

Importance of Social Media Marketing on SMEs in South Africa

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DECLARATION

I declare that the field study hereby submitted for the Masters in Business Administration at the UFS Business School, University of the Free State, is my own independent work and that I have not previously submitted this work, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another university or at another faculty at this university.

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ABSTRACT

This research study illuminates the dynamics of social media marketing in the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and provides insight into the qualitative aspects thereof. The prime objective of this research study was to investigate, through an in-depth qualitative analysis, how SMEs experience, conceptualise and apply social media marketing strategies in the contemporary business environment in which they find themselves.

The research design adopted a qualitative approach by utilising in-depth interviews to gain an understanding of the experiences of SMEs. The motivations, challenges and results concerning social media marketing were uncovered by capturing the narratives of SME owners and managers. The research design adopted facilitated a holistic understanding of the experiences of SMEs when they engage with social media marketing. The study revealed the multifaceted nature of the obstacles encountered by SMEs, ranging from time constraints to the need to adapt to the fast-paced digital landscape.

This research study underscores the pivotal role and transformative power of social media marketing for SMEs in the current digital space. The qualitative approach highlighted the nuances in the dynamics of the social media strategies of SMEs, emphasising the importance of tailoring the approaches that align with the distinct characteristics and objectives of each business. The research study concluded that SMEs should be encouraged to embrace the interactive nature of social media to foster meaningful connections with their target audience and establish a strong online presence.

In essence, this research study reveals valuable insights into the qualitative dimensions of social media marketing within the landscape in which SMEs are situated. The purpose, design, findings and conclusions of this research study were addressed and a practical guide for SMEs looking to navigate the complexities of social media in a way that aligns with their specific objectives was also provided.

Key Terms: Social media marketing, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), qualitative analysis, customer engagement, digital landscape

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1 INTRODUCTION

The internet has had a significant impact on modern society, specifically social media platforms, which are commonly used to link individuals to one another internationally. People can interact without the limitations of quantity or quality by using the numerous social media networks available. Valuable information and experiences can be exchanged by users using these platforms. An impactful opportunity presented by social media is the platform to connect businesses online (Prenaj & Rugova, 2016). Social media provides businesses with opportunities to enhance their marketing strategies, allowing the promotion of their products and services (Prenaj & Rugova, 2016).

The exchange of information and experiences regarding particular products and services via the internet and the freedom it provides is constant. The sharing of reviews of products and services that were tested or purchased is not only beneficial to consumers but can also be an effective marketing tool for businesses (Prenaj & Rugova, 2016).

Communicating with people globally, creating, sharing and disseminating material and obtaining and searching for information on infinite topics are some of the numerous benefits that the internet provides. Business models have developed significantly as a result of the emergence of the internet, more in particular the widespread use of social media (Oztamura & Karakadilar, 2014).

Social media has empowered businesses to communicate directly with their customers on social media platforms and also build and maintain a positive image of their brand and products. This has caused a shift from one-way mass messages to more personal interactions (Boies, 2013).

As a result of the evolution of social media platforms and networks, businesses can improve their marketing strategies by obtaining client information through the use of API-enabled social media platforms. As the number of social media users grows every year (Figure 1.1), many businesses are utilising social media as a marketing tool. Increased business exposure, website traffic and online sales have proved advantageous to businesses (Junfen, 2017).

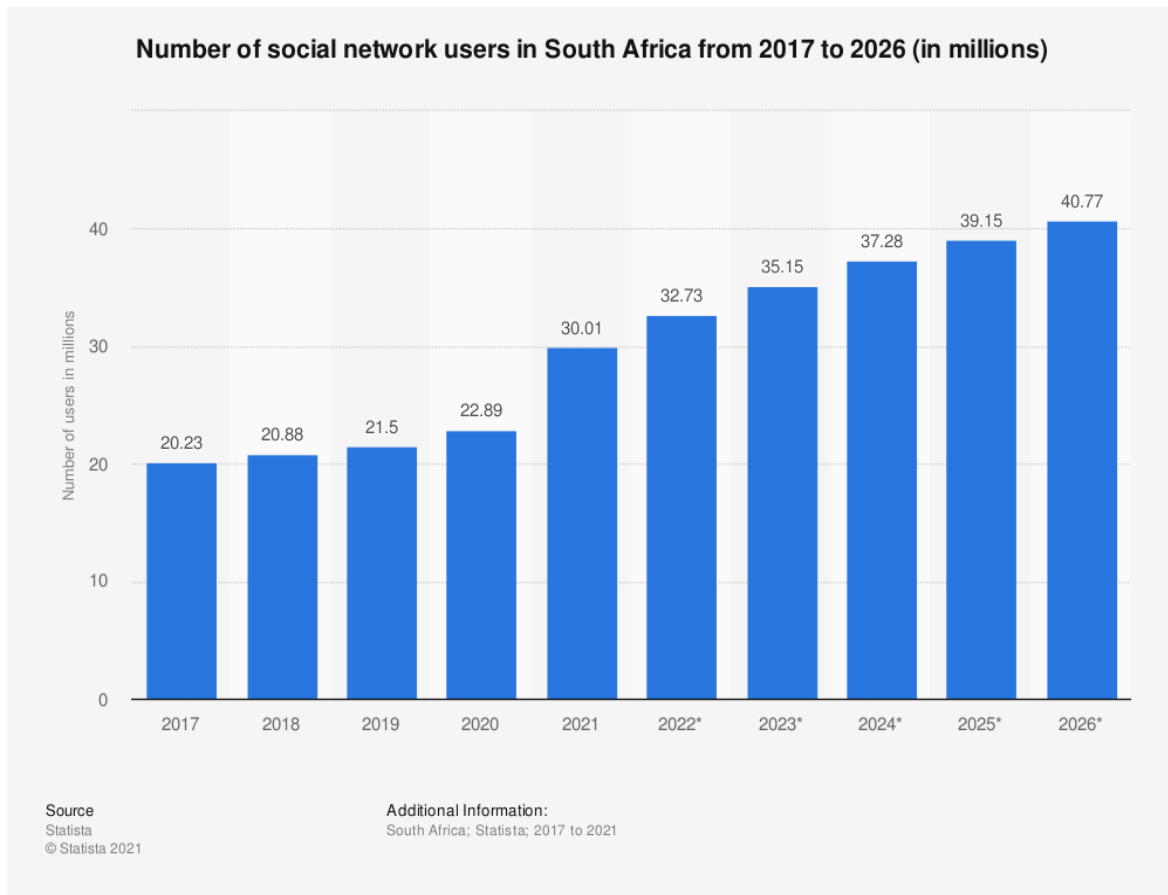


Figure 1.1 Social network users in South Africa from 2017 to 2026 (Statista 2023)

Figure 1.1 depicts, and predicts, the number of people using social media in South Africa from 2017 to 2026. South Africa had around 30 million social network users in 2019 but that number is anticipated to increase to 40.77 million by 2026.

Analysing and researching the effect of the various social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn, on the return on investment of marketing costs in the form of promotional activities to target customers is vitally important (Alalwan et al., 2017). Businesses can benefit from consumers who make use of social networking sites to make impulse purchases, generate sales from new and returning customers and gather marketing knowledge about, among others, their views, interests and perceptions (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017).

In the last decade, there has been a dramatic change in consumer behaviour. How information is gathered about products and services that might interest consumers, decision-making about current and future purchases – whether aspirational or

mundane, feedback on purchases and how purchases are made, particularly on online platforms, have shifted significantly. One of the most important objectives of any business is to develop and enhance a mutually beneficial relationship with all stakeholders and customers. The ability to interact, communicate and better understand a business’s target market is one of the benefits of digital advancement. Social media is one such medium that can be utilised by a business to gain a competitive edge (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017).

1.1 Background

It is crucial to understand and consider the term social media before delving into the concept of social media marketing. The term social media can be defined as the enablement of consumption, creation and sharing of user-generated content through internet-based applications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

These applications have created numerous opportunities for people to create personal content, sharing and exchanging ideas in interactive frameworks that take various forms, such as blogs, wikis, microblogging and general social networking websites. The combination of the interactivity and co-creation feature of user-generated content that characterises social media as a concept is central to the relationships that have been established between businesses and individuals (Filo et al., 2015). Various versions of the conceptualisations that focus on distinct perspectives are summarised in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Definitions of social media and social media marketing

Author	Concept	Definition
Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.197)	Social Media	“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”
Filo et al. (2015, p.2)	Social Media	“new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations (e.g. teams, government agencies

Author	Concept	Definition
		and media groups) and individuals (e.g. customers, athletes and journalists)”
Pham and Gammoh (2015, p. 325)	Social Media Marketing	“company’s process of creating and promoting online marketing-related activities on social media platforms that offer values to its stakeholders”
Dwivedi et al. (2015, p. 291)	Social Media Marketing	“a dialogue often triggered by consumers/audiences, or a business/product/services that circulate amongst the stated parties to set in motion a revealing communication on some promotional information so that it allows learning from one another’s use and experiences, eventually benefitting all of the involved parties”
Choi et al. (2016, p.772)	Social Media Marketing	“engaging with customers through SNSs is commonly known as social media marketing and brings several benefits to companies, such as creating word-of-mouth, positively affecting customer equity, enhancing customer loyalty to the company, and increasing purchase intention of the company’s products or services”
Tuten and Solomon (2016, p. 21)	Social Media Marketing	“is the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organization’s stakeholders”
Felix et al. (2017,p.123)	Social Media Marketing	“is an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media (often in combination with other communications channels) to achieve organizational goals by creating value for stakeholders”
Yadav and Rahman (2017,p.3)	Social Media Marketing	“a process by which companies create, communicate, and deliver online marketing offerings via social media platforms to build and maintain stakeholder relationships that enhance stakeholders’ value by facilitating interaction, information sharing, offering personalized purchase recommendations, and

Author	Concept	Definition
		word of mouth creation among stakeholders about existing and trending products and services”

Great interest in social media in the context of online marketing has been expressed by academics and practitioners. Social media marketing has been looked at by multiple research publications from many perspectives to indicate the many objectives these networks serve, ranging from online administration and brand equity to customer relationships and employee attraction (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Trainor et al., 2014).

Discussions between consumers and organisations about products and services, contributions and cooperation on the creation and the enablement of customers to become champions and influencers of specific marketing offerings for a broad audience have become possible thanks to social media marketing (Alalwan et al., 2017). This idea is about both relationship marketing and online or digital marketing, based on the marketing capability of social media to generate value on these platforms, engage them and disseminate them to major targeted audiences. Social media marketing is strongly linked to advertising and its ability to drive business and conduct promotional activities to reach and communicate with target customers (Alalwan et al., 2017).

As a result of the evolution of social media and due to their interactive nature, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become vital elements in the communication process with businesses, communities and consumers, allowing users to create and generate information in addition to consuming the available information on the supported platforms (Dos Santos & Duffer, 2021).

Networking, the development of client relationships, growth in business and competitive advantage are all driving elements for SMEs to utilise as marketing strategies (Lányi et al., 2021). However, limited resources and negative perceptions of the usefulness and technical capabilities of social media are factors highlighted as barriers to social media adoption (Tuten & Perotti, 2019).

SMEs that experience limitations in financial and technical resources for traditional marketing campaigns can benefit from social media as it is technically easy to use, cost-effective and accessible to a wide range of users (Saleh, 2021). Further research discovered that social media had a favourable influence on business profitability and/or performance and that the ICT channel was regarded as technically accessible and economically effective (Lányi et al., 2021).

