilize to sustain the presence and growth of their businesses. We hope that this research can help online business owners and people who prospectively want to join this career be elucidated on the role of social media in online businesses and that this can help them to make prudent decisions in their business endeavors.

Social media saves time and money by allowing business owners to connect with a large network of people who are interested in their businesses. It brings in new customers while also expanding their reach. Since it is a global innovation, this medium is the latest trend for creating a wider link. Business owners should strive to adapt to the changes in social media marketing and be more willing to embrace those changes. Furthermore, it is significant for business owners to be knowledgeable and skillful about the use of a particular social media platform to advance their business processes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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