

Harnessing Social Media: Elevating Business Performance in Klang Valley's Small and Medium Enterprises

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Abstract

This paper investigates the multifaceted impact of social media on the business performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Klang Valley, Malaysia. In the digital transformation era, social media has become a key platform for businesses to communicate with their audience, but its efficacy, particularly in the SME sector, is underexplored in this region. This study investigates the impact of social media strategies involving social advertising (SMA), customer opinion awareness (SACO), and customer relations (SMCR) on social media engagement (SME) and business performance (BP) among SMEs. Findings indicate that both SMA and SACO positively influence SME, which in turn improves BP. Specifically, SMA enhances engagement through advertising, while SACO drives engagement by responding to customer opinions, with both paths positively impacting BP via SME as a mediator. In contrast, SMCR exhibits a negative direct effect on SME and an indirect effect on BP, suggesting that an exclusive focus on customer relations may detract from engagement and performance. The results underscore the importance of a balanced social media strategy that integrates advertising, customer responsiveness, and relationship management to optimize engagement and business outcomes.

Keywords: SMEs, Business Performance, Social Media, Social Media Advertising, Customer Opinion Awareness, Customer Relations

Introduction

Social media has become known as a key tool for SMEs exploring at enhancing their commercial performance. Social media platform adoption has assisted SMEs engage with prospective clients and reach a wider range of people and contributed to improve business performance. The beneficial influence of social media on SMEs' marketing strategies and overall growth has been supported by multiple sets of studies. The way SMEs engage with their target audience and promote brand visibility has recently been entirely transformed by the utilization of social media platforms (Alzougool, 2019). In a study on the impact of social

platforms on SMEs, Bedda (2022), reached a finding that social media use has significantly assisted SMEs in growing into international markets. The outcome is in alignment with preceding research conducted out by numerous nations, indicating that social media has become recognized as a critical factor in SMEs' capability to compete all over the world.

Additionally, social media not only facilitates vendors and consumers to establish relationships, but it also dynamically contributes to both the course and outcomes of SMEs' selling methods. Many studies have been conducted on the effect of social media on the sales results of SMEs, and the results consistently demonstrate a beneficial and useful influence (Mairescu et al., 2020). According to Arianty and Julita (2019), the utilization of social media platforms enables SMEs to proficiently promote their offerings, expand their target market, cultivate client connections, and enhance sales performance. SMEs can also increase their market potential and enhance their overall operational efficiency by using social media platforms, which provide them an economical and effective way to interact with prospective customers and promote their brand (Vrontis et al., 2022; Ruliana et al., 2020).

Social media usage has also assisted SMEs in raising customer satisfaction and engagement levels by giving them a forum to communicate with clients directly and resolve issues promptly. This platform can be utilized to improve products and services and make data-driven decisions (Goel & Donaldson, 2021). The utilization of social media advertising is of crucial significance with regard to the business performance of SMEs. Customers and businesses can communicate individually via personal connections created through social media platforms. This personalized engagement allows customers to order products that are customized to their individual needs. Social media is a successful strategy for influencing prospective buyers and can result in the development of new products or product transformations that directly involve participants.

The usage of social media platforms has created chances to improve operational efficiency, save expenses, and increase market potential - even though certain SMEs may have resource limitations (Marolt et al., 2022). For SME owners, it is crucial to comprehend social media's potential as a tool for improving company performance. Businesses can identify customers, communicate more effectively, and strengthen customer relations with the utilization of social media (Amanda, 2019). SMEs can establish connections and diversify their network by collaborating through social media (Macharia & Namusonge, 2021). SMEs may overcome the constraints of scarce resources and insufficient marketing knowledge by using social media to their advantage to reach a larger audience, develop brand awareness, and encourage interaction among customers. SMEs may effectively utilize social media to not only connect with prospective clients but also disseminate information about their offerings and persuade them to make decisions based on their preferences and needs (Hidavat et al., 2020; Arianty & Julita, 2019).

The SMEs have become important pillars of the Malaysian economy in the swiftly advancing digital age, making significant contributions to both creating job opportunities and the nation's gross domestic product (Smith, 2023). By transforming conventional approaches to consumer engagement and marketing, social media has become an influential instrument for organizations. Although major corporations have successfully utilized social networks, further

study is still needed to determine the extent to which social media strategies affect and benefit SMEs in Malaysia.

An area of significant research interest pertains to the correlation between social media advertising and business performance. Recent studies have demonstrated that the utilization of social media marketing strategies has an evident effect on the sales performance of SMEs in the context of Malaysia. The determination of sales performance relies heavily on crucial characteristics such as brand awareness, engagement, word-of-mouth, content sharing, and conversion (Moksin, et al., 2023). This underscores the necessity of comprehending the methods by which social media advertising impacts business outcomes, specifically within the highly competitive and diversified market of Klang Valley.

In essence, the focal point of this study pertains to the thorough comprehension and quantification of the influence produced by social media on the operational efficacy of SMEs situated in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. This includes the examination of the direct correlation between social media advertising and business outcomes, the evaluation of small and medium enterprises' knowledge and absorption of customer perspectives, and the analysis of the impact of social media on improving customer relations and, consequently, business performance.

This study explores how social media can be harnessed by SMEs in Klang Valley to elevate their business performance. This research aims to investigate the objectives that guide us in achieving the aims of the current study, among them to understand the relationship and the potential outcomes of using social media and business performance.

