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USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MEANS FOR CONTINUED  
AWARENESS – TAKING THE PERSPECTIVE OF SMEs OPERATING  
IN THE FOOD SECTOR

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently, and all works, important standpoints, and data by other authors have been properly referenced, and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The primary purpose of this study is to examine what small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are doing to remain in the minds of customers. Thereby, a particular emphasis is put on understanding how social media platforms are used for staying in the minds of customers. The study investigates the effectiveness of social media platforms to spread brand awareness for the SMEs and how well SMEs are making use of social media campaigns to connect and interact with their customers. The most popular social media platforms used by the SMEs are Facebook and Instagram and majority of the businesses did prefer Facebook more based upon the needs and requirements of their targeted audiences. Social media marketing is an effective marketing tool for SMEs as it enables the businesses to establish a strong connection with their targeted customers by staying connected with one another 24/7 around the clock. This is the actual strength of this particular medium in terms of marketing is that it takes the information about your products and services to your target populations in a time effective manner with the most minimalistic costs incurred altogether. The study discovered that SMEs depended intensely on utilizing social media stages to accomplish their business targets of drawing in clients, bestowing attention to them, and building public relationship with them in an expense effective way.

Keywords: SMEs, Social Media, Awareness, Social Media Marketing.

## **INTRODUCTION**

SMEs are the catalyser of the economy both in developed and developing countries (Erdirin & Ozkaya, 2020). As they have more flexible working style compared to large enterprises, they adapt to the changes in demand in a short time and reach competition conditions quickly. Thus, they contribute to national income, employment, productivity and entrepreneur training (Erdirin & Ozkaya, 2020).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of SMEs dropped around the world significantly (Fairlie, 2020). The economic side effects of Covid-19 have caused SMEs to lay off and terminate employees. This means that millions of people lost their jobs, causing economic distress to families and dramatically raising the number of unemployed (Dodge, 2020). COVID-19 has increased not only increased the likelihood that small firms have to terminate their business but also the danger that they are getting forgotten by people, i.e., existent and potential customers. The latter might be less of a problem to large business as they usually have the budget for marketing activities aimed at remaining in the minds of customers. Small businesses, on the other hand, typically have small marketing budget, if at all (Ryan, 2021). So, they have to rely on affordable way of maintaining awareness. Social media platforms provide a low-cost marketing for the businesses which enables them to target their potential customers and thus, increase revenue (Ahmad, Bakar, & Ahmad, 2018). Moreover, social media platforms are highly beneficial for the SMEs because they are flexible and innovative in nature and are more concerned to save reduce their marketing cost. Using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube might be a suitable solution for small firms to reach that, as these platforms have proven to be powerful tools for directing the mind-sets of customers (Tigani & Zairis, 2017). It emphasizes the need to identify the effectiveness and significance of social media platforms especially for the SMEs to successfully survive in the market. Social media platforms also facilitate SMEs to increase brand awareness resulting in more customers and increase in revenue (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014).

The primary purpose of this study is to examine what SMEs are doing to remain in the minds of customers. Thereby, a particular emphasis is put on understanding how social media platforms are used for staying in the minds of customers.

The study will focus to answer the following research questions:

- How and why do SMEs use social media?
- How do the decision-makers of SMEs view the role of social media as a continued awareness rising activity?
- How can social media serve as a potential platform for maintaining awareness in a consistent manner for SMEs?

In today's modern economy, SMEs is considered as an innovative and effective sytem. Digitalization has provided numerous opportunities for SMEs to tap intro global markets and expand their businesses. However, their are still a limited number of SMEs that have considered it as an effective tool for their growth (Taylor & Murphy, 2004). Social media is an extended form of traditional media that utilizes effective and advanced tools to allow people to communicate, build relationships, and interact with each other (Safko, 2010). Usage of social media platforms is increasig rapidly and is an important strategical tool for the SMEs. SMEs are in the food business widely using the social media platforms for to interact with their customers because it exhibits clear communication between a business and its customers. It also enables the SME to understand the changing demand of the customers so that they may respond to it effectively (Nagwan, Mokhtar, & Abas, 2020). Previous literature will be discussed with regard to SMEs and their adoption of social media platforms. The findings of the previous studies will develop a theoretical basis for this study. The previous studies will enable to gain a detailed understanding of the key terms related to the topic. To develop a better understanding between the key terms, the literature review will help to establish a connection between them.

Qualitative research approach is employed to conduct this research. As the topic of this study is subjective in nature, qualitative approach will be appropriate to use in which semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather qualitative data (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2015). The method of semi-structured interviews is chosen because it provides in-depth results from the respondents. The data for this study will be gathered from 10 managers or owners of SMEs in Tallinn. 10 small and medium-sized food businesses were chosen. Among the small enterprise, The Monk, Chicks Wings, Margot Kebab, Igavesti, Center food OÜ and Asian way were chosen that were restaurants. Meanwhile, Monowara Holding OÜ, Cinamon restaurant, Restaurant Chi, Shapla OÜ selected in the category of medium-sized enterprise. All the respondents were contacted through email and were interviewed after receiving their approval and consent.

