

Adoption of Social Media Marketing among Small and Medium Enterprises in Malaysian Apparel Industry

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Abstract

Digital marketing expedites marketing processes through the Internet that enables small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners to position their business virtually. Moreover, social media marketing (SMM), another form of digital marketing approach, provides a much-simplified option for SME owners to upload their advertising content with minimal assistance from external parties such as advertising agents. Despite the usefulness of SMM, it can be seen that SME owners in apparel industry are not well equipped with digital knowledge in creating effective online marketing content. In this research, SME owners are taken as the unit of observation and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is applied as the underpinning theory. This research utilises a constructive philosophy using a qualitative research method. The data were collected through multiple case studies via an in-depth interview with SME owners from the Malaysian apparel industry. The apparel industry was chosen because it has potentials in generating income for the country in the global market. Currently, Malaysia is one of the leading apparel exporters to the United States of America. Moreover, many Malaysian entrepreneurs could be more competitive in the global market through online presence. The data collected were transcribed, translated and coded before it was uploaded and analysed into Atlas.ti software.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Small and Medium Enterprises, Content Marketing, Facebook, Instagram

Introduction

Digital marketing emphasises the display of product information via online communication channels such as companies' owned websites, social media, blogs and e-mails. However, unlike the traditional marketing 7Ps product placement approach through physical presentation of their offerings at stores and outlets, digital marketing approach observes ways in which customers could access their product information and features on other various online portals besides their owned companies' website portal (Laudon, 2017; Strauss & Frost, n.d.). For instance, customers could also view fashion designers' clothes not

only from their owned websites, social media and blogs, but also on other popular portals such as www.zalora.com.my and www.fashionvalet.com. The only difference between the 7Ps and the digital marketing is that the 7Ps emphasises on physical evidence in which exchanges between retailers and customers take place such as outlets and stores; whereas the digital marketing, it emphasises virtual environment through the Internet communication and transactions (Pogorelova et al., 2016).

Social media is one of digital marketing platforms that enable fashion designers to outreach their customers in various context such as social sharing (Facebook and Instagram); short messages (Twitter); social streaming (YouTube) and social knowledge (Wikipedia) (Alford & Page, 2015). Even though social media marketing could extend quicker marketing information and communication to customers, Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) may face uncertainties when to adopt social media marketing as they are more complacent with traditional marketing practices. Among these uncertainties are online content presentation, technological adoption and experts, and customers' acceptance.

Content marketing enables SMEs to outreach their customers in a shorter period as compared to traditional marketing. Nevertheless, content marketing must fit well into various social media platforms. For instance, for SMEs that need to demonstrate as to how their batik materials are printed, then YouTube and Instagram could be appropriate platforms for the purpose in displaying their offerings through video and photos respectively. In addition, for customers that wish to read short messages about an upcoming fashion event, then Twitter (X) is the effective communication channel. Moreover, content marketing enables online engagement between SMEs and customers via online chats, reviews and observe ratings.

Literature Review

Social Media Marketing Applications

Online interactions through social media take place into various forms such as social sharing (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), social post (Twitter), social streaming (YouTube) and social knowledge (Wikipedia) (Alford & Page, 2015; Mata & Quesada, 2014). Moreover, online community through online forums and blogs that carry specific topics and issues that may be useful for SMEs in analysing the popularity of and demand for their products (Strauss & Frost, n.d.). Hence, it can be said that social media channels extend opportunities for SMEs to present their content in promoting their clothes through sharing, streaming and short postings. It could be easy and handy in managing these social media platforms (Constantinides, 2014b; Dahnil et al., 2014) with minimal trainings. Nevertheless, SMEs may not know how to utilise these platforms in the correct manner in creating customers' awareness. For instance, some viewers may just want to view short messages, therefore Twitter (now X) is more an appropriate channel as compared to Facebook that could be for more lengthy information and messages.

Social Media Opportunities for SMEs

In social media marketing environment, SMEs are able to generate their owned content in order to attract customers to their social media walls. Effective content could be displayed through text narration, graphics, animation, video and audio. Unlike traditional marketing media namely magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, billboards, radio and television

that are static, social media is dynamic as it allows online interactions between SMEs and customers through various platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for them to socialise and share information, and YouTube enables customers to stream SME clothes through online videos (Alford & Page, 2015; Mata & Quesada, 2014) that are online and real-time. Nevertheless, SME owners may not be willing to utilise social media marketing due to their limited knowledge of online content creation for marketing purposes in generating customers' awareness towards their offerings. As stated by Ala-Mutka et al (2009:20), *"there is still an untapped potential for companies to adopt Social Computing to a larger extent, but also to learn how use it productively"* (Ashworth, 2011). Lack of social media marketing creativity and technical skills could put SME owners in dilemma in figuring out the best way to extend their online marketing messages to customers.