Effectively leveraging social media for business objectives can be a reasonable alternative to forming another platform to reach out to existing and new customers and assist SMEs in concluding relevant data that has been provided. Furthermore, it also contributes to understanding how the SME owners and managers in Klang Valley perceive social media and to what aspects social media are important to their business. In addition, the study is significant given that technology and digitalization were identified as essential factors in supporting the country's economic development, in which SMEs are expected to adopt and foster creativity and innovation. Furthermore, the study provides recommendations toward easing the SMEs' ability to use social media and develop an understanding of potential users of social media, policymakers, and the industry.

Background of Study

The growth and development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have become critical components of most national economies today, especially in the emerging economies. This is evident in the contemporary development of Klang Valley's business landscape, which now comprises a high percentage of small local entrepreneurs driving the economy. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Klang Valley's business environment was dominated by transnational businesses driving industrial and economic growth. The new colonials brought with them a new capitalistic approach to business and their operations. Since the fall of British colonization and the achievement of independence after the technical colonial period, small entrepreneurs have evolved and adapted to the many changes in Klang Valley's landscape. These entrepreneurs are often family-owned and operated, as these families are usually the

business managers and the founders (Azman & Majid, 2023; Kamarudin et al.2021). However, some have thrived, resulting in large domestic brands well entrenched in Klang Valley.

Business to consumer relationships have been completely digitalized, and even traditional big players have created online trading options for their clients to keep up with the online market. SMEs that have not adopted technology incorporated in business practice are gradually experiencing business failure as they cannot keep up with the fast-evolving technological society. Adoption of social media tools has been recognized as the future of business mainly due to advancements in technology and the changes in present consumer buying behavior patterns. Social media utilization has been acknowledged as an issue of critical importance to retain or increase business value, market size, sustainability, and business growth, particularly when the market has a high necessity for goods and services that need to be undertaken online. Consequently, this is another contributory factor that has made the experience of adopting social media by SMEs a necessary study for both academicians and practitioners in this region as a tool to create a high market size for businesses. Having provided the context of Klang Valley SMEs above, the focus then presents the background of the country and the economic contribution of SMEs. This focus provides the major and larger description thereby the interplay of the two characters of SMEs in the study region.

Significance of Study

The proposed research is expected to be of particular interest to practitioners, entrepreneurs, and policymakers, in addition to researchers in the industry and the academic community. From the researchers' practical perspective, this study may contribute to the development of methods for improving the business performance of SMEs in the context of a particular region, particularly in the Klang Valley area. It may also provide relevant findings that can be accessed and used to create strategies targeting a specific audience, thus having an impact on the regional economy. On the other hand, the proposed research's results can also be used to specifically engage customers, implement inbound marketing strategies for product returns, and suggest online branding platforms for small and medium-sized business researchers.

Social relationships and social media are widely regarded as two crucial cornerstones of brand awareness and consumer engagement that have significantly helped SMEs establish themselves in their respective industries. The problem is that this phenomenon may not be explored as an application within the corner of the study under discussion. The exploration of a study in this direction penetrated a research gap in academia. It is also essential to study, particularly in the inclusion of the Klang Valley, as this burgeoning region is frequently cited as a significant potential and the key growth engine of Malaysia's economic development. It has a substantial amount of commerce and, importantly, a critical mass of SMEs. Consequently, some end results could be suggested for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) based in the vicinity of Klang Valley.

Social media has been the game changer in many areas. The focus of discussion in this paper helps to understand the practical utility and effectiveness of using social media tools to improve business performance, specifically among the SMEs of Klang Valley. Social media tools serve as enablers of customer communication and customer engagement. The social media sites used by marketers are helping them to post images, talks, and discussions, and

get comments and feedback from the customers. The online discussions are definitely a form of market studies, reflecting what the market is saying about the product, and gathering ideas on the inputs and reactions from the market. Therefore, it is accurate to state that social media has become a facilitator of marketing tactics within this field.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

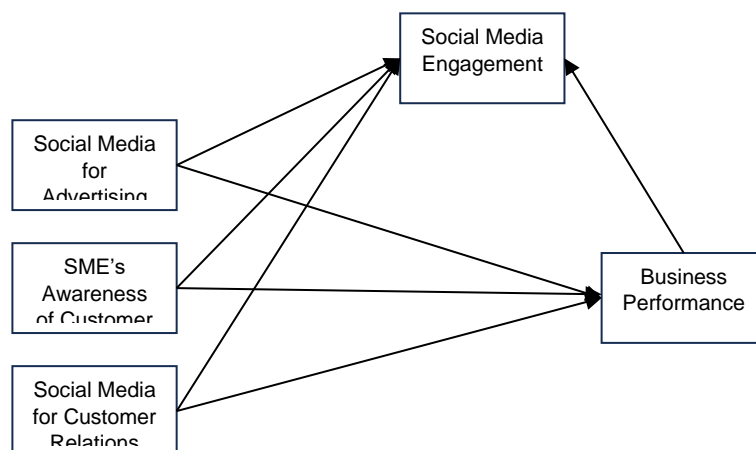


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This study comprehensively examined the Resource Based View (RBV) framework, which is derived from Barney's (1991), research, claims that organizations may achieve a competitive edge through the efficient utilization of their distinct resources and capabilities. This theory examines the connections between successful exploitation of distinct resources, such as social media, and the ability of SMEs to gain a competitive advantage, ultimately resulting in improved business performance. This is supported in a study conducted by Tan and Lee (2023), which discovered that adopting unique social media strategies enhanced Malaysian SME sales and customer relations. The aforementioned theories offer a proposed conceptual framework for comprehending and elucidating the dynamics of these connections within the context of SMEs especially in Klang Valley, Malaysia (Figure 1).