A cross-cultural study to investigate and study the impact of interactions with social media on the quality of relationships and anthropomorphism revealed strong evidence that social media marketing is a distinguishing feature for brands in online interactive settings, resulting in a higher frequency of engagement with brands (Hudson et al. 2016). Although brand anthropomorphism does not ensure strong relationships (in comparison to brand relationship quality), these researchers discovered that customers who interact with businesses on social media have better relationships with those businesses in comparison to those consumers who do not interact with their preferred brands on social platforms. Hudson et al. (2016, p.11) suggest this concept as a "catalyst facilitating an interpersonal lens to interpret social media interactions with a brand".

1.2 Problem Statement

Global economies are driven by SMEs through their contribution to economic growth, creation of employment and innovation. In the current business landscape, social media has transformed how businesses interact with their consumers; this interaction can significantly benefit businesses (Chaffey et al., 2019).

Although an investigation into the factors that drive consumer engagement on social media sites by delving into post characteristics such as text length, content, activation and vividness (Gummerus et al., 2012) has been conducted, little empirical research is available on the relationship between SMEs that have adopted social media marketing platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and X, and customer engagement. Therefore, this study explores the extent to which these social media platforms contribute to increasing customer engagement.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research study are to improve the understanding of the benefits to and challenges of SMEs when using social media marketing through an in-depth examination and use of existing knowledge on social media marketing to structure its benefits and the application thereof. In this paper, the benefits and challenges are discussed from the perspective of SMEs. An additional objective of this study is to explore how SMEs can benefit from the adoption of social media by also considering the challenges that SMEs face when using social media as a marketing tool.

In emerging markets, such as in South Africa, SMEs are a focus for research as e-commerce could potentially boost the growth and capacity of SMEs. Thus, this research aims to explore the relationship between social media platforms and consumer engagement.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to meet the study's objectives:

- What role does social media marketing play in SMEs?
- Does social media marketing impact SMEs?
- What are the updates relating to the use of social media marketing within SMEs?
- What are the drivers of the adoption of social media marketing for SMEs?
- What benefits and obstacles do SMEs face with the adoption of social media marketing?

1.5 Preliminary Literature Review

In the recent years, the landscape of business has transformed significantly, due to the rapid growth of technology and social media platforms. SMEs face challenges and opportunities with the development of social media. This literature review explores the research available in order to identify the impact that social media marketing has on SMEs.

1.5.1 *Small and medium-sized enterprises market structure*

SMEs contribute significantly to economic growth through job creation, poverty reduction, distribution of income and innovation (Maneesha, 2020). To build a strong industrial sector in the economy, a strong SME sector is required. Well-run SMEs are essential for long-term economic growth (Parvin et al., 2021). SMEs are given more opportunities to succeed in domestic and international markets when there is rapid economic growth and higher profitability in developing markets (Yeh et al., 2021). People in South Africa are encouraged to be creative and innovate solutions to emerging social obstacles by creating jobs, reducing inequity and contributing to economic growth (Tuffour et al., 2020).

Retailers can be categorised into two major purchase models: online selling or mortar stores. However, the difference between the two is becoming increasingly blurred as omnichannel shopping becomes the norm (Von Briel, 2018). Retailers succeed when they are better at meeting the expectations of their competitors (Levy & Weitz, 2012). Traditional retailers are therefore following new retail rules brought about by technology-enabled disruption, which has empowered customers to shop whenever and wherever they please through whichever channel they seek. Retailers who resist adaptation to the changing competitive landscape, such as Sears and Stuttafords in the United States (US), will eventually find their doors closed (Kumwenda-Mtambo & Strydom, 2017).

The use of specialised point-of-sale systems, internet access and the rise of social media have changed the way retailers and customers interact. Because of technological advancements, new retail models have emerged. Traditional retailers have begun to use e-commerce as an additional distribution channel, whereas previously only online retailers have opened physical locations (Grewal et al., 2017).

1.5.2 *Small and medium-sized enterprises in the COVID environment*

The pandemic of coronavirus-associated acute respiratory disease, known as coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19), claimed the lives of thousands of people worldwide. As a result, many economies were severely impacted (Gorbalenya et al., 2020). Many economies experienced adverse effects due to the pandemic.

Lockdowns generated a worldwide recession, affecting both developed and developing markets (OECD, 2020).

COVID-19 significantly impacted the physical health of people along with the financial health of businesses globally. SMEs are more prone to vulnerabilities in comparison to larger businesses. The predicament of SMEs is made even more dire by factors such as the lack of financial resources and technical skills. A rise in digital transformation, changes in consumer behaviour and a technological and management gap, that needs to be closed, were direct results of the pandemic (Saleh, 2021).

SMEs, as opposed to other businesses, have characteristics that make them more sensitive to the issues brought about by the pandemic. The lack of financial resources and specialised skills make SMEs unable to respond to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 regulations (Bartik et al., 2020). Solutions to the crisis for SMEs were more challenging than those for large corporations due to the following factors: a shortfall of human resources, a lack of competence in a managerial context (procedures, processes and instruments), a scarcity of funds and management of knowledge limitation (only tacit knowledge, nothing formalised) (Garengo et al., 2005).

Furthermore, SMEs are subject to the liabilities of their size, which simply translates into the direct proportionality of size to the vulnerability to internal and external events. Many are also exposed to the risk of newness, which means that newer businesses are more vulnerable than older ones. Government-subsidised programmes and supply chain changes significantly affect the operations and ultimate survival of SMEs (Eggers, 2020).

On the other hand, this disruption may present opportunities for significant changes in consumer behaviour, balance in the marketplace and changes in the supply chains as a result of the current situation (Carvalho et al., 2020). Digital technologies can assist in seizing the window of opportunity brought about by this disruption, which has accelerated digital technology adoption by approximately 5 years to 8 weeks, even though it is most likely due to necessity (Baig et al., 2020). Due to the

strict regulations brought about by the pandemic, organisations felt the consequences of not having embraced digital transformation sooner (Butt, 2020).

1.5.3 Social media

The popularity of social media networks, such as Facebook, Instagram and X, has increased for all users, including businesses, in the ever-expanding digital era. This provides new mechanisms for interaction, collaboration and communication (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Users can engage with one another in various ways by creating content and including a variety of methods to connect such as many-to-many, one-to-one and one-to-many connections (McCann & Barlow, 2015). Social media platforms are not only used for communication and disseminating information but also for business purposes such as advertising and marketing; they are also primarily free (Ainin et al., 2015).

Online business networks provide a simple method to develop business relationships and gain access to critical external resources and information from members within the network (Pettersen, 2016). SMEs are beginning to adopt social media as an essential component of marketing strategies to improve business performance and growth (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017).

1.5.4 Use of social media as a communication tool

Based on the existing literature, social media as a marketing tool lists networking, establishing customer relationships, growth in business and gaining competitive advantage as motivating factors (Lányi et al., 2021). Barriers to the adoption of social media, including limited technical capabilities and resources and negative perceptions of usefulness, are cited as the main factors preventing adoption (Tuten & Perotti, 2019). Overall, social media has a positive impact on business profitability and/or performance and ICT channels are viewed as technically accessible and cost-effective according to research studies (Bocconcelli et al., 2017).

Facebook is the most popular social media platform for the attraction and retention of customers in the retail sector (Odoom et al., 2017). The majority of the studies on this topic were conducted in developed countries; more research from a developing country perspective is needed (Odoom et al., 2017).

According to research conducted on SMEs, numerous reasons exist for the choice of which social media platforms to select to promote a business. The online ICT medium offers growth potential that can be realised by taking advantage of the promotional and networking opportunities provided by direct connection with customers via this cost-effective communication channel (Odoom et al., 2017).

He et al. (2014) investigated the use of social media platforms by 32 small pizzerias to improve community relationships and social responsibility. Dahnil et al. (2014) investigated the factors that influence the adoption of social media marketing by SMEs. He et al. (2017) conducted a second case study survey to investigate the use of social media for business purposes in 27 small businesses in a mid-sized US city. In a similar study, Michaelidou et al. (2011) discovered that SMEs in the United Kingdom (UK) used social media with brand building as an objective. Further research determined the impact of social media usage on small businesses that had adopted it as a marketing channel (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). However, because the majority of these studies were conducted in developed countries and did not include developing countries, more research from a developing country perspective is required (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020).

Due to the rise in the accessibility of Facebook and the popularity and familiarity of the platform, high activity from consumers occurs on the platform. Tracking social media usage as a marketing tool is an advantage to research (Kemp, 2018). Social media encourages customer interaction, which is useful in the establishment of relationships, increasing brand recognition and lowering marketing costs (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019).

The South African Social Media Landscape Survey Goldstuck (2021), found that 91 per cent of 116 participating brands utilised Facebook, 88 per cent made use of X and 66 per cent accessed YouTube. According to new research findings released Goldstuck (2021), online retail in South Africa has more than doubled in just two years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's explosion in demand for home deliveries. A study conducted by World Wide Worx, according to Online Retail in South Africa 2021 and assisted by Mastercard, Standard Bank and Platinum Seed, determined that total online retail in South Africa grew by 66 per cent in 2020, bringing the total of online retail in South Africa to R30,2 billion (Goldstuck, 2021).

1.5.5 Technology acceptance model

The technology acceptance model (TAM) is an important theoretical framework which helps people understand and examine the inclination of business organisations to adopt technology solutions. Perceived usefulness (PU), along with perceived ease-of-use (PEOU), is the original model that positively influences attitudes leading to behavioural actions involving the use and embrace of diverse technologies (Davis, 1989). However, it has become apparent from further adaptations of TAM that a variety of external factors influence these very attitudes and behavioural intentions relating to the adoption/acceptance of the digital tech space. The basic principle remains unchanged – there is a positive trend towards the adoption of new technology (Dwivedi et al., 2011).

Several external elements that have a positive or negative effect on social media behavioural/usage intentions in several industries and countries make use of TAM (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). Chatterjee and Kumar Kar (2020) studied factors for social media marketing adoption and their impact on Indian businesses. The study revealed that social media marketing had a positive impact on the business (increased customers, sales, inquiries and feedback, improving customer relationships). There was however a negative attitude concerning costs and social media usage (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020).

A study conducted by Sutomo et al. (2020) revealed that facilitating conditions, information quality and trust influenced social commerce (sales via social media) in Malaysian SMEs. SMEs perceived barriers to social media as limited knowledge, skill set and expertise; high costs also had a negative impact on users' intentions to adopt social media (Kwon et al., 2021). Other researchers discovered this opportunity and implemented social media marketing strategies, which brought about an increase in sales; traditional media was more costly than social media and enhanced relationships with customers (Sutomo et al., 2020).

1.6 Research Methodology

In order to thoroughly investigate the impact of social media marketing on SMEs, a well-structured research methodology was employed. The section that follows,

highlights the framework utilised to interpret the data that was collected and analysed in order to study the impact that social media marketing has on SMEs.

1.6.1 Research design

Qualitative research design refers to the techniques used to generate words rather than numbers as data analysis and the insight gained into aspects of social life. As a result, qualitative research is regarded as a structured approach to research in which data analysis and collection are fundamentally non-numerical and founded on concepts (Bryman et al., 2017). The emphasis is on giving readers an in-depth and descriptive view of the information. The objective of qualitative research is to study the behaviour of individuals in social groups in their respective environments.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research study to achieve the objectives of the research.

1.6.2 Sampling

Owners or managers of SMEs were among the target population. SMEs are defined by the National Small Business Amendment Act of 2003, which employs maximum annual turnover thresholds by industry sector (South Africa, 2003). South African thresholds are low in comparison to developing country norms. Many SMEs in Europe and the US (those with fewer than 500 employees) are classified as large enterprises in South Africa. In South Africa, SMEs can only employ up to 200 people and have an annual turnover of no more than R64 million (South Africa, 2003).