The compiled data will be analyzed with the help of thematic analysis as it is an effective analysis tool for qualitative data in which relevant themes are generated on the basis of codes (Gavin, 2013).

This research is divided into five chapters. The first of which covers the introduction, research question, problem statement, and aims of the study. The second chapter examines the previous literature in this subject in order to identify gaps and limitations. The third chapter discusses research approach, data collection methods, and tools for data analysis. The fourth chapter focuses on thematic analysis, findings and discussion of the results and recommendations. The fifth chapter includes a conclusion of the study as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

# **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section discusses the previous literature with regard to SMEs and their adoption of social media platforms. The findings of the previous studies will develop a theoretical basis for this study. The section comprises of the detailed understanding of the key terms related to the topic. To develop a better understanding between the key terms, the literature review helps to establish a connection between them.

## **1.1 Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)**

SMEs are an essential part of the economy for both developing and developed countries. Each country has its own understanding and rules for the SMEs. According to the Europeans, SMEs are divided into three types. These types are termed a micro-sized enterprises, small enterprises, and medium enterprises. Enterprises where the number of employees is up to nine, are referred to as micro-enterprises. Enterprises where the number of employees ranges in between 10 to 49, are referred to as small enterprises. Lastly, enterprises with several employees in the range of 50 to 249 are referred to as medium-sized enterprises. Meanwhile, large-sized enterprises have more than 250 employees in their organization (Taylor & Murphy, 2004).

Small enterprises are distinct around the globe. The categorization of an enterprise as an SME is dependent on the country and the features such as the number of employees, turnover sales, total assets the company owns. National Small Business Act 1996 has defined SMEs with the range of employees working in an organization (Scheers, 2016). This act provides different types of enterprise such as micro, very small, small, and medium enterprises. Estonia, by 2018, had a total number of 76,856 small enterprises in which a total of 70,344 were included in micro enterprises, 5,500 as small, and 1,012 as medium-sized enterprises (Smallbone & Venesaar, 2018). Small enterprises act as a source of economic growth provides various job opportunities. The economy of EU highlights the significance of SMEs with regard to their economy. According to the Eurostat, they were indeed the main contributor to growth between 2004 and 2006 (Amoah, 2020).

## **1.2 Social Media and Its Applications**

Social media can be defined as a group of digital platforms that allow users to create and exchange content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It has significantly improved the rate of access and created

awareness among customers for small businesses. Among the common social media platforms are Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Facebook. Social media can become a strong tool that engage customers to bring their entire social network with them on their buying practice (Kietzmann et al., 2011). In the era of digitalization, Social Media Application (SMAs) have evolved in the recent years. In the previous years, leading social media platforms include Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. These have changed from interesting platforms to being engaged as part of the day-to-day platforms used (Given, Forcier, & Rathi, 2013). SMAs are renowned applications that are either downloaded on phones or accessed through the internet. The features of these applications include sending messages, sharing photos, and content creation and sharing. Examples include native social media marketing apps, social web tech applications, and social media marketing web app platforms (Jayaram, Manrai, & Manrai, 2015).

In today's technological era, social media has gained more importance as a marketing and advertising tool that leads to the success of an organization, product, or service (Hawkins & Vel, 2013). After the rising use of smart phones and the internet, the use of social media platforms has been significantly increased. Customers are more engaged with the major social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube (Kim & Kim, 2018). The use of social media platforms has also significantly affected the interaction between people, organizations, etc. It has emerged as a new place for people and firms to interact with each other for the purpose of sharing knowledge, information, products, and services (Usher et al., 2014). It has increased the significance of social media platforms for customers and organizations. Firms have started to focus on utilizing social media platforms effectively to influence customers and develop profitable relationships with them (Lin & Kim, 2016). According to Alalwan et al. (2017), firms use social media platforms for various purposes, such as advertising, electronic word-of-mouth, managing customer relationships, and branding.

### **1.3 Social Media Marketing (SMM)**

SMM is defined as a marketing strategy style involving one to create and share content via social media networks to achieve overall business goals (Zarrella, 2010). SMEs are the often small in size so they are highly engaged with innovation and are flexible in nature. The flexible nature of SMEs allows them to adopt innovative ways to market their products such as through social media platforms. The primary goal of all the businesses is to generate maximum profits. Social media marketing

supports the SMEs to spread awareness among the target audience. It helps the SMEs to spread awareness about their products, services, and other facilities to the potential customers. It increases the chances of converting potential to actual customers which raises the overall revenue of the SME (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012).