Social Media for Advertising

Shareef et al (2019), studied the impact of numerous advertisement sources on consumers' perceptions of credibility, providing useful insights into consumer attitudes towards diverse social media advertising methods. Advertisements on sites such as Facebook and Instagram are perceived with varying levels of legitimacy by customers.

Radwan et al (2021), looked at how well social advertising works to spur action. They used a variety of advertising techniques to analyse positive, negative, and coactive appeals on social media platforms and how they affect customer behavior. A positive appeal could, for instance, focus on highlighting the advantages of a good or service, whereas a negative appeal might draw attention to the drawbacks of not using it. Similar to this, Efendioglu and Durmaz (2022), used a variety of advertising tools, like carousel ads, story ads, and sponsored influencer posts, to study how Generation Y Instagram users perceived social media advertisements.

Ohajionu & Mathews (2019), offer useful insights on predicting Generation Y's buying intentions towards brands advertising on social media. SMEs in Klang Valley can use data analytics and predictive modelling techniques to comprehend and forecast the tastes and behaviors of Generation Y consumers. Equipped with this information, they may customize their social media advertising tactics to properly connect with this group, ultimately leading to increased conversion rates and company success.

H1: There is a positive relationship between social media for advertising and business performance

SMEs' Awareness on Customer Opinions

The awareness of customer opinions of social media in SMEs Malaysia, is a topic of growing interest. One study that looked into the factors impacting Facebook usage among SMEs was conducted by Sulaiman et al (2015), and it focused on the impact that social media has on the performance of SMEs. The importance of social media uses for SMEs in internal operations, marketing, customer services, and sales was also highlighted by Tajvidi & Karami (2021), who noted that these are critical areas for small and medium-sized businesses. The advantages of social media technologies for SMEs were also emphasized by Gavino et al. (2019), who noted that these technologies have an impact on customer interactions, organizational performance, and brand recognition.

Studies have also demonstrated that SMEs can use social media to improve financial performance, communication channels, business marketing strategy, and client acquisition (Amoah et al., 2021). SMEs' understanding of client viewpoints and customer interactions are also strengthened by the integration of social media into advertising, which has a substantial positive effect on business performance (Gunawardane et al., 2022). Additionally, the quality of global business contacts, comprehension of consumer opinions and preferences, brand awareness, and awareness of competition in several worldwide markets have all been connected to enhanced company performance through the usage of social media (Eid et al., 2019).

To close the digital gap in rural homestay operators' understanding and adoption of social media marketing, research on social media's potential as a marketing tool has been conducted in the Klang Valley, Malaysia (Murniati et al., 2023). Furthermore, Rani, Krishnan & Suradi, (2020), and Alias et al (2022), have emphasized the emotional quotient (EQ) features of Malay women entrepreneurs who own SMEs in the Klang Valley. This highlights the significance of emotional intelligence in the business settings. The findings indicated that social media has a major impact on SME success, including financial results, customer connections, and brand awareness. Particularly in the context of Malaysia's Klang Valley, the studies offer insightful information about how social media affects SMEs.

Additionally, Hashim, Mohammad, & Alam (2023), studied on the effects of internal and external factors on women's microbusiness performance in Malaysia highlights the significance of elements like marketing, managerial abilities, access to financing, and entrepreneurial traits—all of which can be impacted by customer opinion awareness. Other than that, the research conducted by Yap and Lock (2017), highlights the proactive approach of knowledge management as a means of enhancing a company's competitive edge and skills. It also suggests that customer opinion awareness may have an impact on a company's

competitiveness. In conclusion, brand building, customer engagement, and financial performance are all greatly improved by consumer opinion awareness, especially through social media and digital marketing. These factors all contribute to the overall success of SMEs.

H2: There is a positive relationship between SME's awareness of customer opinions and business performance

Social Media for Customer Relations

Customer relations play a crucial role in the performance of SMEs. This enables companies to identify and prioritize their best customers, those who are most profitable for the company, in order to retain them as lifelong customers for greater customer loyalty and repeat business. In addition, it helps SMEs to streamline their sales and marketing processes, improve customer satisfaction, and ultimately drive growth. With good relationships, SMEs can efficiently manage customer interactions, track leads and opportunities, and analyze customer data to make informed business decisions.

This allows different departments, such as sales, marketing, and customer service, to have access to the same information and collaborate more effectively. By having a comprehensive view of customer interactions and preferences, SMEs can personalize their marketing efforts and provide tailored solutions to meet customer needs, further enhancing the overall customer experience.

By having a better relationship with their customers, this can help SMEs to better understand their customer base and adapt their products and services to meet changing demands and preferences. (Hayewangoh, 2021). The Behrouzi & Ma'aram (2019), study highlights the importance of customer perspectives in the Klang Valley area hospitals' balanced scorecard performance indicators. This emphasizes how critical client loyalty and satisfaction are to assessing the success of a company. Afthanorhan et al (2019), also emphasize the relationship between service quality and customer happiness, showing that happy consumers enhance service performance.

Additionally, the research conducted by Latif et al (2023), highlights the significance of perceived value, corporate image, and service quality in shaping consumer satisfaction within the Klang Valley life insurance industry. All of these results highlight how important a relationship there is between SMEs and customer. The study by Wicaksono et al (2021), emphasizes how crucial it is for SMEs to succeed in satisfying client expectations through quality improvement initiatives. A study conducted by Bakar et al (2021), further highlights the importance of achieving customer expectations for service enhancement by comparing stakeholder perception and service quality on bus services in the urban transport sector in the Klang Valley. This emphasizes even more how crucial good customer relations are to the transportation industry's ability to conduct business.

