

The Mediating Effect of Customer Orientation Marketing in the Relationship between Social Media Usage and Organizational Performance among Travel Agencies in UAE

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Abstract

This research aims to study the effect of customer orientation marketing in the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), specifically in tourism industry. Other main objectives of this research are to investigate the level of customer orientation marketing among travel agencies in the UAE. To identify the level of organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE, to determine the relationship between social media usage and customer orientation marketing among travel agencies in the UAE. To determine the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE. To determine the relationship between customer orientation marketing and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE. Lastly, to investigate the mediating effect of customer orientation marketing in the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE. This study will be conducted in seven Emirates of the United Arab Emirates. The total population of the study is 320 manager travel agencies. The sampling size of 175 travel agencies that consist of managers of marketing department, heads of departments or those responsible for information technology working in travel agencies. A set of questionnaires is used e for the data collection. Collected data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential analysis. SEM will be utilized to analyze the mediating effect of the customer orientation. The study will provide insights about how social media trending could benefits in enhancing tourism industry in UAE.

Keywords: Social Media Usage, Performance, Travel Agencies, UAE

Introduction

The tourism industry plays a crucial role in the UAE's economy. In 2016, it contributed AED 68.5 billion (USD 18.7 billion), or 5.2% of the UAE's GDP, and is expected to grow by 5.1% annually, reaching AED 116.1 billion (USD 31.6 billion) by 2027. Key players like Dnata and Arabian Adventures offer authentic Arabian experiences and must adopt competitive strategies to thrive in the market.

The demand for tourism services varies globally, and the availability of alternative products has prompted businesses to use technology and expand their customer reach (Vij, 2017). Social media marketing has become essential for building customer and brand loyalty (Yfantidou et al., 2017), especially as internet access increases, making it easier for companies to promote their services.

The rise of social media since the 1990s has revolutionized communication, connecting companies and consumers without physical boundaries (Campbell, Anitsal & Anitsal, 2013). Social media marketing has become integral to many companies' strategies, offering advantages such as rapid user growth and ease of access (Zhou & Wang, 2014). Compared to traditional advertising, social media allows businesses to engage directly with customers, enhancing brand interaction and loyalty (Gros, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the UAE, SMEs represent over 94% of all registered companies and 86% of the private-sector workforce (Maureen, 2018). These enterprises are classified by size based on employee numbers and annual turnover, with small businesses in trading, manufacturing, and services typically having fewer employees and lower revenue thresholds. In 2019, SMEs contributed 42% to Dubai's GDP (GOV UAE, 2019), underscoring their importance to the economy. The tourism industry, fueled by social media marketing and supported by a thriving SME sector, is key to the UAE's economic growth and competitiveness.

Problem Statement

For tourism industry, which highly depends on its ability to market and create awareness on its destinations and attractions, social media represents a major opportunity for growth yet it is important for players in the segment to apply the best approaches and be aware of emerging trends to ensure their efforts are effective (Kolb, 2018). Some of the challenges that emerge from the use of social media and digital marketing related to the ability of companies to measure the impact of the platforms on their financial performance. Also, the SME's have more difficult to monetize assets for future expansions and hard to get funding for SME businesses in tourism and hospitality (PWC, 2018).

With the fast growth of social media and digital technologies and platforms, businesses cannot ignore the changing trends in marketing and advertising. The ability of social media and digital marketing to target and define the population that an entity seeks to reach makes the new approaches of marketing highly attractive and unavoidable (Del Vecchio et al., 2018). The fast growth of the social media and internet use and access means that it will continue to play a major role as not just an alternative marketing avenue, but also one that will gradually become the dominant marketing platform.

While emerging technologies have made it, easier for advertisers to track the reach of their ads, its impact on their performance is a grey area (Kolb, 2018). Additionally, the ever-

changing and emerging strategies and elements relating to social media and digital marketing mean that it is easy for advertisers to find themselves applying outdated and even ineffective approaches to social media and digital marketing.