The online presence of SMEs allows them to communicate online and engage with their potential customers to spread awareness regarding the goods and services offered by their company. Estonia has some of the top leading social media marketing companies like Hey Digital, Blue Mint Digital, and Texonica (Basri, 2016). In the early years, companies used to interact with their customers through television, radio, newspapers, billboards, etc. However, social media platforms arose and completely revolutionized the traditional marketing practices (Wardati & Mahendrawathi, 2019). Nowadays, an enterprise can put an advertisement message for awareness regarding the need, want, and demand of the target audience who are involved in the social media platforms (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). Marketing using the social media platforms has become important to create product awareness to attract more customers and increase sales. Large companies are big in size and revenue, so they easily market their product through various channels including social media platforms. On the other hand, social media platforms provide various advantages to the SMEs which mainly includes low-cost marketing, reaching large potential customers, etc. It has become common among the SMEs who adopt these platforms for the purpose of marketing as they do not have large budgets for it. Social media marketing does not require any special IT knowledge and skills which becomes easier for the SMEs to utilize without fulfilling any extra requirement (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016).

#### **1.4 Social Network Marketing (SNM)**

Social Network Marketing (SNM) is also similar to SMM in which customers develop a network through social media platforms (Nobre & Silve, 2014). With the rise of technology, there is a rise in the inter-connection between social media marketing and marketing of the SMEs. The marketing team applies numerous social media marketing features, which increase the reach of the company and its products and produce. It enables the company to exhibit a two-way form of communication with the clients. The common features of SNM include the creation and operation of the company's product page, managing adverts and promotion, maintaining public relationships, and conducting full market research. The other features are providing the customer with encouraging courage customs to handle

discussions, recruiting recruit new p, and engaging and collaborating with clients' others (Husnain & Toor, 2017).

There are many firms that appear to act easily in our current reality where shoppers can talk so uninhibitedly with one another, and organizations have progressively less authority over the data accessible with regards to them on the internet. Today, if an Internet client types the name of any driving brand into the Google search, what comes up among the best five outcomes ordinarily incorporates the corporate site page, yet additionally the comparing section in the online reference book Wikipedia (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). SNM is highly effective in building product awareness plus enhancing the brand reputation, which generates crews and advance sales (Jagongo & Kinyua, 2013).

### **1.5 SMEs and Marketing**

Marketing is essential for the businesses which directs the company or its products towards failure or success. Large enterprises have numerous resources to execute traditional and conventional methods to market themselves. On the other hand, SMEs have scarce resources to carry out their marketing activities which often restricts them to limited marketing channels. These constraints direct the SMEs to adopt unconventional and untraditional marketing methods that are cost-effective to promote their products and services (Jain, 2021). In today's globalized business environment, it is challenging for the companies to just use traditional marketing practices which has shifted the businesses towards new way to promote their products. Untraditional and unconventional marketing activities adopted and implemented by the SMEs due to scarce resources is known as entrepreneurial marketing (Hills & Hultman, 2011). In this sort of marketing, new and innovative ways are adopted by the SMEs to promote their products and services in a cost-effective manner. There are various forms of marketing that reduces the cost for the SMEs and are considered to be efficient and effective. Guerilla marketing, ambush marketing, viral marketing, and buzz marketing are few of the forms of entrepreneurial marketing used by the SMEs to gain effective results (Hisrich & Ramadani, 2018).

Marketing plays an important role for the businesses including SMEs. In the long-term perspective, marketing helps to determine whether a SME will succeed or not (Scheers, 2011). The main focus for the SMEs is to spread awareness among the customers which is carried through marketing. Customers

do not often purchase from large brands and it generates an opportunity for the SMEs to sale their products or services to them. In today's business environment, there is a rise in the competition which has increased the need of effective marketing for the SMEs. It helps the SMEs to thrive in the market against the competitors including medium-sized and large companies. Before delivering high-quality products and services to the customers, it is essential for the SMEs to attract and convince them to make a purchase (Pratap, 2017). Effective marketing helps the SMEs to survive among the large competitors. SMEs have an edge over the large competitors to provide individual attention to their customers which develops a positive relationship between a SME and a customer (Al Badi, 2018).

### **1.6 SMEs and Social Media Marketing**

According to Wardati and Mahendrawathi (2019), social media can be considered as a platform that operates virtually and provides dependable and efficient information. It permits exposed communication, which helps enterprises and companies to understand the client's desires and needs, motivating them to respond to the effective needs of customers. The development and improvement of different social media platforms have stimulated SMEs to grasp this opportunity to reach their potential customers. They can achieve their desired goals by communicating their message towards the market for their services or products. It can be considered as one of the most efficient and effective tools of marketing especially for the SMEs. These platforms have enabled the SMEs to reach the global market easily. Due to the high and increasing range of social media users, it has become an effective and common platform for communication and sharing information which has changed customer's behavior. As a result, different companies have acquired an interest in public broadcasting, especially small enterprises, which has become a new strategy for Small enterprises to address and participate in social media marketing (Safko, 2010).