Two sampling frames were utilised in this study. The sampling criteria were based on benchmarks that reflect the following: a) respondents should be business owners or owner-managers, as owner-managers are well-placed in terms of the overall strategic activities of SMEs and b) respondents would be required to have a social media presence and to have posted content on their product/service offering at least once a week on one social media platform – Facebook, Instagram or X – in the 30 days before the survey was conducted (Urban, 2020).

1.6.3 Ethical considerations

Four conditions must be met before a research study can be considered ethical. It is critical for a research paper to be based on the following principles to receive ethical approval:

- To participate in a research study, participants should never be or feel under duress.
- Participants should willingly consent to take part in the research study.
- A high level of honesty and transparency should be maintained at all times.
- The highest levels of privacy and confidentiality should be maintained at all times for the duration of the study (Bryman et al., 2017).

In practice, these four principles frequently overlap but special precautions were taken to ensure that the confidentiality and privacy measures in place were followed.

Ethical considerations were considered by ensuring that the privacy and confidentiality of respondents were maintained at all times. Participants should be made aware of the benefits of the study, their rights and protection measures as participants in the study. To administer the survey, an ethical protocol number was obtained as part of the university's ethical control procedure. Participants were given a consent form with a 'yes' or 'no' option on the questionnaire.

1.7 Significance of the Study

As social media is a new concept and phenomenon, particularly in emerging markets, a lack of understanding of its potential benefits prevails. Social media marketing deserves further study due to the potential benefits it encompasses as a marketing tool.

SMEs make up to 90 per cent of global businesses, therefore, they play a crucial role in the global economy. Thus, it is critical to gain an in-depth understanding of their use of social media marketing and the challenges that they may face in its use. Even though social media provides SMEs with low-cost marketing opportunities, SMEs are currently under-utilising the tool.

More frequent use of this tool should be encouraged for SMEs in emerging markets to realise the beneficial opportunities for expanding and growing their businesses. It is therefore important for SMEs to learn how to adopt social media as a marketing tool and to identify its benefits and challenges.

1.8 Outline of the Study

The first chapter encompasses an introduction and background to the study of social media marketing and SMEs. This chapter describes the problem statement and objectives. A brief overview of the methodology and ethical considerations is also provided.

The second chapter describes the extensive literature on the impact and significance of social media marketing for SMEs.

The third chapter identifies the research methodology and includes a detailed description of how the research study was carried out and the sample population that was studied.

The fourth chapter delves into how the data were interpreted and how the findings related to the research problem. Suggestions for problem-solving are also offered.

The fifth chapter concludes the study. The findings on the importance to SMEs of social media marketing and proposed recommendations are presented.

1.9 Conclusion

The term social media is a phenomenon that transformed how people communicate and interact with one another across the world. Social networking websites have gained popularity and made a significant impact on people's lives. Social networking is gaining momentum and, in turn, having an impact on businesses as a means of communication and marketing strategies. Social media influences people's views and opinions and is increasingly used as a source of information and knowledge dissemination.

Social media is growing in popularity and is being utilised for daily operations in businesses in developed countries. It, however, appears that in emerging

economies, such as South Africa, the adoption of social media has been slow when compared to developed economies.

The impact of social media marketing on SMEs is the main objective of this study. It provides a classification of the concept of social media and investigates the benefits and shortcomings of the application of social media in a business context. This research paper further examines the characteristics and evolution of social media and the major social networking sites that have emerged in the twenty-first century. As a result, it is critical to review the academic literature on the benefits and limitations of the adoption of social media by SMEs thoroughly and to identify factors that influence social media marketing adoption and usage.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

SMEs play a critical role in the economies of many countries. This is a result of the positive impact on the economic status of countries through the creation of jobs and the facilitation of regional development and innovation (Shemi & Procter, 2018). The current economic environment makes SMEs vulnerable to challenges, which are characterised by an increase in variation and uncertainty in market demand and the intense competition brought about by the globalisation process.

SMEs face financial, human and organisational resource limitations, making them extremely vulnerable in the marketplace. However, there are ways to bring about improvements to SMEs in terms of the expansion of networks in new markets, overcoming limitations, pursuing resources from external sources and developing innovations in their products. ICT has had an impact on sales performance, thus, supporting the adoption of this resource (Bocconcelli et al., 2017).

Innovations in the internet over the last two decades have played a significant role in business performance (Tajvidi & Karami, 2017). From the rapidly growing internet, two significant phenomena have emerged: social media and online search engines. In the business context, social media is a new communication channel that allows direct communication between businesses and consumers (Mansour Talal et al., 2018). Social media is useful for gaining access to current and reliable information (Tajvidi & Karami, 2017). Social media also allows for open communication channels, which can assist in a better understanding of customer needs and motivate businesses to respond quickly and effectively (Tajudeen et al., 2018).

The widespread growth in the use of social media has encouraged SMEs to achieve the objectives of marketing their products, brands or services more efficiently and to a widespread target market (Crammond et al., 2018). The number of people using social media and the variety of social media platforms grow every year. Social media is utilised in everyday life for communication and the sharing of information. This has shifted consumer behaviour and is a factor that businesses must investigate. With the advent of social media, a business's strategies and tools for interaction with customers have changed dramatically. Various social media platforms have become

a natural part of a company's marketing strategy, particularly in small and medium-sized businesses (Virtanen et al., 2017).

Overall, social media provides businesses with numerous advantages and opportunities as it assists in attracting new clientele while retaining relationships with existing ones. Improving customer collaboration and potentially speeding up innovation are two of the many benefits of social media (Shaltoni, 2017).

Marketers insist that social media channels are vital components of their marketing efforts. Businesses have started implementing social media for various marketing objectives, such as branding, research, customer relationship management, services and sales promotions. Most businesses make use of social media for branding purposes as a result of these goals. Social media marketing can have a positive effect on a business's image (Halaszovich et al., 2017).

Customers who utilise social media have access to a variety of shared information and sources, such as experiences and recommendations, from other customers (Tajvidi & Karami, 2017). Various communities, particularly SMEs, have acknowledged the existence of social media. Different functionalities can be assigned to social media. Social media functionality can be described by five categories, namely, identity, sharing, presence, conversations and relationships (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

2.2 Small and Medium-sized Enterprise Market Structure

Increasing the rate of employment, reducing poverty, distributing income and innovating are how SMEs contribute to the growth of the economy (Maneesha, 2020). To build a strong industrial sector in the economy, a strong SME sector is required. Well-run SMEs are essential for long-term economic growth (Parvin et al., 2021).

The rapidly growing economy and higher rates of profitability in developing markets provide SMEs with more opportunities to thrive in national and international markets (Yeh et al., 2021). In the South African context, SMEs encourage creativity and innovative solutions to social challenges that can assist in creating jobs, reducing inequity and contributing to overall economic growth (Tuffour et al., 2020).

Retailers can be divided into two major purchase models: physical stores and online retail stores. Although the distinction between the two is becoming increasingly blurred as omnichannel shopping becomes the new norm (Von Briel, 2018), retailers are surviving due to their advantage in meeting customer needs in contrast to their competitors (Levy & Weitz, 2012). Considering this, technology-enabled disruption has enabled consumers to make purchases at any given time and through whichever channel they prefer and retailers are adapting to the emerging retail rules imposed on them in the digital era. Retailers who do not adapt to the changing competitive landscape, such as Sears and Stuttafords in the US, might have to close their doors (Kumwenda-Mtambo & Strydom, 2017).

The use of advanced point-of-sale systems, internet access and the development of social media has changed the interaction method between customers and retailers. Technological advancements have resulted in new retail models. Traditional retailers have begun to adopt e-commerce as an additional distribution channel, whereas previously only online retailers had opened physical locations (Grewal et al., 2017).

2.3 Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the COVID Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic claimed the lives of thousands of people worldwide. As a result, many economies were severely and adversely impacted (Gorbalenya et al., 2020). Lockdowns generated a worldwide recession, affecting everyone from the richest countries to the poorest (OECD, 2020).

COVID-19 significantly impacted the physical health of people as well as the financial health of businesses around the globe. SMEs were more vulnerable than larger corporations. Their predicament was made even more difficult by factors such as the lack of financial resources and specialised skills. As a result of the pandemic, there was a rise in digital transformation, changes in customer behaviour and a management and technological knowledge gap to close (Saleh, 2021).

SMEs, as opposed to other companies, have characteristics that make them more sensitive to pandemic issues. They were unable to respond to the problems brought about by the COVID-19 situation due to a lack of financial resources and specialist skills (Bartik et al., 2020). SME solutions to the crisis are likely to be more challenging than those of large corporations due to the following characteristics: a

shortage of human resources, a lack of managerial competence (procedures, processes and instruments), a scarcity of funds and a lack of knowledge management (only tacit knowledge, nothing formalised) (Garengo et al., 2005).

Furthermore, SMEs are subject to the liability of smallness, which simply means that the smaller the company is, the more vulnerable it is to both internal and external events. Some are also exposed to the risk of newness, which means that newer businesses are more vulnerable than older ones. Furthermore, government financial assistance programmes, as well as changes in the supply chain, have a significant impact on the operations and survival of SMEs (Eggers, 2020).

On the other hand, this disruption presented opportunities. Customer behaviour, market balance and supply chains are all changing as a result of the current situation (Carvalho et al., 2020). Digital technologies can help businesses seize this window of opportunity. This crisis has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies by approximately 5 years to 8 weeks, most likely due to necessity (Baig et al., 2020). Due to this pandemic, organisations are now feeling the consequences of not having embraced digital transformation sooner (Butt, 2020).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

In building a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of social media marketing for SMEs, this research study is based on a theoretical framework that will provide an understanding into the complexities surrounding the use of social media for SMEs.

2.4.1 Theory of planned behaviour

Ajzen anticipated the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) in 1991 to investigate and anticipate the realistic usage of customers; this theory is an elaboration of the theory of reasoned action (TRA) proposed by Fishbein (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

The TPB comprises three steps. First, a person's distinctive behaviour is compelled by the individual behavioural purpose that they have set for themselves. Second, an individual's state of mind towards the behaviour, their subjective norm, and the seeming control they have over their behaviour all interact to influence the

individual's behavioural purpose. Third, these three aspects are also influenced by external factors, such as social and environmental aspects, depending on the particular fact. The development of the model laid the groundwork for further research into the motivations and behaviours of purchasers (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

One of the most significant shortcomings of the TRA is the presumption that most actions are under the control of volition (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). However, there is some evidence that supports the hypothesis of planned behaviour (Sheppard et al., 1988). When contrasted with other models, the TRA/TPB has been subjected to comprehensive application and testing, which has led to the acceptance of their capacity to predict the future (Sheppard et al., 1988). A great deal of criticism is levelled, particularly about the exclusion of many factors that can affect the behaviour of a person (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

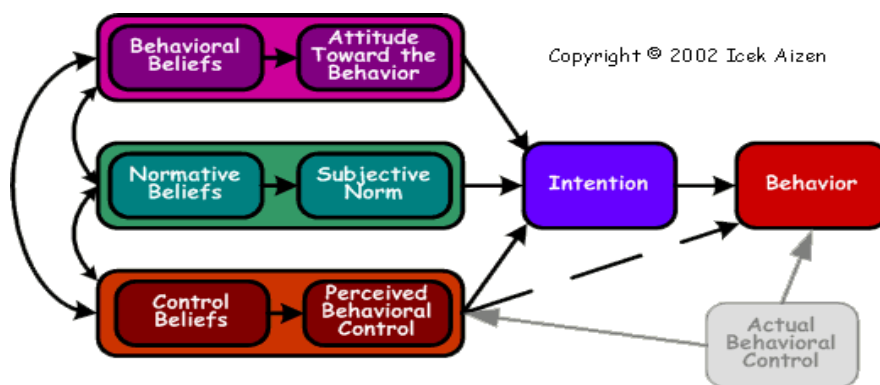


Figure 2.1 Theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, I (2011))

2.4.2 Hierarchy of effects model

The attention, interest, desire and action (AIDA) model is a model known commonly as the hierarchy of effects (HOE) model. It describes the stages in the decision to purchase or the forming process of attitudes. These stages include interest, desire, action and awareness (Lavidge & Steiner, 2000).