The study envisions that social media marketing will play a major role in the tourism and travel industry of the United Arab Emirates. As a country that seeks to shift its economy from oil to service, marketing and popularizing tourism is a major area of interest. However, the country face threats for its local tourism industry due to the countries that have shared goals of shifting from oil-dependent to service-oriented economies Al-Badi, & Tarhini (2017). The UAE must ensure that it understands the best practices that exist or are emerging in its application of social media. There seems to be a very little study done on social media usage as major marketing platforms in the UAE (UAE Social Media Usage Statistics, 2021). Furthermore, very little, if any, has been done relating to the effect of customer orientation marketing in the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE.

Amid this pandemic, the requirement of the people has been changed due to economic decline. People are now more interested towards the products that are important and are not looking forward to any luxury or travelling as the unemployment has increased and the people have got limited with their spending. On the other hand, UAE tourism is likely to face challenges due to increase in the global macroeconomic issues which largely includes aspects such as valuations in the currency, falling prices of the oil which largely increasing its pressure on tourist spending and in turn on the international as well as the local tourist industry. It is essential for the government to come up with some of the essential strategies and the intervention so that they bring change in revenue earning and profits in the tourism industry in a significant manner.

A comprehensive literature review highlights the growing body of research on social media's impact on business capabilities and performance, with notable studies by Mohammed hussen & Abdulnasir (2020) on business capabilities, Dwivedi et al. (2021) on B2B adoption and impact, and Tiwary et al. (2021) on B2B marketing. While social media's potential to enhance organizational practices is widely recognized (Wharton, 2019), empirical research, especially in workplace settings, remains limited (Wilson, 2019). Challenges in UAE tourism agencies, including financial issues, workforce compatibility, and language barriers, hinder social media adoption (Clark, 2019). Moreover, studies on enterprise social media's role in knowledge management and communication efficiency (Behringer et al., 2017; Korzynski, 2014) highlight its benefits, yet marketers are still slow to recognize its full potential to drive business opportunities (Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Despite the promise of social media technology (SMT) in improving business performance, particularly in customer orientation marketing (Monika, 2022), empirical research on its impact on organizational performance is scarce, especially in developing countries like the UAE (Adams, 2019). Studies also emphasize the lack of focus on the mediation role of customer orientation in social media transformations (Hamze & Murthy, 2022). Finally, tourism sector research points to missed opportunities in leveraging social media for policy and management, with limited engagement from tourism operators (Sanaz & Alipour, 2021; Seshadri et al., 2023).

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to investigate the mediating effect of customer orientation on the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE.

1. To identify the level of social media usage among travel agencies in the UAE.
2. Investigate the level of customer orientation marketing among travel agencies in the UAE.
3. To investigate the level of organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE.
4. To determine the relationship between social media usage and customer orientation marketing travel agencies in the UAE.
5. To determine the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE.
6. To determine the relationship between customer orientation marketing and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE.
7. To investigate the mediating effect of customer orientation marketing in the relationship between social media usage and organizational performance among travel agencies in the UAE.

Literature Review

Travel agencies worldwide rely heavily on their branding and marketing to attract customers. A strong brand for a travel agent is built on the availability of memorable experiences shared by past travelers and the company's reputation for reliability in organizing seamless travel experiences. Travelers seek agents they can trust to not only meet their needs but exceed expectations. To establish credibility and differentiate from competitors, travel agents often leverage feedback from satisfied clients, building a portfolio that showcases their reliability. Additionally, word-of-mouth recommendations are crucial for attracting new clients, emphasizing the importance of providing reliable and convenient travel services.

Digital marketing, a widely used strategy for promoting goods and services, reaches consumers through various digital channels. It encompasses a range of promotional techniques aimed at connecting with consumers online. The advent of information technology and the internet has significantly enhanced traditional marketing methods, extending their reach and effectiveness (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). Digital marketing incorporates various technology-driven trends, such as networking, automation tools, and communication platforms, and includes both online and offline methods of promotion.