Hence, Small enterprises are venturing into SMM as it provides a variety of opportunities and paybacks by attracting the new clients and maintaining the bond with the existing ones. Additionally, social media enables SMEs to participate directly with the clients at an affordable cost with high effectiveness as compared to the traditional communication platforms. As a result, SMEs are focusing on SMM to create positive awareness of the company's products and services to generate more revenue and increase number of customers (Jones, Borgman, & Ulusoy, 2015). In this era, the survival

of a business or any enterprise depends on the effective use of marketing channels. SMEs choose social media marketing which provides them various advantages such as managing the customer relationship, increasing sales, uplifting the services' products, sharing awareness, and research development. Secondly, the customers of these SMEs are hanging are more likely to be the user of these social media networks and platforms which increases the chances for the SMEs to reach them through it (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020). Furthermore, using social media platforms for the purpose of marketing does not cost much for the SMEs because platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter does not incur a lot of cost for the advertisement. Unless the SMEs want to upgrade to a higher stage, like promoting their business with paid ads to reach even more potential clients, it will still incur a relatively small cost for them compared to the costs of other traditional marketing platforms (Kirtiř & Karahan, 2011). As a result, marketing through social media channels reduce the advertising costs for the SMEs meanwhile, widening their reach to target their potential and actual customers (Pagano, Bocconcelli, & Cioppi, 2017).

One of the prominent advantages of using social media marketing as a tool is that it does not require any special IT or technical skills to be operated. The managers, owners, and employees working in the SMEs can easily utilize these platforms for the purpose of spreading awareness without using any kind of technical skills. Social media marketing provides an opportunity for the SMEs to effectively communicate with their customers through which it becomes easy for them to identify their needs and demands (Atwong, 2015). Furthermore, it is essential for the SMEs to effectively use content to gain higher engagement. Attractive and engaging content enables the user to attract more customers towards their ads. It is also important for the SMEs to plan their posting schedule because posting advertisement at the right time can gain better results compared to posting randomly. It is also important to possess analytical skills to understand the results and performance of the ads. Accurate analysis can strengthen the SMEs and guide them to improve their content or other factors to improve results (McCorkle & Payan, 2017). Moreover, it is vital for the SMEs to identify their target market and potential customers to effectively use social media marketing for better results. Initially, SMEs should look for the demographics and geographical factors of the target market. It is important for the SMEs to understand the needs and wants of the customers so that the right products and services could be advertised to them through social media marketing. Later on, they should look out for the mostly used social media platform by their target customers. This can be tracked through the usage of their

customers on these platforms. Meanwhile, it is also important for the SMEs to analyze the competition in the market and the product offering of their competitors. It will enable the SMEs to look out for the factors through which they can gain a competitive edge and attract more customers than their competitors. This kind of research before the execution of social media marketing plan can effectively support the SMEs to gain effective outcome (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016).

Making profits through the rise in the total sales while reducing the cost of production and other operational costs, is the primary purpose of SMEs. With a reduction in marketing costs through using social media marketing, SMEs have encountered an increase in revenue and overall profit. A significant impact of social media marketing for the SMEs is to reach their targeted potential customers while maintaining profitable relationship with the existing ones. SMEs have started to utilize SMM effectively for their marketing purpose to achieve their overall organizational goals. Flexibility and dedication in the newly launched SMEs make it easier for them to adopt social media platforms to gain efficient and effective results (Vásquez & Escamilla, 2014). Considerably, social media platforms in Estonia has aided SMEs to advance in their sales, achieving higher profits. These platforms have effectively supported the SMEs to save their operational costs. Social media marketing has turned out to be effective for these SMEs. As the technology is getting advanced and people are shifting more towards digital world, the number of users of social media platforms in Estonia and global world has risen. It has provided these SMEs with an opportunity to reach a large pool of customers. It is advantageous for the SMEs to attract them with their content and convert potential customers into regular ones. Consequently, executing marketing functions through social media platforms have been a successful way for the SMEs to spread awareness among the consumers and thus, gain positive results (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This section discussed the research methodology of this study. It is important for a researcher to choose appropriate methodology to extract effective outcomes from the study. In this section, the research approach and data collection of this study were discussed in detail. Moreover, this section also provided detailed information with regard to the research approach, data collection, respondents, data collection instrument, and data analysis tool.

### **2.1 Research Approach**

The stages and procedures followed by a researcher throughout the study that allow him to conduct it are referred to as the research approach. It helps the readers to better understand the methodology of the study as a whole. Based on the study's goals and objectives, an appropriate research approach is chosen to achieve the desired and reliable results. There are commonly three research approaches, namely, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches, each having their own data collection, data analysis, and interpretation methods. The quantitative approach uses the numerical data collected from the respondents and analyze it with the help of statistical tools. On the other hand, qualitative data refers to the collection of non-numerical data through different qualitative methods to analyze it accordingly with the help of different methods and procedures. Meanwhile, the mixed method approach uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the study. There are some studies that require numerical and non-numerical data to extract the results for the study. For those studies, a mixed method approach is preferably used (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019).

