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Digital transformation of SMEs through social media

Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the strategic integration of social media platforms by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) beyond marketing. Drawing from Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities theories, the study investigates how social media enhances management, coordination, and control functions. Through five diverse case studies from Ghana, findings reveal SMEs' innovative use of platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Slack, and Trello. These platforms foster efficient internal communication, customer engagement, project management, and talent acquisition. Challenges such as technical expertise and dynamic digital landscapes are identified.

Keywords

Digital Transformation (DT), Small Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), social media, social media adoption, social media platforms, social media usage, Low Middle-Income Countries (LMICs).

INTRODUCTION

The digital age's rapid advances brought on by the digital age, digital transformation (DT) has been the driving force of competitiveness and innovation across industries. Particularly for Small and Medium-scale Enterprises (SMEs), embracing DT is no longer a choice but a strategic necessity in navigating the ever-dynamic business environment, to adapt to technological advances and shifting consumer expectations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kraus et al., 2022). As digital technologies continue to reshape industries; altering how businesses operate and deliver customer value (Dobrescu et al., 2018; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020), SMEs must now harness their potential to effectively manage, coordinate, and control their business process. As such, social media has emerged as enablers of DT, offering avenues for transformation that extend well beyond conventional marketing and advertising domains.

The integration of digital technologies into businesses has significantly altered how they operate and deliver value to customers (Dobrescu et al., 2018; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020). DT has since then no longer

been an exclusive territory for larger organizations; rather, it has increasingly become relevant for SMEs, which play a pivotal role in driving economic growth and employment (Gherghina et al., 2020). Adoption of artificial intelligence, big data, and most notably, social media platforms, enhance SME operations and foster growth. Benefits garnered range across improved business performance, increased competitive advantage, and enhanced collaboration through knowledge and information sharing (Jiang, Yang, & Gai, 2023).

Social media, as defined by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), refers to internet-based applications that support user-generated content creation and sharing. This medium revolutionizes how SMEs operate and interact with consumers, namely through marketing and human resource practices, ultimately strengthening connectivity and reach with millions of consumers through personalized, geolocation-targeted messaging (He, 2022). Though providing low-cost, accessible tools for communication, collaboration and real-time data across companies, few SMEs maximize the potential of social platforms beyond customer engagement and marketing (Amoah et al., 2023). With data being the new gold, the use of social media has maximized the visibility and brand awareness of SMEs. By showcasing products and services, SMEs have a larger audience and done regularly, often leads to brand recognition and visibility (Dobrescu et al., 2018; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020).

Leveraging social media platforms to foster communication, collaboration, and real-time data sharing within and outside organizational boundaries offers SMEs an unprecedented opportunity to have cost-effective advertising as compared to the traditional way of advertising (Wang et al., 2016). This promise is especially pronounced for SMEs in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), where strategic social media adoption can address operational challenges and propel growth (He, 2022).

Moreover, social media platforms grant SMEs strategic advantages, namely through promotional activities, market penetration opportunities, potential partnerships, continuous learning, and adaption to the rapid changes in technologies and economies (Dobrescu et al., 2018; Purwati et al., 2021). Exploration of the utilization and effectiveness of social media platforms, especially within SMEs, has increased (He, 2022). A Digital Market Outlook (2020) survey reported that business expenses on social media adoption are expected to increase by 7.6% annually by 2024, representing social media market volume of US \$132,245 million. Therefore, indicating that social media is progressively becoming an essential tool for business operations.

While existing literature acknowledges the potential advantages of integrating social media into SMEs' internal processes (Amoah et al., 2021; Qalati et al., 2022), a comprehensive exploration of how these platforms are adopted into management, coordination, and control mechanisms is warranted. This study aims to bridge this research gap by investigating how SMEs in LMICs harness social media platforms to elevate their management practices, optimize coordination efforts, and establish effective control over their operations.

The outcomes of this research are poised to contribute both theoretically and pragmatically to the discourse on DT and SME management. By illuminating successful strategies, potential barriers, and the transformative potential of social media platforms in SMEs' management, coordination, and control functions, this study aims to steer SMEs and policymakers toward effective utilization of these platforms to drive sustainable growth and bolster competitiveness. The sections of the paper in this study are arranged as follows: literature review, methodology, findings/results, and conclusion. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed in the last section including the study's limitations and directions for future research.