The Emergence of Social Media

Facebook remains the largest social media platform, with over 2.85 billion active users. It also owns major platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger, and LinkedIn, with more than 3.51 billion monthly users across its core family of products ("Most used social media 2021 | Statista", 2021).

The rise of social media has transformed business operations, particularly in marketing (Gordon et al., 2019). For travel and tour companies, social media provides an effective platform to market and advertise their services. However, the challenge for these

businesses is not just attracting clients but convincing them that customer satisfaction is at the heart of their operations.

Emergence of Social Media Marketing

David Benady (2014) noted that technology has dramatically transformed the marketing landscape, intensifying competition. As information technology advances, it offers companies new opportunities to enhance their marketing strategies and reach customers more effectively (Vij, 2017). The use of virtual marketing methods has proven beneficial, reducing traditional marketing expenses while increasing impact. To remain competitive, firms are investing significant time and resources in leveraging technology to establish strong, future-proof marketing channels.

Social Media Marketing and SMEs

Eid and El-Gohar (2013) highlighted that social media marketing has become a strategic tool for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), offering an affordable and effective way to expand their customer base. For companies with limited budgets, social media provides a platform to attract customers through special offers and discounts, a tactic difficult to implement with traditional media channels. The targeted approach of social media marketing also helps reduce marketing costs, providing SMEs with a valuable, cost-effective tool to directly engage with their audience.

Social Media Usage

Social media has become one of the most popular online activities across all age groups, including teenagers, business professionals, and older adults. The rise of smartphones, which are compact and easy to use, has significantly contributed to the growth of social media profiles, with over 2.7 billion users reported in 2021. This number is expected to continue increasing, fueled by the flexibility of work practices and the growing demand for mobile-friendly platforms. Social media companies have responded by optimizing platforms for better content relevance, particularly in video and photo sharing. This fluidity in application design and data integration provides the tourism sector with opportunities to enhance customer engagement and explore new marketing avenues.

Social Media for Marketing

Social media marketing leverages conversion theory to influence users and alter perceptions. Integrated with social exchange theory, it helps businesses reach a wide audience and achieve desired outcomes (Zarella, 2010). Platforms like blogs, microblogs, social networks, and forums offer various marketing opportunities (Zarella, 2010). According to Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019), businesses must effectively use social media to drive traffic to their sites. Social media marketing includes both ongoing strategies and campaigns, with cross-platform interaction enhancing audience engagement (Zarella, 2010).

Social Media for Customer Relations & Services

Customers increasingly use social media to stay updated on products and promotions (Gashi & Ahmeti, 2021). Social media also serves as a real-time service channel, enabling direct interaction with businesses. While Scott (2009) warns of the double-edged nature of the internet, Elena (2016) emphasizes that effective marketing builds close relationships

by understanding customer preferences. Social media fosters engagement, boosts brand exposure, and provides insights that strengthen trust and loyalty (Rishi & Bandyopadhyay, 2018).

Social Media for Information Accessibility

Social media enhances information accessibility, but businesses must ensure the shared content is relevant and valuable (Tajudeen et al., 2016). With advanced analytics, companies can assess campaign impact and improve accessibility for both current and new customers (Elena, 2016). Third-party interactions, such as blogs, further facilitate trust and influence customer perceptions (Tajudeen et al., 2016).

Social Media for Creating Opportunity

Social media creates new opportunities for businesses, particularly in the travel industry, to engage with customers and shift traditional power dynamics. High traffic on platforms offers valuable insights into target audiences and brand intelligence, helping businesses refine marketing strategies and enhance customer engagement (Khan & Jan, 2019; Cai, 2009).

Social Media for Understanding Customers

In the travel sector, customer service is vital. Social media provides businesses with insights into customer preferences, enabling tailored marketing efforts (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018). Feedback helps refine customer service strategies and ensures high-value experiences (Cray, 2012). By personalizing interactions, businesses can better meet customer needs and build trust (Bolotaeva & Cata, 2011).