After evaluating all the research approaches, this study uses a qualitative research approach to conduct the study. As the subject matter of this study is broad and subjective in nature, there is a need to analyze the respondents thoroughly to extract reliable and useful data. Employing a qualitative approach will enable us to gather in-depth data, which will support our ability to find accurate findings. Methods used in the qualitative approach will be used in this study to gather, analyze, and interpret the data gathered from the respondents.

## **2.2 Data Collection**

Data collection in qualitative research is mainly carried out through the methods of interviews and focus group discussions. An interview is the most common type of data collection method used in qualitative research, which is said to be a verbal form of the questionnaire. There are usually three types of interviews, which include structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews have pre-developed questions in which there is little or no variation during the data collection. It is an easy and quick method of conducting an interview because there are no follow up questions that can be asked in this method for further elaboration. Unstructured interviews are not pre-planned and begin with an opening question and are followed by questions developed according to the responses of the participants. It is a time-consuming method and sometimes it becomes difficult to handle it. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews have pre-developed questions that help the researcher to guide the interview, but it also allows the interviewer and interviewee to go in-depth and ask more questions for further elaboration (Gill et al., 2008). In this study, the primary data will be compiled through semi-structured interviews. This particular method was utilized for data generation because semi-structured interviews give interviewees the freedom to express their opinions in their own terms.

Furthermore, this method enables the researcher to gather reliable and comparable qualitative data about the SME activity to continue awareness using social media platforms. The method of semi-structured interviews is employed because the analysis focuses on the result's quality and gathers in-depth reasoning (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). After doing the interviews five small and five medium-sized businesses were chosen. Among the small enterprises, The Monk, Chicks Wings, Margot Kebab, Igavesti OÜ, and Center Food OÜ were chosen, Meanwhile, Monowara Holding OÜ, Cinamon restaurant, Asian way, Restaurant Chi, were selected in the category of medium-sized enterprise. The interview questions will be based on the SMEs' social media activities and their usage of the digital platforms for maintaining awareness among their customers. All the respondents were contacted through email and were interviewed after receiving their approval and consent.

## **2.3 Approach to Data Analysis**

Qualitative research usually has data in an unstructured textual form. The text comprises the transcripts of the interviews, observation notes, etc. In addition to that, it can also be in the form of

videos or audios or any other multimedia form which is then transformed into textual form for the purpose of data analysis. Data analysis is an important part of qualitative research, which is quite different from quantitative research. In qualitative research, the primary focus is to extract useful information to explore the thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences of the respondents to understand the phenomena under investigation (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019).

The compiled data from the respondents will be analyzed through the technique of thematic analysis. It is the commonly used data analysis tool in qualitative studies. The data collected will be analyzed while focusing on the proposed research questions. Coding is one of the most important steps of data analysis in qualitative research. It is the stage in which the unstructured form of data is distributed into different categories on the basis of their similarity. It divides a huge amount of raw data into different categories, which makes it easy to understand and use in further data analysis steps (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After compiling the data from the respondents, preliminary coding and focus coding will be carried out on the compiled data. In the next stage, themes will be developed with the help of codes which were developed in the previous step. Themes are identified with the help of codes in which similar codes are combined to develop themes. After the development of codes, themes will be generated in the last stage of data analysis which will later be interpreted manually (Gavin, 2013). The themes were generated as aspect of awareness, cost effective medium, rising popularity, social media strategies and challenges.

### **3. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Analysis**

In this section, the researcher will provide the information collected through the interviews with the different businessmen with respect to their use of social media marketing platforms and how they consider it as an effective medium for spreading awareness amongst their target customers altogether. The data will be analyzed on the basis of the common patterns identified across all the different interviews conducted with the participants. The following themes will be covered to provide findings for this dissertation:

- Rising Popularity of Social Media Marketing
- Aspect of awareness
- Social Media platforms – A cost-effective medium for SME's
- Social Media Strategies
- Challenges of social media platforms

#### **Theme 1: Rising Popularity of Social Media Marketing**

The majority of the responses that were obtained conformed to the opinion of social media marketing being the fastest growing marketing platform in the world (Pentina & Koh , 2012). Most of the respondents for this particular research who belonged to the Small Medium Enterprises opined that social media has gained immense popularity in today's era mainly attributed to its distinguishing features that are not offered by the traditional platforms. Some of the advantages offered by social media platforms that make it much popular amongst the masses comprise of its cost and time-efficient nature followed by having greater reach and visibility. One of the participants Mr. Riadul Islam, owner of Center food stated:

“In today's era, the significance of social media cannot be understated. The popularity of this platform can be gauged from the fact that the majority of the people across the globe use this platform in order to stay connected with each other and this is the very core reason for integrating social media platforms in my business model. By utilizing the social media platforms, I am able to showcase my products to

a larger target audience within almost no time and this is something that couldn't be easily done using the traditional marketing tools.”