An additional HOE model that is widely accepted was developed by Steiner and Lavidge in 1961 (Lavidge & Steiner, 2000). The model accounts for six stages, namely, awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction and purchase. The buyer has been unaware of the brand from the beginning of the process. At the

subsequent level, the customer constructs a fundamental awareness. As a result, the customer either receives (such as via word-of-mouth or promotion) or searches for data relating to the brand, so that a sense of brand awareness is created by advertising. After the 'reasoning stage', the buyer enters the 'affective stage', when they decide whether or not they appreciate the product and make decisions based on whether they have positive or negative feelings about the brand. In the last step, the feeling stage, the prospective buyer strengthens their belief that the purchase will be convenient, which ultimately results in the formation of an intent to acquire.

Even though it is left out of the majority of HOE models, customer loyalty and advocacy often occur after the purchase stage has been completed. The connection of customers with the product or brand is unquestionably crucial for the succession and flow of the individual phases included in the decision-making process (Pettersen, 2016).

According to Peterson (2016), affect is often understood to refer to emotions and sentiments that are accompanied by some physiological component. Lazarus (1984) identified a difficulty with the fact that a person's self-reported attitude might fundamentally be an intellectual choice (cognition), rather than only an inclination-based preference. Therefore, for the sake of this discussion, emotions and excited assessments in a more generalised meaning as part of the emotional component of customer purchasing behaviour will be included.

2.4.3 Functional attitude theory

Functional attitude theory is the idea that proposes that an individual's beliefs and attitudes are significant contributors to their psychological functioning and that these elements must be strongly considered. The importance of the attributes of a product to the decisions that customers make when shopping online reveals the practicality of the item to the customer before the purchase is completed, serving as a method for guaranteeing that the item is worth the money spent on it.

On a social level, it is important that it shields customers from any potential health issues and that it has a high quality to ensure customer happiness. Therefore, attitude serves as an overall aspect that contributes towards psychological functioning, which in turn impacts the choice that is reached by customers about

whether or not to buy the goods (Hogg, 2006). Therefore, whether an attitude is correct or incorrect will influence an individual to decide on the purchase of a product.

Beliefs are extra factors that contribute to the construction of a happy attitude inside a person. The concept of attitude is connected to the concept of influencing the perception of a person to conclude the selection of a certain brand. An individual's capacity to decide in a manner that satisfies them comes in large part from their attitude towards the available options. Customers can make decisions about the value and price of a product, the ingredients and the brand name that sells the product by using the information that is provided online.

Similarly, the views and attitudes of South African customers who purchase online will be shaped by those of customers who shopped there before them. Referrals to products or services, that are widely acknowledged to be authentic and of high quality, account for the vast majority of sales made via online marketplaces. These are the factors that encourage customers to have a constructive mindset when it comes to selecting an item to purchase while they are shopping online (Hansen & Christensen, 2007).

2.5 Social Media

The definition of the term social media is as follows: a publication and communication platform that generates and sustains the interpersonal interactions of individuals through a particular channel or tool. Various social media channels and tools are available as a platform for interaction (Neti, 2011). LinkedIn, Facebook and X are some of the social networking websites that have gained popularity among people and businesses.

In the digital era, and particularly during the COVID crisis, there was a provision of new mechanisms for communication, interaction and collaboration (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Users of social platforms can participate in content creation and connect with other users in numerous ways – using one-on-one and one-to-many connections (McCann & Barlow, 2015). Social media networks are a means of communication and sharing of information and can also be utilised for marketing,

advertising and buying and selling in a business context. These networking websites have primarily no costs attached to them (Ainin et al., 2015).

Web-based technologies are used by social media platforms to create an interactive exchange and communication channel (Muhammad & Abdul, 2012). Customers can create and disseminate information, engage with other users and develop relationships by the use of such website-based platforms, that is, social media. It is common practice to use the terms social networking and social media interchangeably, although social networking may be viewed as a sub-category of social media (Bashar et al., 2012). The distribution format of the message is known as social media, while the back-and-forth contact, interaction and the establishment of connections via the use of social networking sites or social networks is referred to as social networking (Hartshorn, 2010). The top-rated social networking websites are listed as Facebook, X and LinkedIn.

A paradigm shift has occurred in the way businesses operate due to the nature of social media (Ramsaran-Fowdar & Fowdar, 2013). The dawn of personal computers, the internet and electronic commerce has significantly influenced how businesses function, how they present themselves, how their business is conducted and how work is collaborated among individuals (Bashar et al., 2012).

The practice of social media marketing consists of businesses using social media to carry out the marketing strategies of the business. This strategy enables businesses to establish new relationships, retain current relationships, facilitate online interaction, create connections with customers and create a communication channel with customers (Assaad & Gómez, 2011).

The use of social media networks has provided a new-age network-working approach, requiring less interaction time and building relationships. Depending on the objectives and interests of the network, the specific social media network can generate membership fluidity in the constituency, leading to the emergence of networks within social media platforms (Cenamor et al., 2019). Social media networking sites focusing on businesses aimed at assisting professionals and forming a network of connections are known as social media business networks (Chang et al., 2017). The establishment of business relationships and gaining

access to critical external resources/information from network members is a simple method for online businesses (Pettersen, 2016).

There is a growing number of businesses, including SMEs, that are beginning to adopt social media platforms as an essential element in their marketing strategies to improve their business profitability and growth (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017).

2.6 Use of Social Media as a Tool for Communication

According to available literature, several motivating factors are available for businesses to utilise social media marketing as a strategic tool – networking, establishing new customer relationships, growing the business and gaining a competitive advantage (Lányi et al., 2021). Constraints in resources, lack of technical skill set and negatively inclined perceptions of usefulness are listed as barriers to social media adoption (Tuten & Perotti, 2019).

Studies revealed that social media positively affected profitability in a business context and the ICT channel was viewed as cost-effective and easily accessible from a technical perspective (Bocconcelli et al., 2017). Facebook was the most popular social media platform for the attraction and retention of customers in the retail sector (Odoom et al., 2017). The majority of studies were conducted in developed countries; more research from a developing country perspective is needed (Odoom et al., 2017).

According to research conducted on SMEs, numerous reasons for the choice of social media platforms to promote themselves exist. The online ICT medium offers growth potential that can be realised by taking advantage of the promotional and networking opportunities provided by the direct connection with customers via this cost-effective communication channel (Odoom et al., 2017).

He et al. (2014) investigated the use of social media platforms by 32 small pizzerias to improve community relationships and social responsibility. Dahnil et al. (2014) investigated the factors that influence the adoption of social media marketing by SMEs. He et al. (2017) conducted a second case study survey to investigate the use of social media for business purposes by 27 small businesses in a mid-sized US city. In a similar study, Michaelidou et al. (2011) discovered that SMEs in the UK used

social media with brand building as an objective. Further research determined the impact of social media usage on small businesses that had adopted it as a marketing channel (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). However, because the majority of these studies came from developed countries and did not include developing countries, more research from a developing country perspective is required (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020).

Due to the rise in the accessibility of Facebook and the popularity and familiarity of the platform, consumers are highly active on the platform. Tracking social media usage as a marketing tool is an advantage (Kemp, 2018). Social media encourages customer interaction, which is useful in the establishment of relationships, as well as increasing brand recognition and lowering marketing costs (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019).

The South African Social Media Landscape Survey found that 91 per cent of 116 participating brands utilised Facebook, 88 per cent made use of X and 66 per cent accessed YouTube (Goldstuck, 2021). According to new research findings released, online retail in South Africa has more than doubled in just two years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's explosion in demand for home deliveries. A study conducted by World Wide Worx, according to Online Retail in South Africa 2021 and assisted by Mastercard, Standard Bank and Platinum Seed, determined that total online retail in South Africa grew by 66 per cent in 2020, bringing the total of online retail in South Africa to R30,2-billion (Goldstuck, 2021)

2.7 Technology Acceptance Model

The TAM is an important theoretical framework which helps people to understand and examine the inclination of business organisations in the adoption of technology solutions. PU, the original model, along with PEOU, positively influence attitudes leading to behavioural actions leaning towards the use and embrace of diverse technologies (Davis, 1989). However, it has become apparent from further adaptations of TAM that a variety of external factors influence these very attitudes and behavioural intentions relating to adoption acceptance within the digital tech space. The basic principle remains unchanged – there is a positive trend towards the adoption of new technology (Dwivedi et al., 2011).

The identification of several external elements that had a positive or negative effect on social media behavioural/usage intentions in some industries and countries made use of TAM (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). Chatterjee and Kumar Kar (2020) studied factors for social media marketing adoption and their impact on Indian businesses. The study revealed that social media marketing had a positive impact on the business (increased customers, sales, inquiries and feedback and improved customer relationships) from adoption. There was a negative attitude to the costs of social media usage (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020).

Studies conducted by Sutomo et al. (2020) revealed that facilitating conditions, information quality and trust influenced social commerce (sales via social media) in Malaysian SMEs. SMEs perceived barriers to social media as limited knowledge, skill set and expertise along with the high cost that had a negative impact on users' intentions to adopt social media (Kwon et al., 2021). Other researchers discovered this opportunity and implemented social media marketing strategies, which brought about an increase in sales (Sutomo et al., 2020). According to the research, traditional media, although more costly than social media, enhances relationships with customers.

2.8 Functionalities of Social Media

Seven functional elements form part of the building blocks of the Web 2.0 tool (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These elements are the basis of the impact that Web 2.0 has on businesses. The seven elements that highlight the capabilities that would be impacted are listed next:

- **Identity:** This is the level to which a user is willing to share personal information about themselves. This factor influences the capacity of the business to protect and store the privacy of the user's identity and to provide tools concerning self-promotion and personal branding.
- **Conversation:** The proportion to which users use the available technology to interact with other users which then enables the organisation to monitor and control the times at which it would be appropriate to start conversations.

- **Sharing:** The extent to which users disseminate and retrieve content and the rate of sharing determines how content is managed and assists in the identification of objects that may contain viruses.
- **Presence:** For organisations to develop and manage the context of user availability and location, users need to be able to know of the existence of others.
- **Relationship:** The ability of a business to manage its relationships within the network by the assessment of the communication patterns and intensity of the relationships is determined by the extent to which users relate to one another.
- **Reputation:** The awareness of users' perceptions of the social standing of one another on a social media platform. Reputation serves as a metric for evaluating the sentiments users have.
- **Group:** Refers to the establishment of communities of users; however, the challenge faced with that is the subjectivity of the criteria in the formation of groups (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Networked businesses gain a competitive advantage as a result of the introduction of Web 2.0. This denotes that businesses can successfully and effectively utilise social media tools for the improvement of collaboration, business processes and a two-way exchange in communication (Bradbury, 2010).

2.9 Strategic Social Media Marketing Opportunities for Businesses

Television, newspapers, radio and magazines are examples of traditional media sources that may be used for marketing; these technologies are unidirectional and static (Assaad & Gómez, 2011). In recent years, there has been a fall in the efficacy of conventional mass media marketing communications because customers now anticipate more interactive communication from businesses (Clark & Melancon, 2013).

Unlike conventional media, social media helps acquire the trust of customers by interacting with them on a deeper level than is possible with traditional media (Neti, 2011). Many academics (Anjum et al., 2012; Assaad & Gómez, 2011) agree that social networks provide businesses with the ability to engage with customers on a more personal level, which is often difficult to do via conventional channels of

communication. Additionally, two-way contact between companies and their customers is made possible through social media (Muhammad & Abdul, 2012).