Research problem

SMEs have been utilizing several tools in line with digital transformation, with research (Celek, Gajdka, Světlík, & Vavrečka, 2020; Amoah & Jibril, 2020; Eid, Abdelmoety, & Agag, 2020) stipulating their usage/ adoption of social media sites and platforms being centered towards it as a marketing and advertising tools rather than employing it as an organizational-wide digital transformation. A study by Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Pullins (2021) however suggests social media has untapped potential for managing, coordinating, and controlling various business operations, often held back by a lack of knowledge, limited resources, and perceived risks associated with its use. Limited research has delved in exploring the use of social media by SMEs beyond marketing, and rather on other business processes involving managing, coordination, and control.

In the context of Ghana and other Low-And Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), more research is needed on how social media can enhance various SME business processes. This was emphasized in studies by Martin-Rojas et al. (2020) and Bruce et al. (2022), Hagg, Dahinten, & Currie (2018), where they pointed out the potential benefits of social media integration into other business operations such as bookkeeping, customer service, and supply chain management. Social media provides significant opportunities beyond marketing and advertisement. However, if SMEs fail to harness these opportunities adequately, they stand to miss out on substantial opportunities for growth and process optimization, especially in the evolving economies of Ghana and other LMICs (Hagg, Dahinten, & Currie (2018).

This study seeks to explore how social media can be strategically integrated into various business processes to enhance the output and growth of SMEs in Ghana and other Low-And Middle-Income Countries beyond marketing. Addressing this is crucial for SMEs as this study can uncover novel initiatives that can be used to exploit social media beyond marketing. Understanding the barriers and facilitators of social media adoption for broader business purposes can inform business support organizations, and SMEs themselves, contributing to more informed decision-making and strategic planning (Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Pullins,2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital era has ushered in transformative changes in the business landscape, with SMEs increasingly turning digital technologies for competitive advantage and growth (Kraus et al., 2022). Despite the potential of social media-enabled digital transformation in offering affordable ways for SMEs to enhance processes and match larger businesses' performance and growth, they are primarily used only for traditional marketing and promotion (Ritz, Wolf, & McQuitty, 2019).

The integration of social media platforms and other digital technologies into SME core business functions and process often encountered with barriers i.e., lack of expertise, resource limitations, the challenge of quantifying impacts, and data privacy and security issues limiting their full utilization (Dobrescu et al., 2018; Zaied & Mohamed, 2020). Despite these impediments, SMEs have the potential to transcend these limitations by adopting an approach that priorities the capabilities of these technologies. SMEs can do so by harnessing these technologies into tools for gaining a competitive advantage through continuous learning and adaptation (Gökmen, 2021; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020).

Digital Transformation and SMEs

SMEs are essential drivers of economic and employment growth, particularly in the context of LMICs and developing economies. The 21st-century digital age has urged most businesses, including SMEs, to adapt and adjust business processes and models digitally lest they become obsolete (Kraus et al., 2022).

However, they are often resource and information-limited to effectively invest in digital transformations, given the skillsets required for data extraction, analysis, and translation into valuable information (Kraus et al., 2022). Modern IT has enabled businesses to reduce communication and coordination costs and broaden their product portfolio, triggering numerous digital transformation projects (Wengler et al., 2021).

Social media has emerged as a critical avenue for SMEs to facilitate DT. As online platforms that foster the creation, sharing, and exchange of information and ideas, social media has become a vital tool for businesses in the digital era, especially for SMEs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram offer numerous advantages such as customer engagement, brand recognition, and extended market reach (Wang et al., 2016); they also offer opportunities for enhanced management practices, improved coordination mechanisms, and efficient communication strategies, ultimately contributing to their overall performance and sustainability (Ahmad et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). Additionally, these platforms present opportunities for businesses to engage and empower their online communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Despite these limitations, SMEs have embraced social media platforms to strengthen communication, marketing, and customer service operations (Qalati et al., 2021). There is notable progress in the adoption of social media by SMEs and its effect on marketing, customer relationship management, and innovation (Lutfi et al., 2022). Studies by Amoah et al. (2021), Ali Abbasi et al., (2022) and Bruce et al. (2022) reveal ways to maximize social media for driving brand awareness, visibility, and loyalty, while others such as He et al. (2022) and Dwivedi et al. (2022) stress its usefulness in targeted marketing. However, research has also revealed that SMEs often underutilize the potential of social media platforms, only focusing on basic marketing and advertising, and often overlooking their application in other key business processes (Bruce et al., 2022). This partly due to a lack of awareness, resources, skills, and perceived risks such as those identified by Qalati et al. (2022). Thus, to remain competitive, SMEs need to broaden their understanding of social media usage and fully harness the potential these platforms offer for digital transformation, by considering their existing limitations.