H3: There is a positive relationship between social media for customer relations and business performance

Social Media Engagement

The concept of social media engagement is complex and includes several ways that users connect with material that companies or brands share on social media platforms. Likes, shares, comments, and a wider range of engagement with the brand's content are examples of this interaction, which shows how much people are interacting with the brand actively (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Social media engagement involves more than just quantitative metrics like likes or shares. It also includes qualitative aspects such as the depth and quality of conversations, as well as the emotional connections formed between the audience and the brand (Gomez, 2021). Recent studies underscore the significance of this engagement, illustrating its role as a key mediator in enhancing business performance across various sectors (Khanal et al., 2021; Moy et al., 2020).

Numerous studies show that social media participation is a vital link between social media advertising and a company's overall success (Rahman and Chatterjee, 2023). This implies that the influence of social media marketing on business outcomes can be considerably changed by the way people interact with information on social media. The literature continuously demonstrates that social media engagement plays a vital role in influencing consumer behaviors, including purchase intentions and the establishment of brand relationships (Rahman and Chatterjee, 2023; Gomez, 2021). This suggests that higher levels of interaction are probably going to encourage more favorable buying behaviors from customers as well as increased brand loyalty.

According to Ibrahim (2022), social media usage has shown to have a direct impact on a number of performance measures for businesses, such as brand image, customer satisfaction ratings, and general involvement. This emphasizes how important it is for companies to foster meaningful participation in their online brand communities in order to enhance commercial outcomes. Furthermore, scholarly investigations have also explored the function of social media involvement in distinct circumstances, including its influence on people's inclinations to make donations and their approval of product placements, demonstrating its extensive relevance in many industries (Gosal et al., 2022; Lai & Liu, 2020).

It is essential for SMEs in Klang Valley to use social media strategically. It goes beyond conventional marketing strategies, giving companies the ability to improve consumer connections, build stronger brand loyalty, and increase corporate performance. Research findings suggest that businesses should strategically and more deeply connect with social media as a crucial element of contemporary business strategies.

Relationship of Social Media Advertising and Business Performance

SMEs are able to benefit from blended learning through leveraging the information as well as the skills required to effectively apply social media advertising for promoting their products and services successfully. SME owners can learn about the different types of social media, targeting strategies, creation of content approaches, and performance statistical analysis through a combination of interactive webinars, online courses, and experiential learning. The development of the aforementioned abilities and expertise might have an instant impact on SMEs' ability to run their businesses. SMEs may succeed more effectively in reaching their target audience, boost awareness of their brands, and encourage interactions with consumers through exploring social media advertising.

Prior research has provided sufficient proof concerning the beneficial impact that social media advertising has on the profitability of businesses. Social media networks have a beneficial effect on SMEs' sales performance, according to research by Ghazwani & Alzahrani (2023), discovered that SME businesses in rural areas are interested in taking advantage of social media platforms for marketing, cooperation, and advancement. Additionally, Nurmala (2022) study emphasizes the value of social media use in entrepreneurship, particularly with regard to social capital, information access, advertising and branding, and customer service (Jadhav et al., 2023).

Aguilar et al (2022), underscored the direct impact of social media on business results by focusing on the influence of social media marketing on the brand performance of small online enterprises. Additionally, proof of the growing florists' use of social media advertising to interact with clients and advertise goods was provided (Torres et al., 2019). This suggests that social media advertising has a favorable impact on business performance. The beneficial association between social media advertising and business performance is supported by empirical data from this research. Dwi Santy et al., (2021) highlighted how social media helps firms with their advertising efforts, showing how it can improve overall business success. In a similar vein, Lupo and Stroman (2020) emphasized how small firms can embrace social media best practices to enhance their competitiveness in the market and get market intelligence. All of these studies point to the possibility of increased business success through the use of social media advertising.

H4: There is a positive relationship of between social media advertising and businessperformance

Relationship of SMEs' Awareness of Customer Opinions and Business Performance

Social media's introduction has completely changed how companies communicate with their customers. There has been interest in the literature regarding the connection between SMEs' business performance and their understanding of the customer opinions. Numerous research has provided insight into the favorable influence of customer awareness on the success of SMEs. Focusing on the customer is essential for SMEs to keep a competitive edge. It has been demonstrated that a customer-focused approach improves internal business processes, learning and growth, and financial performance, among other areas of business performance.

Abrokwah-Larbi (2023), discovered that there exists a noteworthy and affirmative correlation between customer-focus and various performance indicators, including financial performance, customer performance, internal business process performance, and learning and growth performance. This finding aligns with prior research that has consistently demonstrated the favorable influence of customer-focus on the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises. Gunawardane et al (2022), have provided evidence that the level of awareness among SMEs regarding customer opinions on social media significantly influences both customer relations and business performance. Moreover, Amoah and Jibril (2021), have substantiated that SMEs have the ability to gauge client perceptions regarding their offerings and services by utilizing social media platforms. This practice has the potential to enhance customer involvement and, consequently, positively impact business performance.

Current research indicates that there is a favorable relationship between customer bonding, trust, and commitment and the performance of SMEs (Wahyuni et al., 2022; Maharani & Yamit, 2022). Furthermore, a study conducted by Maharani and Yamit (2022) revealed that the growth of SMEs is influenced by factors such as the innovation of business models, consumer trust, and commitment. The establishment of a strong rapport with consumers might potentially yield favorable outcomes in terms of their perceptions of quality, satisfaction, retention, and loyalty. Consequently, these outcomes can subsequently lead to enhanced corporate performance.