The many channels of social media include social networks, blogs, websites for media sharing and websites for user evaluation (Anjum et al., 2012; Baruah, 2012). The primary social media platforms used by marketers include social networks such as Facebook (92% of marketers make use of this tool), X (84%), LinkedIn (71%), blogs (68%) and media sharing sites, such as YouTube (56%) (Clark & Melancon, 2013).

The term 'social networking' refers to the online platforms that facilitate the formation of 'virtual communities' or 'social networks' among persons who share commonalities in terms of their educational attainment and credentials, way of life, areas of interest, or pursuits (Bolotaeva & Cata, 2011). Individuals would rather spend their time interacting with their friends on social networking sites, playing games and perusing the profiles of their friends online than physically meeting with them in person (Farooq & Jan, 2012). The majority of individuals spend more than an hour every day using the internet. It is consequently possible for marketers to engage with customers via the use of social networks (Bashar et al., 2012). Facebook, X and LinkedIn are now the three most widely used social networking services (Assaad & Gómez, 2011).

Social media offers many opportunities for both consumers and organisations. On the one hand, by using social media, consumers have developed new ways to interact with brands, voice their opinions about particular brand experiences and have also been enabled to search, evaluate, choose and buy goods and services (Albors et al., 2008). Organisations, on the other hand, can invest in their social media presence and develop more targeted campaigns, communicate with customers, use the medium to drive direct sales, gain insights into how customers perceive and appreciate a brand and achieve lifetime value targets, such as customer acquisition and retention (Albors et al., 2008).

2.9.1 Advertising potential of social media marketing

There is a significant correlation between social media marketing and the potential for boosting business growth through advertising and engaging with targeted customers (Alalwan et al., 2017).

2.9.1.1 Facebook

Previously known as Facebook, Meta's revenue was over \$117 billion in 2021, up from around \$86 billion in the previous fiscal year (Statista, 2022). As a result of being the largest social network in the world, Facebook is the main platform for social media advertising and marketing, with 94 per cent of global marketers using Facebook in their marketing efforts. Most of the social network's earnings in 2020 were accounted for by advertising; the revenue was close to \$84.2 billion, while payments and other fees revenue amounted to \$1.8 billion.

Facebook has an appealing advertising platform for brands and businesses because of its massive online audience reach and excellent user engagement rates. The most popular Facebook fan sites have over 100 million followers. Photos, links and status updates are among the most popular types of material shared on Facebook.

2.9.1.2 Whatsapp

Brian Acton and Jan Koum were the founders of WhatsApp in 2009 as a cheaper alternative to expensive SMS providers (Forbes, 2014). The software is compatible with iPhones, Android phones and computers and allows users to import their contact book and send free messages to anyone who has the app installed (WhatsApp, 2022).

WhatsApp was purchased for \$19 billion by Meta, formerly Facebook, in February 2014. According to the 2014 Facebook Form 10-Q, WhatsApp produced an income of \$1.29 million in the nine months before September 30, 2014 (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2014). In February 2020, WhatsApp had two billion subscribers, making it Facebook's second-largest product behind its namesake app (WhatsApp, 2020).

2.9.1.3 *Instagram*

Instagram was started in 2010 by Michel Krieger, a software engineer, and Kevin Systrom, a computer programmer and former Google employee. This social media platform is used for sharing photos and short videos. The two versions of Instagram, the iOS and Android versions, were released in 2010 and 2012, respectively. Instagram gave birth to the pop culture phenomena of 'influencers'. Influencers are labelled a crucial demographic. The service has expanded its platform to include shopping and other marketing features to help these well-known users succeed. Instagram's revenue was \$24 billion in 2020, accounting for 36.9 per cent of Facebook's overall income (Iqbal, 2022).

2.10 Customer Relationship Management and Social Media Marketing

The use of social media by organisations and corporations to build, create and maintain social engagements with customers, results in lasting connections. International companies, implement social media to enhance client experience and customer relationship management. Consumers are more inclined to interact with brands in online applications when they produce, upload and share various types of content on social media platforms, creating a level of engagement and involvement in a more intense relationship with an organisation (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012).

The terms 'social customer' or 'creative consumer' refer to one who is actively involved in the creation and dissemination of value-added material on social media platforms. Consumers have become more involved in co-creating their interactions with businesses. Technological advancements necessitate a changed outlook on customer relationship management by academics and marketers alike (Wang & Kim, 2017).

2.11 Impact of Social Media on Small Businesses

Social networks draw companies by their rapid growth and rise in popularity which translates into commercial potential and the prospect of utilising them as marketing tools. Thus, social networks are becoming more widely used (Farooq & Jan, 2012).

The use of social media by businesses is the key to their future success and expansion. The use of social media for business goals, in particular as components of communication, marketing and recruiting strategies, is gaining a growing amount of attention among companies. The use of social networking sites has evolved into an integral part of users' routines. Not only does it give companies an extensive number of chances, but it also poses a significant obstacle for them to overcome. Applications for social media platforms are used by owners of small businesses to expand their customer base by leveraging a diverse set of tenuous connections and the significance of such relationships within a community of proprietors of other small businesses (Shabbir et al., 2016).

Small business owners must become aware that the impact of social media can be positive or negative, depending on the use of social media. Businesses will achieve favourable outcomes if users are knowledgeable about how to use social media platforms and keep up with all the constant updates on the platforms regularly. Despite this, the use of social media may have a detrimental effect on companies. If for any reason it is not possible to address unfavourable feedback on a company's goods or services, the reputation of the organisation will be harmed, which will have a negative impact on business and decreased sales will result (Bekalu et al., 2019).

In a nutshell, the use of social media makes private information accessible to the whole public. It makes suggestions from word-of-mouth, both positive and negative, visible to everyone across the globe. The reach of social media is vast and depending on what your customers say about a business, it may literally make or destroy the business. Even though the voice of social media is personal, the reach of social media is massive. Customers are given back their power via the use of social media and when they have that much of a voice, companies need to listen to them and respond appropriately (Bekalu et al., 2019).

2.12 Research Gap

The potential of small to medium-sized businesses to rapidly grow their operations has become a very real possibility with the introduction of new technologies and their subsequent availability. Tools for social media that incorporate Web 2.0 technologies were developed to enhance social interactions, accelerate business processes,

improve customer relations, foster innovation and economical pricing and provide an advantage in the selection of highly skilled staff. From an academic point of view, relatively little research has been conducted on the impact and use of social media platforms in the context of SMEs (Fu et al., 2019).

The lack of availability of academic writing manifests itself on various levels. According to Fu et al. (2019), the amount of academic research on the use of social media in business settings has been augmented. This is demonstrated generally by the fact that there is a growing body of academic research. On the other hand, the majority of these studies concentrate on more substantial businesses and there is a dearth of specific studies on the use of social media relating to SMEs. In addition, the existing research on the use of social media technologies by SMEs is limited both on an international level and from the point of view of business owners (Fu et al., 2019).

2.13 Conclusion

This empirical research study provides insight into the impact that social media has on the business practices of SMEs. This study imparts valuable information on the development of strategies for the appropriate implementation of social media. These strategies are designed to encourage business growth with appropriate usage.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the key concepts utilised to gather and analyse the data for this research study. The research design selected, the sampling strategy employed, the method used in the data collection, the methodologies applied in the analysis, the presentation of the data once it was collected and the ethical considerations for the research study are all described.

Quantitative and qualitative research are two types of study that differ in epistemology, ontology and the relationship between theory and research. Qualitative research favours induction because of constructionism and interpretivism. A qualitative research design is a method for collecting and interpreting non-numerical data in an organised manner (Bryman et al., 2017).

Qualitative research utilises narratives and linguistic symbols to illustrate and grasp real-world behaviour. Comprehension of the term "specific instances of social phenomena" , according to Gephart & Saylor (2020, p.2) enables the determination of what is meant by this behaviour to scientific researchers and ordinary people (Gephart & Saylor, 2020).

Complexities are associated with qualitative research and can be addressed by the construction of a framework that consists of three distinct layers, namely, the methods, logic and the paradigmatic layer. According to Blaikie (2010, p.227) "there is no necessary connection between research strategies and data collection and analysis methods", research methods take precedence (Gephart & Saylor, 2020).

To gain deeper insights into an individual's perception of the world, qualitative research methods are employed. Despite the number of qualitative methodologies available, they all share the characteristics of flexibility in the retention of rich meaning during the data collection and interpretation processes. The common qualitative approaches include grounded theory, ethnography, action research, phenomenological research and narrative research. Although these methodological approaches share commonalities, objectives and perspectives differ.

Qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video or audio) to gain insight into the concepts, opinions or experiences of individuals. The generation of new research ideas and an in-depth understanding of a problem are some of the reasons for the employment of a qualitative approach (Bhandari, 2020).

3.2 Research Design

The definition of a problem or research question is identified by the research design in a study. It is a concise explanation of the methods of data collection and analysis of set questions in the study. Research outcomes and the description and justifications of the decisions taken during the research process are the objectives of the research design. Therefore, designs are long-term plans that describe research activities, align the activities to research objectives and set out a method for interpreting the research findings through theories and paradigms (Gephart & Saylor, 2020).

Before the start of a research study, the research design can be prepared and shared as a confidential document (Blaikie, 2010). To achieve research objectives, the appropriate methods must be selected to address the topic or problem and logical strategies, in addition to research paradigms to identify concepts, theories and models, must be implemented. Depending on the research decisions about the scientific and non-scientific knowledge utilised in practice the outcomes will be achieved (Gephart & Saylor, 2020).

Research designs are developed before the creation of the research proposal. Research proposals require the research design to be included. The research proposal is the foundation of a formal, binding legal agreement between a researcher and a funding agency. Designs and proposals are targeted at different audiences but are mutually relevant and overlap each other significantly (Blaikie, 2010). Figure 3.1 illustrates the elements of a qualitative research design.