Content Marketing

Content Marketing is not only limited to the information that are displayed on social media but also online engagement between SMEs and customers, and among customers themselves. Relevant information that are extended to customers would provide value to them. For instance, customers who are interested in contemporary fashion would visit SMEs websites that are relevant to their needs (Forrest, 2019). Thus, customers can view, interact, and observe ratings by other customers who have visited the website earlier. Therefore, these could provide them with clarity in deciding whether to consume the said fashion or otherwise. Moreover, SMEs could observe customers' behaviour through their actions such as "Like", "Share" and "Subscribe" should they like a particular fashion design. It would help these SMEs to market the relevant fashion that is highly in demand among customers and purchasers. Nevertheless, in the absence of online engagement via content marketing, SMEs may not be able to analyse the demand and popularity of their fashion among public at large.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions formulated:

1. Do the selected SMEs in Malaysian apparel industry find it easy to display their offerings through social media platforms in generating customers' awareness?
2. Do the selected SMEs in Malaysian apparel industry able to put up effective online content in generating customers' awareness?
3. Do the selected SMEs in Malaysian apparel industry require a third-party assistance in generating their online content?

Scope of Study

This is an exploratory study based on constructive philosophy. It applies qualitative research method whereby the data are collected through multiple case study. All participants are SME owners in Malaysian apparel industry who operate in the Klang Valley which also hosts many prominent, experience and young entrepreneurs. This is a cross-sectional study in which the participants were observed through their online advertising and promotional activities via social media in determining their adoption level in applying social media channels for online communication.

Method*Qualitative Research Method*

This research analyses the behaviour of selected Malaysian SMEs owners in accepting social media marketing as a marketing communication tool. It arrives at an understanding of new ideas that relates to SMEs' readiness to adopt social media marketing, and the outcomes could be introduced to those Malaysian SMEs that have yet to consider in having online presence as mentioned by Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). A direct communication through face-to-face conversation between researcher and participants is required in understanding the latter's knowledge levels, attitudes, perceptions and acceptance when deciding to adopt social media marketing could be analysed. It is achieved through close collaboration with the participants through unstructured interviews and observations of their social media activities. The qualitative research method is applied in this study as the outcomes from this research could be vague and unclear due to the selected Malaysian SMEs' unawareness of the importance of social media marketing platform for marketing purposes.

Results and Discussion*Analysis of the Results*

The replies show that five out of six SME owners agreed that generating own content on social media such as Facebook and Instagram are easy. The five SME owners have put up a lot of photos with simple product narrations in supporting their online advertising on social media. In addition, one owner had also put-up photos on her daily activities for her customers' viewing.

Despite the simplicity in generating own content on social media, two SME owners did not utilise it at the fullest. One of two SME owners is faced with an issue of developing effective online content. He finds that not many customers are viewing his Facebook as the number of "Like" is so few. According to the owner, one post could only gain approximately around fifteen "Like". He acknowledges that he is lacking in skills in creating and developing online content, in which his narrations are more on technicalities in batik design that are understood by fashion and batik designers. Hence, he needs to put up more marketing messages that could describe his batik and clothes that could be absorbed by customers at large. In the same situation, another SME owner has appointed an external online developer to develop and produce its online content on Facebook and blog. This is due to her lack in creativity in producing effective online presentation in generating customers' interests on her offerings through social media platforms.

Nevertheless, it is found that social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram are popular among customers, and as well as the selected SMEs when viewing and advertising products virtually. This is due to their handiness and simplicity in uploading content by SMEs without much effort. Moreover, they are also popular social media platforms among customers.

Conclusion

Interesting photos and simple write-ups that are uploaded on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram may attract online customers to engage with SMEs through their feedbacks, product reviews and ratings, and sharing with their other online peers. This

research focuses on the selected SMEs that have been in apparel business for more than five years. It is suggested that future research could select SMEs that operate between two to fifteen years as their participants or respondents. This is due to the fact that there are some digital gaps between these entrepreneurs as participants or respondents as they could be a combination of Generation X (GEN X) and Gen Y, or even Generation Z (GEN Z) in which are more of IT savvy, and have been categorised as “digital native” (Dervojeda, Verzijl, Nagtegaal, Lengton, & Rouwmaat, 2014; Metropolitan & Metropolitan, 2019). These groups may perceive social media marketing adoption from different perspectives and context.

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