H5: There is a positive relationship between SMEs' awareness of customer opinions and business performance

Relationship of Social Media for Customer Relations and Business Performance

The relationship between the utilization of social media for customer relationships and the overall business performance within the context of SMEs has garnered significant attention within the realm of academic research. Several academic studies have examined the effects of the adoption of social media on the performance of SMEs, yielding significant knowledge regarding the operational and strategic dimensions of employing social media for customer relations and business performance.

This is consistent with the research conducted by Alkhateeb and Abdalla (2021), who established a positive relationship between the utilization of social media platforms and the performance of SMEs. Moreover, it has been emphasized that social media platforms have the potential to strengthen the bond between customers and SMEs, facilitating personalized contact for customized product requests (Mataruka & Muzurura, 2023). The aforementioned findings provide evidence that social media platforms have the potential to positively impact on customer relations and, in turn, bolster the overall performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Dodokh and Al-Ma'Aitah (2019), sought to expand upon prior academic research about the use of social media and its influence on organizational performance. Their study placed particular emphasis on the significance of social media in the context of customer relations and service. This view is consistent with the perspective of Arianty and Julita (2019), who highlighted the distinctive ecosystem facilitated by social media platforms for SMEs. They underlined that this environment offers several advantages, including enhanced market visibility, decreased marketing expenses, heightened sales, and improved customer relationship management.

In addition, Moses et al (2019), looked at how B2B marketing strategies utilize social media to boost customer happiness, specifically in India's information and communication technology (ICT) industry. The authors highlighted how social media can help different companies work together to co-create value and provide better value to customers. All of this highlights the significance of social media in terms of improving the performance of B2B businesses and the pleasure of their customers. Furthermore, Kim & Zhan (2018), concentrated on characterizing and assessing social customer-relationship management (CRM) capacities, highlighting the necessity for marketers to create plans that prioritize fostering customer relationships via social media to increase customer involvement and interactions with the company.

H6: There is a positive relationship between social media for customer relations and business performance

Mediating of Social Media Engagement towards the relationship of Social Media for Advertising and Business Performance

Social media advertising refers to the practice of paying to place products or services on platform channels such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter (Hotkar, Garg & Sussman, 2023). These ads aim to both reach and elicit a response from target audiences and move them to act- such as clicking over to a website, buying something online (for one's company also by mail order within China) signing up for newsletters, etc.

The engagement on these platforms produces a bridge between social media advertising results and business performance outcomes. Higher levels of engagement imply that the advertising content meets the audience, causing intrigue and provoking interaction. In turn, this engagement can bring greater publicity for a company, customers who are more loyal to that company, and the like. Ultimately, the business performance index ought to give positive feedback with figures like sales revenue or customer retention rates as strong indicators of progress. Also, engagement metrics can guide businesses to assess the effectiveness of their advertising strategies and tweak them accordingly (Abbas et al., 2019). By tracking such data people can gain insight into what sorts of tastes, interests, or habits your readers have and that is going to strengthen who sees so companies can modify the type of content they provide with more targeted advertising campaigns to gain better results.

In summary, for businesses online in this digital era, the mediative level of engagement between social media advertising and business performance underscores how important it is for meaningfully interacting with audiences to drive successful outcomes.

H7: Social media engagement positively mediates the relationship between social media for advertising and business performance

Mediating of Social Media Engagement towards the Relationship of SMEs' Awareness of Customer Opinions and Business Performance

The mediating effect of engagement influences the entire process in quite a concrete way. Firstly, SMEs need to actively listen to and engage with customer opinions to gauge satisfaction levels, highlight problems that need addressing, and build on advantages (Qalati et al., 2020). Common channels through which SMEs seek feedback include various social media, comments on review websites, and wider surveys about customer satisfaction. The level of engagement refers to the depth and frequency of interactions between SMEs and their customers on these platforms. Secondly, awareness of customer opinions has a direct influence on outcomes. Positive feedback can enhance brand reputation, keep customers loyal, and drive sales (Jibril, 2019). Conversely, negative feedback points out places that need attention and stops customers who are about to leave. The result is that SMEs that are good at incorporating customer feedback into their offerings tend to outperform rivals, and indeed show impressive sustainability growth figures.

The engagement can act as a bridge between SMEs' awareness of customer opinions and business performance. Moreover, higher levels of engagement, such as active dialogue, responsiveness, and meaningful interactions with customers, can intensify the influence of customer feedback on business outcomes (de Oliveira Santini, 2020). Engaged SMEs not only collect feedback but also commence conversations. They address problems and keep customers happy and united.

In addition to this, engagement metrics like likes, comments, shares, and online reviews can help indicate customer sentiment and satisfaction levels. Businesses can analyze these metrics to look for trends, calculate the effectiveness of their customer engagement strategies, and then make decisions designed around data that will enhance business performance.

H8: Social media engagement positively mediates the relationship between SMEs' awareness of customer opinions and business performance

Mediating of Social Media Engagement towards the relationship of Social Media for Customer Relations and Business Performance

The mediating effect of engagement is vital for determining the direction of whatever platform a business has decided upon that caters to customer relations with social media. Social media has been crucially effective as a medium through which businesses can keep up customer relations. It helps them to relate with customers in person instead of over any kind of digital or electrical device (Harrigan, 2020). It provides support and is also a chance to market service packages to prospects who were earlier exposed but may not be sold on the company itself, to begin with. It even offers information about potential future events and news as forecast mentioned earlier.

The level of engagement on social media platforms as measured in terms of such criteria as the number of "likes" received for something or the number of comments made. Simply put, any action that reflects interaction -is an indicator of these interactions themselves: their richness and depth.