Customer Orientation in Marketing

Success depends on prioritizing customer needs, offering quality products, and fostering engagement. A customer-focused strategy, centered on satisfaction rather than profit, involves understanding customer preferences and incorporating them into product development.

Organizational Performance

Organizational performance measures how well a company achieves its financial and market goals (Li et al., 2006). Key factors include leadership, efficiency, and innovation (Haworth, 2007). It involves transforming inputs into outputs, with a focus on cost, efficiency, and effectiveness (Chen, 2002). Performance is often evaluated in terms of financial outcomes, market share, and shareholder return (Richard, 2009).

Financial Performance

In the travel industry, financial performance is key to maximizing stakeholder value. Managing liquidity and profitability ensures firms can fund operations like marketing and social media (Carton & Hofer, 2006; Cray, 2012). Key indicators include return on investment and sales growth.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is crucial in the competitive travel sector. Retaining customers is more costly than acquiring new ones (Kaufmann & Panni, 2013). Loyalty programs help secure

profits, improve customer satisfaction, and encourage positive social media word-of-mouth, strengthening the company's market position (Bolotaeva & Cata, 2011).

Underpinning Theory

The use of social media in marketing decision-making is grounded in several theoretical frameworks, with key implications for how businesses communicate with potential customers. One critical theory is social exchange theory, which emphasizes the importance of trust and commitment in building relationships that drive marketing decisions (Donaldson & O'Toole, 2007). In the digital age, the ease of information sharing requires marketing strategies to focus on voluntary exchanges, fostering reciprocity through customer engagement and service acquisition (Rishi & Bandyopandhyay, 2018). This dynamic, customer-driven approach highlights the evolving role of social media in modern marketing.

Research Methodology

This study aims to explore the use of social media within the UAE tourism industry. The methodology section outlines several documented benefits of social media for businesses, including enhanced brand visibility, word-of-mouth promotion, increased sales, and improved information sharing within organizational contexts. Additionally, social media facilitates social support for consumers, fostering trust and reinforcing shared values. These advantages are leveraged by companies to create positive impacts on their brand perception and customer engagement, ultimately contributing to their market success.

Sample Size

According to Creswell (2017), a sample refers to a subset of the target population from which a researcher draws inferences about the larger group. In this study, the total population is 320, and the sample size of 175 is determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) requires a sufficiently large sample to ensure reliable inferences. Boomsma (1982, 1985) emphasizes that small sample sizes are inadequate for generalizing results. As a general rule, SEM requires a minimum sample size of 100–200. Based on this, a sample size of 175 is selected for the study.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique refers to the method used to select participants from the population. For this study, a **random sampling** approach is chosen, which is widely regarded as one of the most effective and efficient methods for data collection. This technique ensures that every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected, enhancing the representativeness of the sample. Over time, random sampling has become increasingly popular for its ability to provide diverse and unbiased data. In this study, a **proportionate sampling** method will be used, meaning 175 respondents will be selected proportionally from the total population of 320. This ensures a balanced representation of the target population in the sample.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study aims to address the research questions outlined in the first chapter. To verify the hypotheses, statistical techniques are employed, using SPSS and

AMOS as the primary tools for analysis. These tools are both reliable and widely recognized in social science research.

As the study follows a quantitative approach, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to assess the relationships between variables. This allows for testing the direct, indirect, and overall effects of the proposed model. For Objective 2, descriptive analysis is conducted to summarize the data, while mediation analysis is performed using the Preacher and Hayes (2008) bootstrapping method to examine the indirect effects. A detailed overview of the specific methods and techniques used for data analysis, tailored to each research objective, is provided below.