He further added;

“I try to reach my customers mainly through Facebook and Instagram as they are undoubtedly considered to be the most prominent social media platforms. These two popular social media platforms have added in making me develop a strong customer base over time”.

Another respondent provided his valuable insights regarding the popularity of these social media platforms. Katlin Leppund, owner of Chicks wings proclaimed;

“Social media platforms have inevitably gained immense popularity for all business especially the SME's sector. By capitalizing on this marketing tool, I am able to witness a growing customer base and it wouldn't be wrong to say that social media platforms play a dominant role in the success of my business.”

Hawkins & Vel (2013) pointed out that social media platforms are now viewed as a popular marketing and advertising tool that ultimately serves to play a major role in ensuring the success of an organization, product, or service and it is mostly due to the advent of digital devices and extensive use of smartphones and the internet all over the world.

## **Theme 2: Aspect of awareness**

Social media platforms are mainly deployed to create awareness regarding the products offered by the brand (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). Almost all the respondents who participated in this research accepted the positive role played by social media platforms to build awareness regarding the products or services offered by them. In this regard, Mizanur Rahaman from Monowara Holding OÜ proclaimed;

“Social media platforms greatly assist me to create awareness regarding my products. I regularly post my products on Facebook and Instagram platforms to provide my clients with all the relevant information regarding the services that I am offering. Since the majority of the people use social media platforms to stay updated and connected with each other, this helps me greatly to post my offerings regularly on different social media platforms where the customers can obtain necessary information

about my products. This awareness built through social media helps me to further increase my client base too. Moreover, social media platforms are an essential tool for SMEs mainly because we do not possess a very large budget to dedicate for creating awareness amongst our target audience.”

Mr. Champak Saha was another participant in the research who favored social media platforms in creating awareness about his products and stated that;

“It is very important for businesses to create awareness amongst the customers regarding the products or services they offer. I personally use social media platforms like Facebook to create awareness regarding my offerings and since this platform is used by huge number of people, it makes it easier for me to create awareness as well as obtain clients' feedback on my offerings. I place my advertising on Facebook that provides customers to obtain all the necessary information and in the Covid-19 times, the social media platform helped me immensely to impart awareness to the clients regarding my products.”

### **Theme 3: Social Media platforms – A cost-effective medium for SME’s**

Social media platforms do not require a huge financial investment rather one of the prime reasons that organizations especially Small and Medium Enterprises capitalize on using this platform pertains to the fact that these platforms require relatively lower costs (Dahnil, Marzuki, Langgat, & Fabeil, 2014). Muslima Khatun at Shapla Ou said:

“The greatest advantage that social media platforms offer us is that lower costs are required for creating awareness regarding our services. We actively use different social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to promote our offerings to our desired clientele without needing to allot a greater budget and this works absolutely fine for our small company. Advertising on social media platforms is not only cost-effective for us rather it brings a lot of other advantages meaning that we interact with greater masses more promptly and this helps us to improve our services as well.”

Social media platforms offer a plethora of advantages to SME’s and most of the respondents said that by communicating through these platforms they were able to keep growing their customer numbers. In this regard, one of the respondents named Ms. Jekaterina Trumm mentioned,

“Social media platforms help us to engage customers that too for free. We are able to do free marketing and promotion of our products on different social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram that helps us to save our costs and at the same time, the content that we promote on social media platforms travel much faster and cover more people as compared to any other medium. Thus, the advantages of social media are many indeed.”

Small and Medium Enterprises mainly utilize social media platforms because of their lower operating costs, followed by improving the business's effectiveness and efficiency in reaching greater masses conveniently (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020).

#### **Theme 4: Social media Strategies**

One of the most important factors that respondents believed to have helped them engage more with their customers was the design and implementation of different social media strategies and campaigns.

The majority of the participants of this research agreed to use some social media strategies in order to increase their existing clientele base and further frame strong relationships with them. In this regard, Heli Kozoritski from Margot OÜ stated that,

“It is important to share information regarding our products with our clients so that we can obtain feedback about what the clients think about our offerings. At the same time, to maintain close relationships with our customers and further increase our customer base, we deploy different social media strategies that comprise offerings discounts to the customers. We offer regular discounts to other customers through different social media platforms to be able to sell more products and maintain a better relationship with our clients. As soon as we post some discount offers on our social media channels. We witness more and more customers approaching us and this tells us that the particular strategy has worked well for us.”