In this relationship, the mediating stage of engagement may serve as a catalyst. Active participation means higher levels of engagement, which indicates genuine interest and beneficial connections between enterprises and their customers (Chen, 2020). Customers who are engaged will often comment and share the experiences they have had with what they buy. They become content providers themselves, besides spreading your brand's visibility, which is an amazing help for you. What's more, engagement metrics provide businesses with valuable indications as to the effectiveness of their efforts at customer relations and give them tools to fine-tune strategy accordingly (Zollo et al., 2020). By sifting through engagement data, businesses can discern trends, customer preferences, and areas where they need to invest more effort. Then design their communication and engagement programs to conform more closely to what customers want.

H9: Social media engagement positively mediates the relationship between social media for customer relations and business performance

Relationship of Social Media Engagement and Business Performance

Social media engagement, firstly, is an indication of how interested and involved users are in a brand's content (Garanti & Kissi, 2019). The higher the level among audience members that engage with a piece of information increases the likelihood that it resonates with them—catching their attention and getting them involved. This engagement increases both the visibility of messages disseminated by the brand as well as a sense of seeing themselves in those who speak for themselves.

Social engagement secondly helps to improve brand awareness and visibility. When users engage with a brand's content, it appears on their feeds and is also seen by their connections. So, the brand's message will reach a larger audience than ever before (Tajvidi, 2021). Greater visibility means more exposure to a brand, and that in turn attracts potential customers. Social media engagement is essential to driving web traffic and leads. With good content, one will be encouraged to click through to the brand's website or landing page. There they can learn more about products and services or maybe even make a purchase and submit their contact information (Jibril et al., 2019). This traffic and leads that are generated from a brand's social media engagement supports directly business performance metrics such as website traffic, conversion rates, and sales revenue.

Moreover, social media engagement can even bring about customer loyalty and advocacy. When brands actively engage with their audience, reply promptly to comments or messages, and acknowledge user-generated content they build up trust and credibility. Loyal clients will help build a brand, share their favorable experiences with others, and contribute to repeat business or new customers in that way as they bring sustained business growth.

H10: There is a positive relationship between social media engagement and business performance

Methodology

The study utilized surveys online questionnaire and distributed to selected SMEs. Anonymity was prioritized in the data collection process to protect the privacy of the participants. Additionally, informed consent was sought from all participants, emphasizing the ethical considerations that were integrated into the research process. This study adopts convenience sampling for data collection. This non-probability sampling technique is driven by the ease of access to participants who are readily available and willing to participate in the study.

According to the Malaysia Business Licensing Portal (MyBiz, 2022), there are approximately 872,281 registered SMEs in Malaysia as of 2022. Out of this number, approximately 357,142 are in the Klang Valley area. This represents 41% of all SMEs in Malaysia. The Klang Valley stands as the region with the highest population density. Moreover, it serves as the primary location for numerous international firms and government institutions. Because of this, it is a highly desirable site for companies of all kinds, including SMEs. The population for this was chosen from 384 owners of SMEs in Klang Valley, Malaysia. This region offers the greatest likelihood of gathering robust data for this survey. A total of 386 questionnaires were distributed to registered SME owners across industry, and received 100% response rate.

The demographic data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the demographic profiles of the respondents. The SPSS analysis was critical in understanding the sample characteristics and ensuring the generalizability of the findings (Pallant, 2020). The measurement and structural models were tested using SmartPLS 4, a software widely used for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The PLS-SEM technique was chosen due to its suitability for testing complex models with latent variables, small sample sizes, and non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2022).

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1 below presents a comprehensive summary of the demographic attributes of the 386 participants in this study. Critical variables such firm size, type of business, number of employees, respondent roles, gender, age, educational attainment, years in operation, and sources of start-up capital are emphasized. This demographic data enhances comprehension of the backgrounds of the businesses and individuals involved in the research, providing essential context for result interpretation.

Table 1
Demographic data

| Variables | | n=386 |
|----------------------|--|-------|
| Size of Business | Small (Sales Turnover RM300k < RM3Million) | 269 |
| | Medium (Sales Turnover RM3Million ≤ RM20Million) | 69 |
| | Micro (Sales Turnover < RM300k) | 48 |
| Type of Business | Independent | 283 |
| | Part of Chain | 71 |
| | Franchise | 32 |
| Numbers of Employees | 5 to 29 employees | 282 |
| | Less than 5 | 58 |
| | More than 30 employees | 46 |
| Respondents | Owner/Manager | 170 |
| | Owner | 167 |
| | Manager | 49 |
| Gender | Male | 221 |
| | Female | 165 |
| Age | 30-39 years | 125 |
| | 40-49 years | 117 |
| | 20-29 years | 116 |
| | 50-59 years | 25 |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|
| | 70+ | 2 |
| | 60-69 years | 1 |
| Highest Education | Bachelor's degree | 173 |
| | Diploma/Certificate | 150 |
| | Master's degree | 37 |
| | Professional's degree | 16 |
| | SPM | 10 |
| Years of Business | Between 5 to 10 years | 193 |
| | Between 11 to 15 years | 134 |
| | Less than 5 years | 37 |
| | Between 15 to 20 years | 20 |
| | More than 20 years | 2 |
| Start-up Capital | Loan/Financing from Bank | 276 |
| | Own Money/ Saving | 64 |
| | Loan/Financing from Government | 33 |
| | Others | 13 |
| Business Sector/ Segmentation | Services | 277 |
| | Manufacturing | 46 |
| | Others | 27 |
| | Construction | 23 |
| | Agriculture | 12 |

Assessment of Measurement Model

In evaluating the measurement model, several key criteria were considered: indicator loadings, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The evaluation process began by examining the indicator loadings. For an item to be considered acceptable, its loading should exceed 0.7.