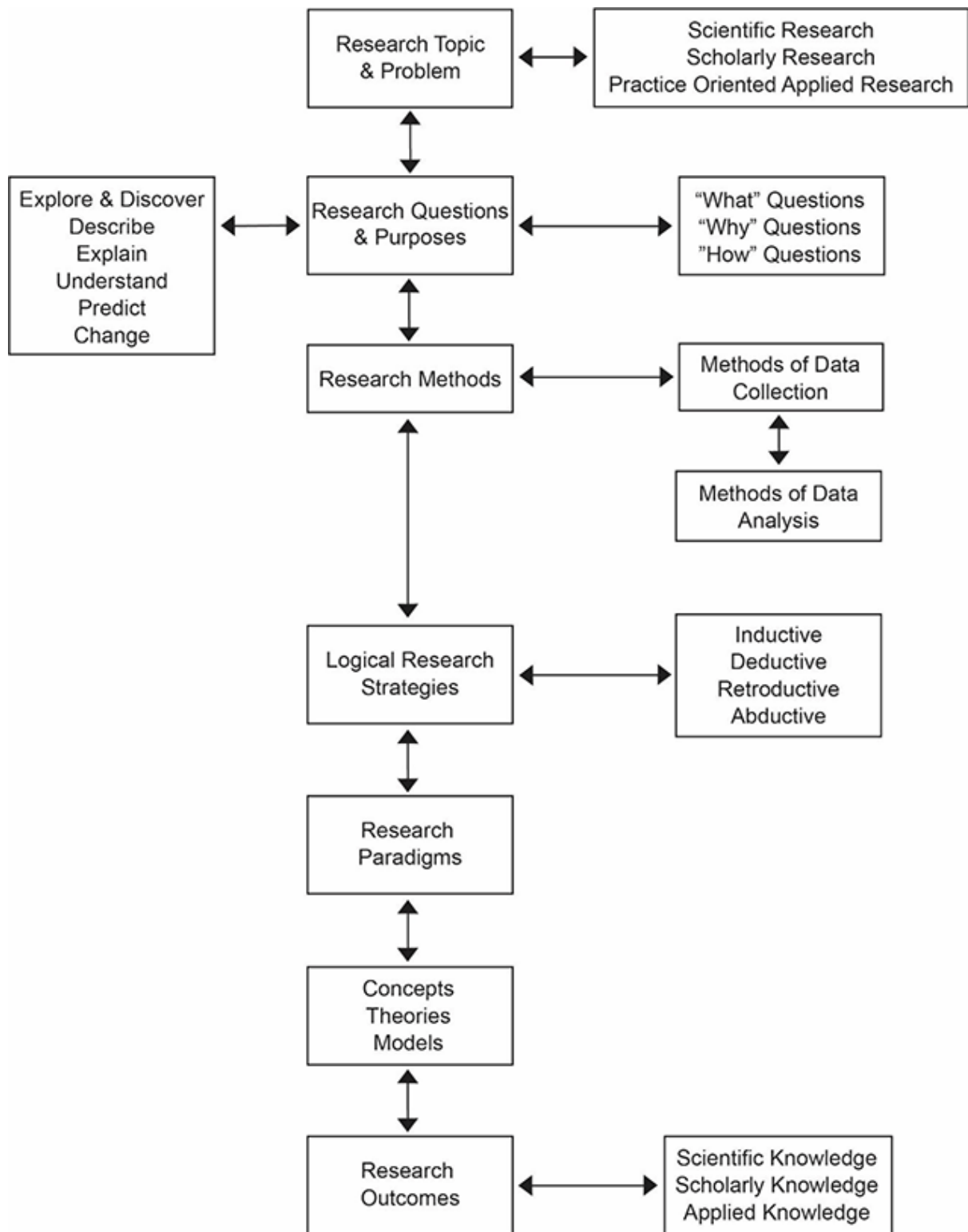


Figure 3.1 Elements of qualitative research design (Blaikie, 2010)

The research design is divided into three layers. The first layer is concerned with the data collection methods used in the research. The logical frameworks for data analysis are the focus of the second layer. The third layer is concerned with the

paradigm that is used to construct a coherent worldview from research methods and logical frameworks (Blaikie, 2010).

Qualitative research is differentiated by its objectives, which are concerned with techniques and the comprehension of some aspects of social life. These objectives produce words as opposed to numbers as data for analysis. Qualitative research is an organised methodology for data collection and analysis that emphasises non-numerical data concepts (Bryman et al., 2017).

Qualitative research consists of four traditions (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

- Postmodernism is defined as the various ways in which social reality is formed, with a particular emphasis on 'method talk'.
- Emotionalism is founded on people's personal experiences and their subjective interpretations of those events.
- Ethnomethodology is a naturalistic approach to understanding how interactions and communication produce social order.
- Naturalism is a view of social reality in its purest and most natural form

As a result, qualitative research focuses more on giving the reader detailed descriptive information. Concerning the specific environment, qualitative research aims to understand the behaviour of individuals in a social setting (Bryman et al., 2017).

Gaining an insight into an individual or group's beliefs, outlook and experiences is the ultimate objective of the qualitative research approach. This method tries to address social concerns by elucidating the 'how', 'what' and 'why' of a phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

To achieve the study objectives of this research, a qualitative research methodology was selected. The goal of this research study was to gain insight into the importance of the impact that social media marketing has on SMEs.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A non-probability sampling technique is employed in qualitative and quantitative research. In quantitative research where researchers target a group with characteristics that are representative of a larger community, the chosen technique is usually probability sampling. In the context of a qualitative research method, a non-probability sampling method is used for the recruitment of only specific groups to investigate a specific problem or topic or when the total population is either unknown or unavailable. Non-probability sampling can be classified into four categories (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013):

- Convenience sampling
 - This common qualitative sampling method occurs when a group are invited to take part in a study as they are readily available in terms of access, location, time and willingness. Convenience sampling is a quick and easy way to get the sample size one needs for one's study.
- Purposive sampling
 - Pre-determined criteria relevant to the specifications of the research question is a common sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is also referred to as judgement sampling and is utilised to generate data-rich cases for in-depth study. The selection of the participants is dependent on the required criteria of special knowledge, status or experiences to share the information researchers require. This is because participants must have the required status and experience or be known to have special knowledge, to provide the information researchers require.
- Snowball sampling method
 - Chain referral or networking sampling are alternative terms used for snowball sampling. A researcher gathers information from one or a few people and then gets connected with new participants, be it friends, relatives, co-workers or other significant contacts. This sampling technique is particularly important when the sample is representative of marginalised or stigmatised participants and is effective in indicating hidden populations that are not easily accessible to researchers using other sampling methods.

- Theoretical sampling
 - This sampling technique is predominantly used in grounded theory generation in the collection of data from participants. The initial sample is a homogeneous (small) sample and then there is a further progression to a heterogeneous (larger) sample to identify the similarities and differences among the cases selected. This sampling occurs pre- and post-data analysis, at which point previously analysed data guides the subsequent data to be collected. Because of the initial participants' ease of accessibility, they were deliberately selected for the study.

Snowball and purposive sampling techniques were chosen for this research project. A target group of customers were selected using a targeted sampling strategy. The non-probability sampling method is used in purposeful sampling. As a result, the researcher is unable to generalise the findings to the wider public (Bryman et al., 2017).

Purposive sampling seeks to select participants or cases strategically to maintain the sample population relevant to the research questions (Bryman et al., 2017). Participants in this study were selected based on their opinion of how the implementation of social media marketing would impact their purchases from an SME of which they were customers. The population selected are customers of an SME based in the Eastern Free State – ABC Stationery. ABC Stationery is a retail store selling stationery and office consumables. Ten SMEs were selected to contribute to this study. The businesses ranged in nature from attorneys, commercial farms, a hardware store and a real estate company to a plant hire company.

As a tool, a snowball sampling technique was chosen to ask interviewees to make recommendations about other potential applications to better their experience of social media marketing. The recruitment strategy chosen for this study could have resulted in selection bias (Bryman et al., 2017).

Ten small business owners and managers from the Eastern Free State participated in the study. Table 2.1 provides the profiles of the participants' businesses. To

maintain anonymity and keep identities confidential, only the nature of the businesses are listed.

Table 2.1 Profile of participants

NATURE OF BUSINESS	
1	Poultry Farm
2	Hardware Store
3	Commercial Real Estate Company
4	Pharmacy
5	Grocery Wholesaler
6	Plant Hire and Earthworks
7	Kindergarten
8	Spice and Pre-packing Shop
9	Tyre and Wheel Alignment
10	Spares Retail and Wholesale

The sample population chosen is not representative of all businesses in general but is a subset of businesses in a larger context. The potential bias introduced by using the snowballing approach was not a major concern as the objective of this research paper was to identify the impact of social media marketing on SMEs (Bryman et al., 2017).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data collection and sampling can be viewed as complementary to each other due to their inextricable link. Data is collected directly from the targeted sample population. Collected data can be classified as direct or indirect data. Direct data consists of any form of speech that can be recorded and body language, actions and interactions that are visible. Indirect data can be described as documents or photographs of an event that took place or an artistic painting of an event or experience. Indirect data is thus created by someone or something else from the start (e.g., novels, songs, paintings, poems or photographs) (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Texts, photos, videos, audio, interview transcripts, survey responses, field notes, or recordings made in natural settings can be utilised as qualitative data (Bhandari, 2020).

The most common type of qualitative data is direct data. Numerous data collection techniques can be employed singly or by a combination of methods, depending on the type of data needed. Direct data methods include interviews, observations, open-ended questionnaires, journaling (diary accounts) and 'think aloud' sessions. At the request of a researcher, a study participant can also collect direct data (for example, by keeping a personal journal or diary) and share it with the researcher.

Interpersonal contact with participants (usually an interview) or, secondarily, through the researcher's presence close to relevant events (usually observation) are used by most qualitative approaches to collect data. Contrarily, quantitative research frequently involves no interpersonal contact with participants or events (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

One or more data collection methods are used in the qualitative research approaches. The following are some of the most widely used qualitative techniques (Bhandari, 2020):

- Observations: making notes of what was seen or heard.
- Interviews: asking participants questions through face-to-face conversations and generating discussions by asking questions are what focus groups are about.
- Questionnaires: open-ended questions are distributed in the form of surveys.
- Texts, images, audio and video recordings that already exist are known as secondary research.

Interviews create a unique opportunity for a researcher to gain insight into the participant's world and provide a reflection on a specific event. To collect extensive and specific data, relationships and trust should be built. Probing for deeper insight and the clarification of research questions can be achieved during interviews that evolve into conversational encounters.

Unique data can be collected from interviews because participants' interview outcomes will always differ. Researchers and participants can achieve productive and meaningful interactions by conducting qualitative interviews (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Semi-structured interviews consist of a list of specific questions that cover the issues addressed in the research. A semi-structured interview is often

known as an interview guide, allowing the interviewee the leeway to answer questions they find appropriate. Questions not asked in the guide could be asked if the interviewer detects certain responses from the interviewee (Bryman et al., 2017).

Ten independent businesses, that are customers of the SME in the research study, were selected to provide information. The researcher contacted potential participants via phone or text message to inquire about their willingness and interest in participating in this research study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at ABC Stationery because the participants were customers of the company or via telephone and video conferencing.

3.5 Data Analysis

Emphasis on content, underlying themes, definitions and texts used to discover communication characteristics are achieved by qualitative content analysis strategy implementation (Bryman et al., 2017). Qualitative data analysis is the process of making sense of research participants' views and opinions of situations.

Corresponding patterns, themes, categories and regular similarities are also part of qualitative data analysis.

There is a contrast between qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis focuses on the repetition of specific words or themes as part of the study and content; the focal point of qualitative content analysis is the content that the researcher is studying (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Direct content analysis, a deductive method for extending or validating the theory that provides for the context of the research question, and a structured and analytical approach based on existing theory to predict relationships between variables were used in this study (Bryman et al., 2017).

3.6 Data Saturation

The benchmark for the determination and evaluation of qualitative sample sizes is defined as data saturation. Empirical studies conducted by researchers created mathematical and statistical techniques to forecast the most likely number of qualitative interviews required to reach the saturation point for a particular subject.

The existing research available has improved the understanding of sample size estimation during the initial stages of data collection.

However, there is a limitation concerning the adequacy of the saturation of data before and after data is gathered (Guest et al., 2020). The question involves how many qualitative interviews are sufficient. The solution to this topic has typically focused on identifying saturation numbers across academic disciplines over the past 50 years (Guest et al., 2006). The term 'theoretical saturation' was initially used as a definition for saturation in the context of qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The concept relates to the level at which the theoretical concept under development stabilises and was created to establish and check theoretical models which employ qualitative data. However, a large number of qualitative data studies use a broader all-encompassing inductive thematic analysis rather than the specialised grounded theory method. For illustrating a range of uses of the phrase, the term 'data saturation' has gained popularity over time. Saturation can be defined as the stage in data gathering and analysis at which extra incoming data offers little to no new information to address the research topic (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

The methodology for operationalising this definition of saturation can be identified by the base size, run length and proportion of incoming new information, or the new information threshold, which constitute the methodology for operationalising this definition of saturation.

- Base size
 - Information coming in is compared to information already gathered for determining saturation. The term 'base size' describes how the scope of data that has already been discovered as a denominator in a given data set is limited. Put another way, how many data collection events – namely, interviews – should be evaluated or analysed to determine how much information has already been gathered? As there would be no more data left to evaluate, all data-collecting events should be used as the base size, thus, inevitably achieving saturation. Most of the novel information in a qualitative dataset is usually gathered in the

early onset of the process and typically follows an asymptotic curve. A relatively sharp decline in new information occurs after just a few data collection/analysis events (Guest et al., 2017).