Social media for managing, coordinating, and controlling business processes.

Scholars like Fraccastoro, Gabriellson, and Pullins (2021) have argued that SMEs can make use of social media beyond marketing by streamlining internal communication, enhancing user and customer relationship management. This untapped potential in the use of social media challenges the traditional perspective of social media as a solely used as a marketing tool. Fraccastoro, Gabriellson, and Pullins (2021) indicate that social media is powerful and when used effectively, can benefit SMEs more as there are many roles that can be executed via social media rather than just marketing. For instance, social media can be a tool for recruitment of staff and for internal communication purposes, leading to improved coordination among various departments and stakeholders (Bruce et al., 2022). These social platforms facilitate real-time communication, enabling efficient project management, remote collaboration, and agile decision-making processes (Amoah et al., 2021). By adopting social media for this purpose, SMEs can enhance cross-functional coordination and mitigate information silos (Fan et al., 2021).

Integrating social media platforms into SMEs' internal process yields numerous benefits which extend traditional marketing efforts. Improved communication and stakeholder engagement contributes to a deeper understanding of customer needs and preferences, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Amoah et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2016). Research indicates that social media does improve SME competitiveness by enhancing communication, innovation, and relationships with customers and partners (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020). Real-time data sharing and collaboration streamline coordination efforts and offered insights on market trend and competitor strategies result in more efficient

decision-making processes (Bruce et al., 2022, Ali Abbasi et al., 2022, Gökmen, 2021). This is significantly relevant in LMICs where resource limitations necessitate novel approaches to optimize internal operations (Gherghina et al., 2020). Moreover, social media platforms enhance customer service, enabling SMEs to address customer inquiries and feedback promptly (Amoah et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2021).

Though the potential benefits of social media usage in this retrospective are evident, notable gaps and unexplored dimensions exist. Existing research mainly focuses on developed economies, leaving a gap in understanding social media adopting in the context of LMICs (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Studies delving onto the use of social media in this retrospective Furthermore, the challenges of effective integration of social media into daily operations remain understudied. Factors such as data privacy concerns, technical literacy, and resource constraints can hinder the full realization of social media's potential in SME management, coordination, and control (Qalati et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Challenges of using social media for non-marketing purposes.

Numerous challenges are faced by SMEs which attempt to adopt social media platforms for managing, coordinating, and controlling their business processes. Studies have indicated that SMEs are faced with challenges ranging from lack of technical expertise, limited resources, data privacy concerns, cultural resistance and change management, and information overload (Zhang et al., 2022; Qalati et al., 2021, Fan et al., 2021, None Agung Tirta Wibawa et al., 2022).

Many SMEs struggle to effectively adopt social media platforms due to their lack of technical knowledge hence struggle to navigate the intricacies of these platforms beyond basic usage (Dwivedi et al., 2021, None Agung Tirta Wibawa et al., 2022). The lack of proficiency in understanding platform algorithms, analytics, and data interpretation hinders SMEs' ability to harness social media's potential for management and control purposes (Fan et al., 2021; Amoah et al., 2023). Resource limitations, a common characteristic of SMEs, hinders hiring and training skilled personnel to manage social media activities (Mujahid & Mubarik, 2021). Additionally, SMEs may lack the financial means to invest in tools that facilitate effective social media integration into their business processes (Qalati et al., 2021). SMEs might be hesitant to fully leverage social media in internal operations due to data privacy/security risks (Zhang et al., 2022; Qalati et al., 2021).

Organizational culture and employee resistance play a pivotal role in shaping the success of social media adoption (Zhang et al., 2022). Employees might be resistant to change and unfamiliar with incorporating social media into their daily tasks (Qalati et al., 2021). Overcoming this challenge requires strategic change management approaches that foster a culture of adaptability and digital literacy (Reim et al., 2022). The vast amount of information on social media platforms can lead to information overload, affecting the quality of decision-making within SMEs (Qalati et al., 2021). The phenomenon of filter bubbles, where users are exposed to information that aligns with their existing views, can limit the diversity of insights gained from social media, hindering well-rounded decision-making (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2023).