As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings exceed 0.7, indicating strong individual item reliability. The next step involved assessing the internal consistency reliability. This was done using the composite reliability metric, which should have a threshold value of at least 0.7. According to Table 2, all constructs achieved composite reliability scores above 0.7, demonstrating excellent internal consistency.

The third step was to evaluate convergent validity. This involved calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct, which should be greater than 0.5 (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). Table 1 shows that the AVE values for all constructs are above 0.5, indicating adequate convergent validity.

The final step was to assess discriminant validity. This ensures that each construct is distinct from the others. Following the recommendations by Henseler et al. (2015), discriminant validity was examined using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). Issues with discriminant validity are suggested when HTMT values are high; the threshold for constructs that are

conceptually similar is 0.9, while for distinct constructs it is 0.85. As depicted in Table 3, all HTMT values are below these threshold levels, confirming discriminant validity.

The examination of collinearity in the structural model yielded a variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1.914 and 1.305, falling below the established threshold of 5, thereby indicating satisfactory outcomes (Hair et al., 2017). To examine the presence of common-method bias, the researchers conducted a comparison of the R-squared (R²) values in the model both before and after the introduction of an unmeasured marker. The analysis revealed that the discrepancy observed was below 10%, suggesting the absence of common method bias within the dataset (Lindell & Whitney, 2001).

Table 2

Measurement Model

| Constructs | Items | Loadings | CR | AVE |
|--|--------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| Customer Opinion (SACO) | SACO1 | 0.853 | 0.849 | 0.652 |
| | SACO2 | 0.774 | | |
| | SACO3 | 0.793 | | |
| Social Media Advertising (SMA) | SMA1 | 0.82 | 0.839 | 0.568 |
| | SMA2 | 0.755 | | |
| | SMA3 | 0.778 | | |
| | SMA4 | 0.752 | | |
| Social Media for Customer Relations (SMCR) | SMCR1 | 0.862 | 0.816 | 0.601 |
| | SMCR2 | 0.703 | | |
| | SMCR3 | 0.835 | | |
| Social Media Engagement (SME) | SME1 | 0.761 | 0.889 | 0.571 |
| | SME2 | 0.738 | | |
| | SME3 | 0.767 | | |
| | SME4 | 0.735 | | |
| | SME5 | 0.772 | | |
| | SME6 | 0.759 | | |
| Business Performance (BP) | BP1 | 0.776 | 0.860 | 0.551 |
| | BP2 | 0.703 | | |
| | BP3 | 0.742 | | |
| | BP4 | 0.707 | | |
| | BP5 | 0.781 | | |
| | BP6 | 0.776 | | |

Table 3

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation for discriminant validity

| Construct | BP | SACO | SMA | SMCR | SME |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| BP | | | | | |
| SACO | 0.714 | | | | |
| SMA | 0.298 | 0.081 | | | |
| SMCR | 0.138 | 0.112 | 0.751 | | |
| SME | 0.812 | 0.669 | 0.341 | 0.082 | |

Assessment of Structural Model

To assess the hypothesis's direct and indirect effects, bootstrapping procedures with resampling for the theoretical model were used. The statistical results provide substantial evidence to support the hypothesized relationships in the research model.

Direct Path Analysis

The direct paths from various social media activities to social media engagement (SME) and business performance (BP) provide insightful findings on the roles of social media for advertising (SMA), awareness of customer opinions (SACO), and customer relations (SMCR) in influencing engagement and performance among small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Firstly, the positive effect of SMA on SME ($\beta = 0.457$, $t = 2.830$, $p = 0.005$) shows a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.269$), indicating that advertising on social media channels effectively enhances SME. The Bias-Corrected Confidence Interval (BCI) for this relationship ranges from 0.134 to 0.702 (Table 4), further reinforcing that the effect is statistically significant and unlikely to be due to random variation. This suggests that SMEs that invest in advertising through social media are likely to see increased engagement with their audience, an essential step toward improving business outcomes.

In terms of SACO, the positive relationship with SME ($\beta = 0.543$, $t = 7.469$, $p = 0.001$) is not only statistically significant but also has a substantial effect size ($f^2 = 0.520$). The BCI, ranging from 0.402 to 0.675, underscores the strength and consistency of this effect. This finding suggests that SMEs that stay aware of and responsive to customer opinions on social media can drive higher engagement levels. By actively listening to their customers and incorporating feedback into their strategies, SMEs can enhance customer interest and involvement in their social media activities.

In contrast, the direct relationship between SMCR and SME is negative ($\beta = -0.326$, $t = 2.740$, $p = 0.006$), with a BCI of -0.492 to -0.097, indicating that focusing solely on customer relations through social media may detract from overall engagement. This medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.224$) suggests that while customer relations are essential, relying on them exclusively without complementary advertising or engagement strategies may not effectively enhance SME. Additionally, the direct paths from SMA and SMCR to BP were not significant (p-values of 0.399 and 0.585, respectively), with effect sizes of 0.006 and 0.002, indicating small impacts. This shows that advertising and customer relations alone may not be sufficient to directly improve business performance, highlighting the need for a holistic social media strategy.