Furthermore, she added

“To craft a strong relationship with our customers, I try to utilize major social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram as they are used by masses. Moreover, through these platforms, I extend different offers and discounts to the customers to attract them to try out my food products. This strategy adequately helps me to gain more customers as clients get tempted by discount offers. Such

social media strategies assist me greatly to keep increasing my customer base and further developing strong relationships with them. Thus, social media platforms can be used as an effective tool to grow my business in the long run surely.”

### **Theme 5: Challenges of Social media platforms**

It is known that social media platforms offer extensive benefits for SMEs in creating awareness and attracting customers. However, the participants of the research also talked about the different challenges faced by them with respect to these social media platforms. Mr. Suraj Prakash from Restaurant Chi stated that

“One of the major cons of the social media platforms is that there are no regulatory authorities that can keep an eye on the working mechanism of these platforms. Since these platforms are open for the audience, many times, the audience can post negative reviews and feedback about our offerings, and this can serve to tarnish our image amongst our customers. The audience posting against our offerings can raise sufficient challenges for our business and we are entitled to take the blame even when we are not at mistake.”

Another major challenge extended by social media platforms pertains to the fact that the information available on social media platforms can be tweaked by different competitors and this can create mistrust between the business and its clientele. Mr. Sohel stated that,

“The benefits of social media platforms are many, one can reach their desired target audience by incurring lower costs through this platform, however, sharing information on these platforms can also result in giving birth to different cons. A major reason that I don’t trust these platforms a lot pertains to the fact that the information available on these platforms can be used by the competitors for their own benefit and this is the reason we use other platforms too for promoting our business.”

Mr. Shafiq ul Islam acting as another participant in this research also highlighted a few challenges of using social media platforms. He stated;

“As we are the second-largest entity in the market, we do not rely much on using social media platforms to reach the customers, as our customers are familiar with the kind of products we sell. We disseminate little information about our new products on the Facebook page, but we use the word to

mouth platform to increase awareness about our products. The major reason that I don't rely on using social media platforms only, is that if we share much information about our products, the competitors can take advantage of this, and customers would keep comparing our products to other competitors that would hamper our small-scale business. ”

### **3.2 Findings and discussion**

The above thematic analysis provides comprehensive answers to the research questions that have been crafted in the initial part of the research.

In response to the first question that asked why and how the SMEs used social media platforms. Pentina & Koh (2012) proclaims that social media platforms are deemed as the fastest growing marketing platform all across the globe. This serves as a major factor for SMEs to capitalize on using social media platforms. Moreover, the findings of the present study revealed that the different participants in the research demonstrated their willingness to use social media platforms in their business model to attain different objectives comprising of attracting customers, imparting awareness to them, and growing the customers base. To achieve all these objectives, businesses had been witnessed capitalizing on different platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube. The majority of the respondents affirmed using these platforms to engage with their customers and craft strong relationships with them. Moreover, a study conducted by Kietzmann et al. (2011) proclaimed that small businesses commonly utilize social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter as they serve as a major tool for them to engage with the customers, followed by growing their customer base.

The different owners and managers of SMEs who acted as the participants for this research disclosed that they deployed social media platforms to impart awareness amongst their customers. One of the participants, named Mizanur Rahaman stated that small businesses do not possess a very strong financial budget to create awareness amongst their target audience. To tackle this situation, we leverage using different social media platforms that serve to provide awareness to our customers regarding our offerings and these platforms further play a positive role in witnessing a growing customer base. SME's capitalizing on social media platforms are able to impart awareness to their customers sufficiently and not only this but by increasing the visibility of the businesses on social media platforms, it has been observed that these SME's are able to attract more customers, resulting

in growing their existing customer base as mentioned by the participants. Moreover, the findings of this research are consistent with the study conducted by Oztamur & Sarper (2014) proclaimed that putting up an advertising message on social media platforms serves as a great tool for creating awareness amongst the desired customer group.

The outcome of the thematic analysis further show that social media platforms can be used by SMEs to create awareness amongst the customers for a long period of time. A major explanation given in this regard pertained to the cost-effective nature of this medium. Different participants supported the importance of social media platforms for small businesses. Participants such as Mizanur Rahaman and Muslima Khatun mentioned that since the SMEs do not contain a vast financial budget to impart awareness to the customers regarding their offerings, the role of social media platforms becomes imperative. Through social media platforms, SME's are able to advertise their products and services thereby creating awareness amongst their desired customer group that too at a sufficiently lower cost. Though the findings of the research have pointed out some of the challenges of social media platforms for the SME's such as the information that is made available on these social media platforms can be utilized by the competitors and furthermore the prevalence of negative feedback was considered to be a major disadvantage of these platforms as stated by the participants, Mr. Suraj and Mr. Shafiq ul Islam respectively. However, a study put forward by Atwong (2015) proclaimed that social media platforms extend opportunities for SMEs to effectively communicate with their customers and understand their needs and demands to create awareness amongst them appropriately. Moreover, according to Taneja & Toombs (2014), executing marketing functions through social media platforms has been a successful way for SMEs to spread awareness among the consumers to gain positive results. Thus, building upon these facts it can be abruptly stated that social media platforms can adequately assist SMEs to continue imparting awareness amongst their desired customer group by relatively operating at lower costs.