Theoretical foundation

The RBV theory posits that a firm's competitive advantage emanates from its distinctive and inimitable bundle of resources (Barney, 1991). Social media platforms can be construed as such strategic resources, enabling SMEs to enhance various business processes, from internal coordination to customer relationship management. The unique access to real-time communication and data-sharing capabilities offered by social media platforms becomes a source of competitive advantage, enabling SMEs to respond swiftly to market changes and engage customers more effectively (Bruce et al., 2022). The strategic utilization of

these platforms can lead to improved decision-making, streamlined coordination, and optimized internal processes, all contributing to enhanced competitiveness and overall business performance (Amoah et al., 2021). Ahmad et al. (2019) highlights the impact of social media adoption on firm performance in the UAE. The study showcases how SMEs' adoption of social media positively influences their management strategies, leading to enhanced organizational efficiency and responsiveness. This is consistent with RBV theory, as firms that effectively utilize social media platforms can acquire and deploy resources such as information, customer insights, and real-time feedback, thus enhancing their management capabilities (Barney, 1991).

The Dynamic Capability Theory asserts that a firm's ability to adapt and reconfigure its resources is pivotal in navigating dynamic environments (Teece et al., 1997). In the context of social media adoption, SMEs can strategically cultivate dynamic capabilities by harnessing these platforms to stay responsive to market shifts. Social media serves as a conduit for gathering real-time market insights, enabling SMEs to adapt their strategies, coordinate operations, and make informed decisions swiftly (Qalati et al., 2021). SMEs that cultivate dynamic capabilities in social media adoption can consistently innovate and adapt their practices, aligning with the core tenets of Dynamic Capability Theory. By harnessing the transformative potential of social media, SMEs can respond effectively to emerging opportunities and challenges, bolstering their overall agility and competitiveness (Zhang et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research employs an interpretivist research methodology to understand the phenomenon. The study aims to examine the potential of adopting social media platforms in SME's management, coordination, and control functions in the context of LMICs, particularly, Ghana, which remains unexplored. The research will take on descriptive research method involving interviews being conducted with maximum control over factors that may interfere with the validity of the findings which answer the research questions and research hypothesis of this paper (Burns and Grove, 2003). For the convenience of interviewees and cost effectiveness among other factors, the unit of analysis (service-based firms adopting at least on social media platform in operations) was chosen using a non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) (Amoah, Jibril, et al., 2021). The service-based firms comprise of SMEs in the service sector. Interviewees comprised of managerial staff (managers, CEOs, and owners), due to their in-depth knowledge and the fact that they represent primary decision makers in the use of social media in business operations (Korherr, P., Kanbach, D. K., Kraus, S., & Jones, P., 2022). A total of five (5) interviewees were interviewed using an open-ended interview instrument.

Eligibility for the study required SMEs to fulfil certain characteristics, including being based in Accra, Ghana, operating for a minimum of six months, and incorporating online tools into their business activities. These SMEs also need to utilize at least one social media platform for their business processes.

FINDINGS

The findings from the interviews conducted provide valuable insights into the ways Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Ghana are adopting and utilizing social media for managing, coordinating, and controlling their business processes. The cases of various SMEs showcase a diverse range of approaches and strategies that highlight the significance of social media platforms in enhancing operational efficiency, customer engagement, and business growth.

Case 1: October's Beauty: Online Beauty Product and Service Business

The case of October's Beauty illustrates how a one-woman online beauty product and service business successfully utilizes social media to launch, manage, and grow the venture. Instagram served as the initial launchpad, allowing the founder to showcase her makeup skills visually and attract clientele. The adoption of multiple platforms, such as Snapchat, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, further expanded the customer base and facilitated convenient engagement. WhatsApp emerged as a critical tool for personalized customer communication, appointment scheduling, and product delivery coordination. This case exemplifies the strategic utilization of diverse social media channels to reach distinct demographics and streamline business processes, even with limited resources.