Data Analysis and Results

Table

Characteristics of the Respondents

Option	Frequency	Percentages
Gender Distribution		
Female	151	42.2
Male	207	57.8
Total	358	100.0
Years of Existence of Company		
11 – 15 years old	143	39.9
16 – 20 years old	36	10.1
6 – 10 years old	116	32.4
Above 20	23	6.4
Less than 5	40	11.2
Total	358	100.0
Educational Qualification		
Bachelor Degree	61	17.0
High Diploma	131	36.6
High School	16	4.5
Master's Degree	73	20.4
PhD Degree	77	21.5
Total	358	100.0
Experience in the Current Company		
1 year to 3 years	116	32.4
4 years to 6 years	53	14.8
7 years and above	105	29.3
Less than 1 year	84	23.5
Total	358	100.0
Location of Organization		
Abu Dhabi	25	7.0
Ajman	60	16.8
Dubai	145	40.5
Fujairah	28	7.8
Ras Al Khaimah	51	14.2

Sharjah	32	8.9
Umm Al Quwain	17	4.7
Total	358	100.0
Income by AED		
10,000 - 25,000	28	7.8
26,000 - 35,000	93	26.0
36,000 - 45,000	89	24.9
46,000 - 55,000	35	9.8
Above 56,000	56	15.6
Less than 10,000	57	15.9
Total	358	100.0

Descriptive Statistics and Assessment of Normality

Assessment of Normality and descriptive Analysis

Variable	Min	Max	Skew	Mean	SD	c.r.	Kurtosis	c.r.
CL1	1.000	5.000	.212	2.02	1.419	1.643	-1.424	-5.513
CL2	1.000	5.000	-.330	2.87	1.121	-2.559	-.862	-3.339
CL3	1.000	5.000	-.339	3.04	1.530	-2.622	-1.238	-4.796
CL4	1.000	5.000	-.473	3.06	.925	-3.661	-.474	-1.837
CL5	1.000	5.000	-.223	2.94	.937	-1.724	-.844	-3.271
SM1	1.000	5.000	.224	1.89	1.284	1.737	-1.393	-5.396
SM2	1.000	5.000	-.074	2.94	1.283	-.575	-1.282	-4.966
SM3	1.000	5.000	-.383	3.42	1.317	-2.966	-1.128	-4.370
SM4	1.000	5.000	-.604	3.58	1.461	-4.676	-.896	-3.472
SM5	1.000	5.000	-.583	3.79	1.259	-4.515	-.766	-2.965
FP1	1.000	5.000	-.297	2.61	1.175	-2.304	-.887	-3.435
FP2	1.000	5.000	-.211	2.85	.868	-1.633	-.992	-3.843
FP3	1.000	5.000	-.534	3.04	1.178	-4.134	-.695	-2.692
FP4	1.000	5.000	-.701	3.41	1.259	-5.431	-.363	-1.404
FP5	1.000	5.000	-.678	3.35	1.244	-5.248	-.493	-1.908
CO1	1.000	5.000	-.379	3.13	1.431	-2.939	-1.054	-4.080
CO2	1.000	5.000	-.457	3.14	1.328	-3.539	-1.045	-4.049
CO3	1.000	5.000	-.518	3.09	1.290	-4.011	-.759	-2.939

CO4	1.000	5.000	-.580	3.24	1.152	-4.489	-.350	-1.355
CO5	1.000	5.000	-.319	2.87	1.342	-2.468	-1.217	-4.714
SU1	1.000	5.000	-.348	2.91	1.362	-2.699	-1.112	-4.307
SU2	1.000	5.000	-.452	3.47	1.264	-3.500	-.943	-3.652
SU3	1.000	5.000	-.538	3.56	1.122	-4.167	-.575	-2.226
SU4	1.000	5.000	-.828	3.79	1.135	-6.417	-.127	-.492
SU5	1.000	5.000	-.417	3.31	1.235	-3.230	-.879	-3.403

Reliability and Validity Model

The reliability and validity of the model are assessed using four different values i.e. convergent validity, internal consistency, composite reliability, and discriminant validity.