- Run length
 - A collection of related activities or observations that occur one after the other is referred to as a run. The run length is determined by the total number of interviews that are conducted to gather and analyse new data. The run's total number of new themes determines the saturation ratio's numerator (Guest et al., 2017).
- New information threshold
 - Once the units of analysis for the numerator and denominator have been established, the proportional computation is straightforward. This, however, is simply subjective, determining to what extent a dearth of fresh data is taken as a sign of saturation (Porte, 2013)

Data saturation can be achieved by novice researchers by gathering data that is rich in quality and quantity while conducting the study (Gerring, 2011). To establish that data saturation has been reached, one may use a data-gathering methodology that has been used in the past. In addition, one would accurately document the procedure as proof (Porte, 2013).

Conducting interviews is a method to achieve data saturation for a study's findings. Bernard (2012) recommends that researchers should accept what they can gather as he was unable to quantify the number of interviews required for a qualitative study to reach data saturation. Interview questions should be framed the same for all participants, otherwise, data saturation would be unachievable as it would become a moving objective (Guest et al., 2006).

Bernard (2012) recommends conducting interviews with participants who one would not normally consider to increase data saturation. He warned against a knowledgeable person overshadowing the data unintentionally or on purpose – known as the shaman effect.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This research paper required ethical clearance from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). The ethical clearance number – **UFS-HSD2023/0448** – was acquired.

Several ethical issues were considered during this research study. The researcher asked study participants to share vital information and their perspectives on the impact of social media marketing. Interviews involving such sensitive information had the potential to make participants feel uneasy about sharing, so it was made a priority to reassure them of the confidentiality of the interview.

At the commencement of each interview, participants were notified about the goal of the interview and were then requested to sign a written consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Participants were made aware that they had the opportunity to refuse to answer any questions or even end the interview at any given time.

Participants in this research paper were assured that their responses would be kept anonymous and strictly confidential. Responses to the interviews were solely for research purposes. Each participant's participation in the study was voluntary and they were only interviewed with their permission.

The informed consent document would ideally be distributed to potential participants through email so they can read it and return their signed copy. This allows for the best chance of success. Even if participants consent to the phone interview after reading this information, verbal consent needs to be obtained from them over the phone to make sure that they have read and fully understand the information and to enable time for any questions before the interview starts.

3.7.1 Risk-benefit ratio analysis

The probability of suffering injury is referred to as a 'risk'. The idea includes two dimensions: (1) the size or severity of the prospective harm and (2) the possibility that this harm will materialise. Based on how these two factors interact, the significance of risk is determined. As a result, both the high likelihood of a little injury,

such as short-term discomfort, and the low chance of catastrophic harm must be considered. The assessment of risk in the context of research focuses on the additional dangers subjects may encounter as a result of taking part in a study, which is frequently lower than the overall level of risks to which subjects are exposed.

The fundamental potential value of research is the generation of generalisable knowledge, that is, knowledge that is relevant beyond the study's specific participants (Coleman, 2021). After identifying the risks and benefits of a proposed study, the following steps are required to quantify them. This is made more difficult by the fact that the relevance of a certain risk or benefit is largely subjective. Individuals differ not only in their attitudes towards the prospective outcomes of research but also in their judgement of the risk-taking itself. Many people are risk-averse, which means they would rather accept a higher possible profit if it meant reducing the possibility of harm, or even risk-seekers. Similarly, people vary in their readiness to swap bad consequences for favourable ones (Troche, 2000).

Risk-benefit analysis is an important aspect of determining the ethical acceptability of a research study. The main difficulty in risk-benefit analysis stems from the fact that perceptions of hazards and potential benefits are necessarily subjective. Those entrusted with determining the ethical acceptability of research should make every attempt to include as many perspectives as possible in the process so that their conclusions do not merely reflect their own idiosyncratic beliefs (Troche, 2000).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided the reader with an overview of the research approach that was selected. The qualitative research methodology was summarised and followed by insights into the research design and sample strategy utilised and the data collection strategy. The ethical issues for the study's participants concluded this chapter. The information, that was collected through semi-structured interviews, is analysed and interpreted in Chapter 4.

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the research strategies and approaches selected to address the research objectives of the study. This chapter focuses on and discusses the research findings in the context of those objectives. The main data collection tool used was interviews with the owners/managers of ten SMEs in the Eastern Free State. Tables and themes show the data to address the primary research questions.

An overview of the participating companies and interviewees is given in the next section. The results, based on an analysis of the responses derived from the interviews conducted with the participants, are then presented and discussed.

4.2 Profile of the Participants

Ten small business owners and managers from the Eastern Free State participated in the study. Table 4.1 provides a profile of the participants' businesses.

Table 4.1 Nature of participant businesses

Business	Nature of Business
1	Agricultural Farm
2	Hardware and Building Materials
3	Commercial Real Estate
4	Pharmacy
5	Fast-moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) Wholesaler
6	Plant Hire and Earthworks
7	Kindergarten
8	Pre-packing and Spices
9	Tyre and Wheel Alignment
10	Spares Retail and Wholesale

Table 4.1 details the nature of the businesses of the participants, however, there were no limitations concerning any specific sector of the business. The 10 participants selected were from different fields and sectors of business. To

guarantee anonymity, the names of the businesses have not been disclosed. For this research study, the businesses will be identified by numbers as illustrated in the first column of Table 4.1.

4.3 Findings of Interviews

As an important part of this research methodology, the sub-sections that follow present the findings from the in-depth interviews. Gaining insight into the experiences of the participants through the interviews will shed light between the relationship between SMEs and social media marketing.

4.3.1 Business background

Business background indicates the sector in which the participants' businesses operate. This information is indicated in the second column of Table 4.1. The information presented in the second column of the table was derived from the participant responses on the nature of their business. Some examples of such responses are as follows:

We are a poultry and egg farm, supplying our produce to major chain supermarkets for over 20 years. (Business 1)

We specialise in hardware and building material. We have expanded to four store outlets at our very young age of five years in the business and are hoping to further expand in the coming years. (Business 2)

Our business is solely focused on commercial property letting. We source tenants for our commercial properties in and out of the Free State. We handle the maintenance of the buildings that our company owns and all other administration relating to our tenants and buildings. We have been in operation for roughly 10 years. (Business 3)

Our pharmacy is fairly new. We have been dispensing for the past two years. (Business 4)

4.3.2 New product enquiries and placement of orders

The following question was asked to establish what method of communication was utilised by these particular businesses: How do you currently interact or communicate with ABC Stationery when it comes to placing orders or enquiring about new products?

While some participants indicated that they utilised WhatsApp as a form of communication, others mentioned that they relied heavily on emails or telephone calls. Five of the participants mentioned that they follow ABC Stationery's Facebook page where new products are advertised but still place orders and communicate via email. Three of the participants mentioned that they preferred using the company's WhatsApp platform to communicate and view specials as the responses and communication were almost instantaneous. Two participants stated that they preferred shopping the traditional way – by coming into the retail store. The varying responses by the participants are illustrated in the following quotes:

Seeing that we are situated quite a distance away from the store, we prefer sending all our orders via email so that one of our drivers can collect the order on his way to the farm. (Business 1)

Due to the fact that our head office purchases office consumables for all the branches, it is easier for us to consolidate all the branches' orders and then send them via WhatsApp or email. We don't always get the opportunity to come into the store and physically make purchases. (Business 2)

We actually like keeping up with all the new cute stationery that gets launched now and then. We always keep a close eye on their Facebook page or even the WhatsApp status updates. We are very admin-driven so the specials on WhatsApp status updates are quite helpful. (Business 3)

Our business just needs basic everyday office items so we just prefer coming into the store and buying what we need. (Business 4)

We like to be assisted by telephone sales assistants or by sending someone to make purchases at the store. We don't really make use of any social media platforms. (Business 5)

We look forward to seeing the WhatsApp status updates and Facebook posts of ABC Stationery. WhatsApp for the win! (Business 6)

The fact that ABC Stationery is also stocking early educational resources is so convenient for us. We would never have known if it was not for social media. We mostly place orders and communicate via WhatsApp. (Business 7)

We mostly email our orders but occasionally also make use of WhatsApp. (Business 8)

I usually prefer WhatsApp to communicate; it's a faster way to communicate. (Business 9)

We use a combination of WhatsApp and emails for making purchases and communication. (Business 10)

The responses from the participants clearly indicate that social media was utilised as a form of communication and for the placement of orders as opposed to physically coming to the retail branch. Most of the participants found that WhatsApp was the fastest way to communicate and get responses.

4.3.3 Preferred method of engagement

One of the questions in the interview with participants was the following: What method of interaction (social media) or platform would best suit your needs as a client/ customer? Table 4.2 indicates the responses from the participants.

Table 4.2 Preferred method of communication between participants and ABC Stationery

Business	WhatsApp	Telephone Calls	Facebook	Email	Walk-in
Business 1				✓	

Business	WhatsApp	Telephone Calls	Facebook	Email	Walk-in
Business 2	✓			✓	
Business 3	✓		✓		
Business 4					✓
Business 5		✓			✓
Business 6	✓				
Business 7	✓		✓		
Business 8	✓			✓	
Business 9	✓				
Business 10	✓			✓	

After reviewing the responses shared by the participants, it was established that the preferred means of communication is social media, more specifically WhatsApp. The participants further indicated that they felt that communication through social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, generates a quicker response time.

4.3.4 Impact of social media platforms on business goals

Participants were questioned on their opinions of how an increased usage of social media marketing would affect their interactions with ABC Stationery. Their opinions on specific business goals are outlined in the following sub-sections.

4.3.4.1 Customer service

All the participants gave the same answer – the use of social media marketing would improve customer service at ABC Stationery.

Though we are satisfied with the means of engagement that we are currently using, which is emails or phone calls, I do believe if we made use of tools such as WhatsApp, it might make communication quicker and easier. In that way, we would get much better and quicker responses from ABC Stationery, which then obviously would greatly improve customer service. (Business 1)

100% would using social media improve customer service. We have recently also increased our usage of WhatsApp with our own customers as

well. We have found that our customers are a lot more satisfied with us as a business. (Business 2)

Yes, it would improve customer service. (Business 3)

I think that it would better the customer service. (Business 4)

Yes, for sure it would. (Business 5)

4.3.4.2 Order processing and delivery lead times

The participants in this study were further asked how they felt about social media marketing affecting the processing of orders and the delivery lead times. Table 4.3 illustrates each of the participant's responses to the above questions and also provides a brief explanation for each.

Table 4.3 Effect of social media marketing on order processing and delivery lead times

Business	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 1	Faster	Faster
	<i>Using social media obviously provides a quicker response rate to queries and then quicker finalisations of sales orders or quotations and in that way speeds up the processing of orders and then the orders being picked and packaged and delivered or even collected.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 2	Faster	Faster
	<i>A while back, we used to communicate and place orders via email but now that we are using WhatsApp to communicate with ABC Stationery. We receive our orders for all our branches much quicker than before.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 3	Faster	Faster
	<i>We do not even need to leave the office, thanks to the WhatsApp sales team at ABC Stationery. It has made everything move at such a fast pace; we love it.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 4	Faster	Faster

	<i>We do not make use of any social media platforms to communicate or place orders. It is quite helpful to make enquiries as the WhatsApp sales team responds immediately.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 5	Faster	Faster
	<i>We are very busy and have a high influx of customers daily. It is very important that our admin team is up to date and keeping up with all the business activities. The ABC Stationery sales consultants assist us very quickly via social media.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 6	Faster	Faster
	<i>Everything moves much faster when using social media platforms like WhatsApp.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 7	Faster	Faster
	<i>Our orders are always processed and delivered very fast on WhatsApp.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 8	Faster	Faster
	<i>Orders and delivery times will surely be much faster with the use of social media.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 9	Faster	Faster
	<i>We have experienced a faster turnaround in receiving our orders thanks to social media.</i>	
	Order Processing	Delivery Time
Business 10	Faster	Faster
	<i>Social media will and has improved the speed at which our orders are processed; everything works much faster than before.</i>	

All the participants unanimously agreed that the use of social media will advance the time frame in which orders are processed and received.