Case 2: Total Filling Station subsidiary

The experience of Total Filling Station, a franchise fuel distribution company, demonstrates how established businesses can leverage social media and digital tools for internal communication and collaboration. The extensive use of WhatsApp groups among station managers, employees, and partners enhances information sharing and quick updates on product prices and other relevant data. The adoption of Zoom for virtual meetings complements traditional in-person interactions, particularly during the pandemic. This case underscores the value of social media and digital tools in streamlining communication, fostering oversight, and staying updated in a dynamic industry.

Case 3: Online Clothing Store

The case of Person M's online clothing store highlights the strategic use of social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp for marketing and customer engagement. The business leverages influencers and visual content to promote products, engaging potential customers and measuring success through sales and profits. WhatsApp serves as a communication channel for order collection, delivery coordination, and customer updates. Despite challenges in separating personal and business accounts, Person M's case illustrates how social media can empower solo entrepreneurs to efficiently manage their ventures.

Case 4: Fooveo: Content Creation Company

Fooveo's experience in the content creation industry showcases the role of digital tools and social media in enhancing project management, team collaboration, and customer engagement. The adoption of Slack for clear work communication and Notion for streamlined project management enhances efficiency. Social media platforms like Instagram are strategically used for marketing and connecting with clients, while the company also explores platforms like Basecamp for collaboration with larger clients. This case exemplifies how a small business can scale operations through a tailored mix of digital platforms and social media strategies.

Case 5: ManorCave: Graphic Design Company

The case of ManorCave, a graphic design company, highlights the flexibility of remote operations enabled by social media and digital tools. The strategic adoption of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Slack, Trello, Zoom, and Google Drive facilitates project management, team collaboration, and client engagement. Trello serves as a pivotal tool for task organization, offering transparency and accountability within the team. ManorCave's approach emphasizes the need for skilled team members adept at using digital platforms for seamless collaboration and efficient project delivery.

Interpretation

The analysis of the interview findings highlights the transformative influence of social media adoption on the operational dynamics and growth trajectories of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Ghana. These cases underscore the strategic integration of digital tools and social media platforms to enhance various aspects of business processes.

The startup case of October's Beauty exemplifies the pivotal role of platforms like Instagram in launching and growing businesses (Ahmad et al., 2019). For emerging businesses, social media serves as a potent tool to establish brand awareness and engage customers effectively. The case of Person M's online clothing store demonstrates the power of diverse platforms, tailored to distinct demographics, in fostering customer engagement (Fan et al., 2021). This approach aligns with the notion that diverse social media platforms can positively impact SME performance by enhancing customer orientation (Fan et al., 2021).

For established enterprises like Total Filling Station, social media adoption translates into streamlined internal communication and collaboration (Gökmen, 2021). WhatsApp groups emerge as a powerful tool to facilitate real-time information exchange among stakeholders. This resonates with the view that digital tools can enhance communication and collaboration within SMEs (Gökmen, 2021).

Fooveo and ManorCave exemplify how digital tools enhance project management and collaboration efficiency (Kraus et al., 2022). Fooveo's use of Slack and Notion demonstrates the potential of such platforms in optimizing project tracking and collaboration (Kraus et al., 2022). Meanwhile, ManorCave's reliance on Trello underscores the significance of transparent task management in SME operations. These practices align with the notion that digital platform capabilities contribute to innovation performance in SMEs (Jiang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the cases of Fooveo and ManorCave highlight social media's role in talent acquisition and business expansion (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). Fooveo's exploration of social media for discovering talent and trends underscores platforms' potential in recruitment and collaboration (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). ManorCave's remote operations enabled by social media illustrate how businesses can expand their reach.

However, challenges, including time constraints and platform updates, underscore the dynamic nature of the digital landscape (Marolt et al., 2022). Despite these hurdles, the case of October's Beauty's founder's persistence in learning and adapting underscores the entrepreneurial resilience required for successful social media integration.

CONCLUSION

In this era, SMEs are compelled to embrace DT as a strategic necessity for staying competitive and adapting to evolving business environments. This paper explores the integration of social media platforms by SMEs in LMICs for enhanced management practices, efficient coordination, and effective control. Platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Slack, and Trello can be seen to be used in this respect to enhance to enhance internal communication, customer engagement, project management, and talent acquisition. Drawing from the RBV and Dynamic capabilities theories, the findings from this research underscore that social media contributes to improved management practices, coordination efforts, and control mechanisms. However, challenges such as technical expertise and dynamic digital landscapes pose hurdles in its effectiveness.

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