Mediation (Specific Indirect Path) Analysis

In terms of the mediation effects, social media engagement (SME) plays a crucial mediating role in connecting social media activities to business performance. The specific indirect path from SMA to BP through SME is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.306$, $t = 2.438$, $p = 0.015$) with a BCI of 0.076 to 0.542 (Table 4), confirming that SME serves as an effective intermediary in translating advertising efforts into business performance gains. This suggests that while advertising alone may not directly impact BP, it can lead to performance improvements when it enhances SME. SMEs should, therefore, consider designing advertising campaigns that not only promote their products or services but also actively engage users to drive meaningful performance outcomes.

SACO also shows a significant indirect effect on BP through SME ($\beta = 0.363$, $t = 6.607$, $p = 0.001$) with a BCI of 0.270 to 0.487 (Table 4), reflecting substantial mediation by SME. This result indicates that awareness of customer opinions enhances BP indirectly by increasing SME, implying that SMEs that invest in understanding and integrating customer feedback can achieve better performance. The substantial effect size ($f^2 = 0.520$) for the SACO-SME relationship further underscores the value of customer-centric strategies that foster SME as a pathway to improving BP.

On the other hand, SMCR's indirect effect on BP through SME is negative ($\beta = -0.218$, $t = 2.586$, $p = 0.010$) with a BCI of -0.359 to -0.069, suggesting that an exclusive focus on customer relations without complementary engagement strategies may detract from BP. This highlights that while customer relations are essential, they need to be managed strategically alongside advertising and engagement efforts to avoid reducing overall SME and BP.

In summary, the findings indicate that SME is a vital mediating factor that enhances the effectiveness of social media strategies on BP. While advertising and customer opinion awareness positively influence BP through engagement, customer relations alone may be insufficient. Consequently, SMEs should integrate advertising, customer opinion awareness, and customer relations in a balanced social media strategy to maximize business performance.

Table 4

| Relationship | Coefficient (β) | Std. dev | t-value | p-value | BCI LL | BCI UL | Decision | R ² | f ² | Effect size |
|-----------------------|-----------------|----------|---------|---------|--------|--------|---------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| H1: SMA -> SME | 0.457 | 0.162 | 2.830 | 0.005 | 0.134 | 0.702 | supported | 0.435 | 0.269 | Medium |
| H2: SACO -> SME | 0.543 | 0.073 | 7.469 | 0.001 | 0.402 | 0.675 | supported | | 0.520 | Substantial |
| H3: SMCR -> SME | -0.326 | 0.119 | 2.740 | 0.006 | -0.492 | -0.097 | supported | | 0.224 | Medium |
| H4:SMA ->BP | 0.075 | 0.089 | 0.844 | 0.399 | -0.083 | 0.252 | Not supported | 0.534 | 0.006 | Small |
| H5:SACO -> BP | 0.357 | 0.091 | 3.942 | 0.001 | 0.179 | 0.519 | supported | | 0.179 | Medium |
| H6:SMCR -> BP | 0.042 | 0.077 | 0.546 | 0.585 | -0.123 | 0.181 | Not supported | | 0.002 | Small |
| H10: SME -> BP | 0.669 | 0.071 | 9.359 | 0.001 | 0.513 | 0.787 | supported | | 0.808 | Substantial |
| Relationship | Coefficient (β) | Std. dev | t-value | p-value | BCI LL | BCI UL | Decision | | | |
| H7: SMA -> SME -> BP | 0.306 | 0.125 | 2.438 | 0.015 | 0.076 | 0.542 | supported | | | |
| H8: SACO -> SME -> BP | 0.363 | 0.055 | 6.607 | 0.001 | 0.270 | 0.487 | supported | | | |
| H9: SMCR -> SME -> BP | -0.218 | 0.084 | 2.586 | 0.010 | -0.359 | -0.069 | supported | | | |

Conclusion

The study concludes that social media engagement (SME) is a pivotal factor linking social media strategies to enhanced business performance (BP) among small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Social media for advertising (SMA) and awareness of customer opinions (SACO) both positively influence SME, which in turn improves BP. The significant medium effect size of SMA on SME suggests that advertising on social media platforms effectively drives engagement, providing SMEs with an indirect pathway to enhance business performance. SACO, with its substantial effect on SME, reinforces the importance of customer feedback; SMEs that actively listen to and respond to their customers’ opinions are more likely to engage effectively with their audiences, resulting in positive performance outcomes. This emphasizes the need for SMEs to integrate customer awareness into their social media strategies as a means to foster engagement.

Conversely, social media for customer relations (SMCR) showed a complex relationship with SME and BP. The negative direct relationship between SMCR and SME suggests that focusing primarily on customer relations alone may limit overall engagement. While managing customer relations is important, SMEs may need to adopt a balanced approach that combines customer relations with proactive engagement strategies such as advertising to maximize the benefits of their social media activities. This balance is essential, as the findings indicate that customer relations alone do not contribute directly to business performance, yet they play an indirect role when combined with efforts that drive engagement.

In terms of mediation, SME serves as a critical mediator that translates the positive effects of SMA and SACO into improved BP. This indicates that social media advertising and attention to customer feedback are only effective in driving business success when they contribute to enhanced engagement levels. Furthermore, the findings show that SME mediates the relationship between SMCR and BP in a negative direction, suggesting that customer relations must be strategically managed to avoid potential drawbacks on engagement and performance.

In conclusion, this study underscores that SMEs should prioritize social media engagement as a central component of their social media strategies, combining advertising, customer feedback, and customer relations in a balanced manner. By doing so, they can optimize their engagement levels, which are instrumental in achieving improved business performance. These insights provide a valuable framework for SMEs aiming to enhance their social media practices and drive better business outcomes in the digital landscape.

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