4.3.4.3 *New product knowledge*

The participants were questioned about whether they felt that social media marketing would help them gain product knowledge as well as learn about new products. Table 4.4 presents the responses received from the participants.

Table 4.4 Participant responses on product knowledge through social media platforms

Business	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 1	Yes	
	<i>Yes, it would help us know about new products.</i>	
Business 2	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 2	Yes	
	<i>We would learn a lot more about the office consumables we use and also when there are new items launched.</i>	
Business 3	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 3	Yes	
	<i>We sometimes do not know of the many stationery products available but with social media, we will be able to be made aware of products that we may be interested in.</i>	
Business 4	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 4	Yes	
	<i>Though I myself am not very much into social media, I do think that it could help customers learn about products that are available.</i>	
Business 5	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 5	Yes	
	<i>It would be very helpful, yes.</i>	
Business 6	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 6	Yes	
	<i>We can see what other products are available, not only what we are used to buying.</i>	
Business 7	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 7	Yes	
	<i>New products can help our offices be more organised and that would only happen if we were always learning about the products that are in the market.</i>	
Business 8	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 8	Yes	
	<i>Of course yes, I always look forward to seeing the social media adverts for new products.</i>	
Business	Helpful	Not Necessary

Business 9	Yes	
	<i>Very helpful and informative.</i>	
	Helpful	Not Necessary
Business 10	Yes	
	<i>I believe it would educate customers about the products that are available and also new ones.</i>	

The results above indicate that all participants felt that the use of social media marketing would improve customer knowledge of new products as well as the ones that were currently available. Many of them mentioned that they looked forward to learning more about the products they could use to optimise their offices and administration processes.

4.3.5 Impact of social media implementation on business relationships

The participants were questioned on their view of what impacts social media marketing would have on their relationship with their supplier, ABC Stationery.

I feel that the use of social media marketing can improve the relationship between us and ABC Stationery. If all the processes were running faster than normal, it would surely make us more productive. (Business 1)

As long as we still have the human touch or we feel like there's still a person that we can call or communicate with, we will have a positive relationship. It would be very frustrating to feel like a statistic to our suppliers. Sometimes we need to speak to a person who will understand what we are looking for. (Business 2)

The use of social media, like WhatsApp, has made a positive impact on our relationship with ABC Stationery. We feel more connected to the business because we can view the WhatsApp ads and then immediately enquire about a product if we are interested. An email feels too formal; a WhatsApp message makes it a lot easier. (Business 3)

Social media will be positive for our relationship. (Business 4)

The WhatsApp group where products are advertised is really helpful and we can always chat with the sales consultants to get more information. This, for our company, is very good. We don't have to waste time waiting for a response for things like stationery. We can carry on with our work and not be delayed for stationery or office consumables. We are happy clients! (Business 5)

The responses to the question were that all of the participants mentioned that the implementation of social media marketing and tools would have a positive influence on the relationship between them and their supplier, ABC Stationery. One of the participants did however mention that they would still prefer the human aspect of interaction and not feel irrelevant and a mere statistic to the business.

4.3.6 Presence on social media platforms

The participants were asked whether ABC Stationery should have a stronger social media presence and their reasonings were as follows:

Yes, I think that ABC Stationery should be more active on social media so we can see more of them and about them. We would feel more part of the ABC family. (Business 1)

ABC Stationery must be more present, especially on social networking websites like Facebook and Instagram. I think they will be able to reach customers not only in Ficksburg but other places too. (Business 2)

All the companies are going online and marketing themselves online. I think it's a good idea. (Business 3)

Though I prefer shopping the traditional way, I also know that the world is changing and we must also change as well. I will suggest that everyone start using social media in their businesses. (Business 4)

I think that ABC Stationery and all businesses should move over to a social media presence. We are also planning to increase our social media presence for our business. (Business 5)

ABC Stationery should increase its social media presence because it can capture a market that it still hasn't tapped into. People these days prefer shopping from the comfort of their homes so it is becoming important for all businesses to be more active on social media. (Business 6)

From the responses of the participants, it is clear that all participants felt that ABC Stationery should increase their social media presence for varying reasons.

4.3.7 Recommendations for improved engagement on social media platforms

The participants were posed the following question: In your opinion, what should your supplier work on with regards to improving the quality of interactions between you as a customer and themselves as a supplier? Table 4.5 illustrates the responses to this interview question.

Table 4.5 Recommendations for improvement of social media engagement

Business	Room for Improvement	Comment
Business 1	Yes	<i>WhatsApp is great but I think that a better Facebook presence would help. Though there is a Facebook page at the moment, it is not very interactive.</i>
Business 2	Yes	<i>A website where we can order online would really be convenient.</i>
Business 3	Yes	<i>The Facebook advertising has room to improve I think.</i>
Business 4	Yes	<i>Maybe we can see more specials advertised and not only during back to school.</i>
Business 5	Yes	<i>I do not come across any ads or posts on Facebook when I am online.</i>
Business 6	Yes	<i>ABC Stationery does not have any social media platforms other than Facebook. I think they can get other social media such as Instagram and Threads.</i>
Business 7	Yes	<i>I think the social media presence is okay for now but I think they can post more on their Facebook page.</i>
Business 8	Yes	<i>A new, updated website would be good.</i>
Business 9	Yes	<i>A catalogue on WhatsApp to make it easier to</i>

Business	Room for Improvement	Comment
		<i>view products.</i>
Business 10	Yes	<i>I think we would like to hear more from ABC's team on Facebook, not only ads. I think the new clients, who do not know the team personally, need to connect to them through more interesting posts about the business.</i>

All the participants believed that ABC Stationery could improve when it came to social media presence and marketing. Facebook was one of the areas that required improvement in terms of engagement with viewers.

4.4 Conclusion

After analysing the responses from the interviews, it is evident that customers view social media marketing to be very important for running a business. By analysing the opinions of the customers of ABC Stationery, the researcher can deduce that there has been a significant impact on businesses from the use of social media marketing and that this tool should therefore be adopted and implemented. It is also evident that businesses, such as ABC Stationery, are not operating adequately on social media platforms to optimise their business goals.

After the review of the responses, it is apparent that the business environment is changing and evolving. Digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, are gaining momentum and changing the way businesses operate. The majority of consumers are leaning towards online purchasing.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter examined the findings of this research study by connecting the research objectives, findings and theory. This chapter makes recommendations based on the study's discoveries, discusses the limitations of the study, provides suggestions for future research and concludes the study.

5.2 Recommendations for the Study

Considering the changes in technology and sociocultural trends, the significance of a digital footprint for SMEs is becoming more widely acknowledged. Through the integration of smart devices, applications and internet data resources, technology is opening possibilities for SMEs in developing and emerging economies (Ekanem & Abiade, 2018).

Small business owners should utilise social media and mobile technologies by maintaining and expanding a vast network of connections to gather information, locate resources, establish a reputation and interact with their clients (Chaffey, 2015). Based on this research study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- A social media plan should be developed. Social media marketing is essential for small businesses. This includes selecting the appropriate channels, establishing target markets and creating interesting content that aligns with company objectives and core values. This strategy optimises the impact on social media.
- Owners of small businesses should engage with their audience by responding to messages, reviews and comments. This fosters client happiness and promotes loyalty and confidence. Online audience engagement and activity are maintained by consistently publishing worthwhile and pertinent content.
- Small businesses with limited resources should use social media advertising carefully. By focusing on the right audiences and doing a thorough analysis of their advertisements, they could make the most of their marketing budget.
- Trends should be observed. Algorithms and social media platforms are subject to change. Small business owners need to stay current with the

features of and developments in social media marketing. Webinars, online communities and industry experts can assist small businesses to remain one step ahead of the competition.

- Owner-managers should be urged to use social media platforms more frequently so that they can get quick feedback on their goods or services, which will facilitate customer engagement. To expand their operations, SMEs must understand how to take advantage of their online presence and attract new clients.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This research paper's principal limitation is related to the small sample size. The owners or managers of 10 small businesses, who are clients of ABC Stationery, were interviewed. The sample size was deemed adequate due to the objectives and nature of this investigation.

Marketing on social media necessitates a wide range of abilities, including familiarity with digital tools, platforms and channels, writing proficiency, technological knowledge and an understanding of how social media material functions. It is important to comprehend social media's value as a tool and how SMEs should take advantage of it. Time restrictions are one of the reasons SMEs are reluctant to use social media efficiently.

One of the biggest issues facing SMEs is the amount of time needed to interact on social media. Managing social media, interacting with users, producing and sharing content and accomplishing social media marketing objectives can be time-consuming, particularly for SMEs with smaller staff complements.

5.4 Future Research

The following elements are recommended by the researcher:

- It is important to use larger sample sizes before making conclusions about social media marketing as smaller sample sizes may not accurately reflect the variety of available opinions.

- Supplementary research should be conducted to determine how to efficiently leverage and manage the business opportunities offered on numerous social media networks. Marketers need more knowledge and understanding about marketing their company and products on several social media platforms.
- Research may focus more extensively on the limitations encountered by SMEs implementing social media marketing for the challenges they encounter to be alleviated.

5.5 Conclusion

This research study delved into the importance of social media marketing for SMEs in the Eastern Free State. The participants perceived the importance of social media marketing as follows:

- Increased engagement with the target audience.
- Enhanced relationships with customers and businesses.
- Increased knowledge gained by customers about the products and services offered.
- Expanded customer base of business.

When social media marketing is implemented effectively, it proves to be a strong communication tool. SMEs are gradually adopting social media marketing as a communication tool, even though some businesses are resistant to the adoption of this tool. Based on the findings of this study, some SMEs are hesitant about the adoption of social media marketing. Some cited the lack of funds and time to properly embrace the platform.

To adopt social media platforms optimally, the researcher recommends that SMEs be more open to and embrace new technologies. To learn about the new technologies, SMES must gain education about the concepts from experts in the field. Knowledge in the field of social media marketing will keep SMEs updated on the ever-changing field of technology. Despite the challenges with the adoption of social media marketing tools faced by SMEs, it was still found that the positives outweigh the shortfalls of the platform from a business perspective. Social media provides SMEs with the opportunity to expand their customer base.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure A: Interview Questions

Name: _____

- 1 What does social media marketing mean to you?
- 2 In your opinion, is social media a tool that businesses can utilise to grow and expand? If so, how?
- 3 How long have you been a customer at ABC Stationery?
- 4 Do you follow their Facebook page? Or interact with them through any other platform?
- 5 How do you currently interact or communicate with ABC Stationery when it comes to placing orders or enquiring about new products?
- 6 What method of interaction (social media) or platform would best suit your needs as a client/ customer?
- 7 Do you think that interacting through social media platforms mentioned above would improve:
 - 7.1 Customer service
 - 7.2 Processing of orders
 - 7.3 Delivery times
 - 7.4 New product knowledge
- 8 Do you feel that a stronger social media presence and also interaction would positively or negatively affect your relationship with your current supplier, ABC Stationery?
- 9 Would you prefer having an increased social media interaction with your suppliers?

- 10 Do you feel that your supplier, ABC Stationery, should be more active on social media platforms? If yes, why?
- 11 In your opinion, what should your supplier work on with regards to improving the quality of interactions between you as a customer, and themselves as a supplier?