Table

Reliability and validity model

	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CL	0.925	0.942	0.944	0.771
CO	0.911	0.911	0.919	0.696
FP	0.944	0.984	0.956	0.813
SC	0.805	0.816	0.846	0.524
SI	0.958	0.991	0.967	0.854
SM	0.897	0.966	0.920	0.696
SO	0.825	0.853	0.855	0.548
SU	0.895	0.913	0.922	0.702

Result and Discussions

Recommendations

Travel agencies in the UAE should focus on enhancing their engagement with customers through strategic social media content. To effectively convert potential customers into loyal users, it is crucial for these agencies to influence consumer decision-making at key touchpoints by providing content that resonates with their needs and preferences. Content-based marketing can significantly contribute to raising brand awareness, reinforcing the brand image, and cultivating long-term customer loyalty.

Given the strong local presence of travel agencies in the UAE, it is essential to conduct in-depth research on the target audience to design attractive and personalized travel packages and promotional offers. Understanding the specific interests and behaviors of

the local population will help agencies tailor their offerings to better capture attention and foster loyalty.

Moreover, travel agencies should leverage the principles of manipulation theory, which emphasizes influencing consumer behavior by addressing their psychological triggers and needs. By incorporating this theory into their marketing strategies, agencies can craft compelling content and offers that not only attract new customers but also encourage repeat business and long-term customer relationships. This strategic approach can further solidify the agency's position in an increasingly competitive market.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered. It focused on the impact of social media usage on customer loyalty and financial performance, based on responses from 358 customers of travel agencies in the UAE. Given the large population in this metropolitan area, the sample may not fully represent the broader consumer base. Future research with a larger, more diverse sample is needed to gain a broader perspective on how social media affects organizational performance, especially with the role of customer orientation marketing.

Additionally, the study employed a purely quantitative approach, which may not capture the full depth of customer experiences. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative methods like interviews with quantitative surveys, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of customer orientation marketing in shaping the impact of social media on organizational performance.

Conclusion

This study found that the financial performance of travel agencies in the UAE is positively influenced by social media use for creating opportunities and integration. However, the impact of social media marketing and customer relations & services on financial performance was positive but insignificant, indicating that travel agencies are not fully leveraging social media to enhance financial growth. While social media plays a role in marketing and customer service, other factors likely contribute more significantly to financial outcomes.

In terms of customer loyalty, the study revealed a positive relationship with social media marketing and integration. However, the effect of social media for customer relations and information accessibility on loyalty was positive but insignificant. This suggests that, while social media engagement is beneficial, it does not yet have a strong impact on customer retention.

Notably, social media integration had a significant positive effect on both financial performance and customer loyalty, highlighting the value of integrating social media into broader business strategies. Overall, customer orientation marketing accounted for 45.3% of the variation in social media's impact across various functions.

In conclusion, while social media holds promise for travel agencies in the UAE, its full potential for driving financial performance and customer loyalty has yet to be realized.

Agencies that adopt a more integrated, customer-focused approach are likely to see greater benefits in the future.

Implications of the Findings

Managerial Implication

The relevance of these findings to the managers of travel agencies in UAE is that customer orientation marketing does not significantly influence customer loyalty. In essence, providing customers with specific information related to their needs through platforms like telephone calls encouraging them to discuss their needs to some little extent keep them encouraged but does not cause them to patronize these brands. This might imply that travel agencies in UAE are not conversant with the use of social media as a conversion platform wherein potential customers are changed into users. Focus needs to be made to enable customers know more through content, videos and pictures in order keep them informed and as well engage them through relationships building to change their way of thinking by stimulating interest. Also, integrating with social exchange theory that provides a platform for a company to access the overall market and deliver the desired results through market content.

Theoretical Implication

This study made use of the social exchange theory. As such, the theoretical contribution of the study stems from the fact that it offers opportunity for the development of a conceptual research model that enables the usage of social media in enhancing organizational performance through customer orientation in UAE. The ease of information exchange on social media among stakeholders of travel agencies in UAE are by sharing information in sites that can enable their customers, and potential customers access and view their products and events. Easy access to information, frequent updates and good feedback system to enable customers get their doubts and worries attended to in interactive social media platforms with opportunity to accommodate a larger customer base at once enhances customer loyalty.

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