In a nutshell, the information disclosed by the different participants who belonged to the SMEs industries opined the fact that social media platforms serve as a strong marketing tool for the SMEs to reach their targeted potential customers more effectively and impart relevant awareness to them alongside ensuring crafting a profitable relationship with the customers (Vásquez & Escamilla, 2014). Thus, the findings of the study proclaim that social media platforms and strategy play a pivotal role

for the SMEs to create awareness amongst the customers alongside generating other advantages such as recording an increased customer base and establishing fruitful relationships with them.

### **3.2 Recommendations for SMEs**

Social media is described as a time-saver for operating the marketing of a business, attracting clients, reaching a wider coverage of audience plus gain finance-related benefits to the business, and allowing sharing of information and increased interactive moments with customers.

In good terms, the recommendation to owners of small businesses is to dedicate periods and use that time well over the platform to maintain awareness of their brand. Also, they should give a budgeted expenditure to spend while running the operations on the online platform. They should be organized and run the chosen platforms to reach wider clients' coverage and fulfill their desires.

For faster outputs, expertise in marketing socially should be assigned to run all the social accounts of the business. Futural will benefit the owner's time saving, interacting with clients, and capturing both homeland and outside clients. Besides, timetabling the social operation plans, automatic content creation, plus advice acquiring from well-experienced personals is another recommendation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Covid has affected the SMEs badly and Small firms and medium firms are at high risks compared to the bigger enterprises as they might not be prepared (Durst & Henschel, 2021). The Main findings of the study revealed that SME's relied heavily on using social media platforms to attain their business objectives of attracting customers, imparting awareness to them, and building interactive relationships with them in a cost-efficient manner. Given the kind of exponential increase in the development of SMEs, there is a growing need for establishing strong ties between businesses and their targeted customer base. If SMEs wish to sustain their position in the marketplace, they have to ensure that they are able to gain the attention of long lasting and extremely loyal customers in the long-run. Evidence reviewed from past research studies have shown that SMEs widely using the social media platforms for to interact with their customers because it exhibits clear communication between a business and its customers. Moreover, it also enables the SME to understand the changing demand of the customers so that they may respond to it effectively and remain competitive in the marketplace as well. Based upon the findings of this research, social media is an effective strategic tool for SMEs to gain presence in the marketplace and gain a competitive position in the long-run. The most popular social media platforms used by the SMEs are Facebook and Instagram and majority of the businesses did prefer Facebook more based upon the needs and requirements of their targeted audiences.

In today's technological era, social media has gained more importance as a marketing and advertising tool that leads to the success of an organization, product, or service. This is exactly what almost all the participants had agreed upon, except a few who still did not trust this new marketing tool. There were some participants who had thought that due to the access of information shared through the social media platforms, it can benefit the competitors as well and might give the opportunity to target upon the specific products or services campaign altogether. It was found out to be the primary reason for some of the participants to not depend upon social media campaigns for the success of their businesses. Past research studies have highlighted that SMEs are the often small in size, so they are highly engaged with innovation and are flexible in nature. The flexible nature of SMEs allows them to adopt innovative ways to market their products such as through social media platforms. Nonetheless, the findings of the research do propose, to make use of a mix of marketing methods to reach out to the targeted customers. For some, customer loyalty means everything, and which is why

they do not strictly limit themselves to one medium of promotion for their products and services in the long-run.

Research studies have highlighted that the primary goal of all the businesses is to generate maximum profits. Social media marketing supports the SMEs to spread awareness amongst the target audiences as it helps the SMEs to spread awareness about their products, services, and other facilities to the potential customers. It also increases the chances of converting potential to actual customers which raises the overall revenue of the SME. Based upon the respondents in the research, it was found out that the SMEs usually rely more upon the feedback and reviews given by their customers through social media to improve their overall products as well as service quality. It is a major concern for any business is to ensure that the customers are returning back home fully satisfied with the products and the services altogether. In this research majority of the respondents were restaurant owners, they relied upon the reviews of the customers to improve their overall product and service quality. Evidently, social media platforms provide various advantages to the SMEs which mainly includes low-cost marketing and reaching large potential customers. There were some respondents who did not entirely depend upon social media platforms as they did not find it much trusting in the long-run. However, research shows that since Social media marketing does not require any special IT knowledge and skills, it becomes easier for the SMEs to utilize without fulfilling any extra requirement whatsoever. This is the main reason as to why majority of the business owners even found social media marketing as an effective tool for reaching out to the target markets in an effective manner.

The content one shares through social media platforms also holds a lot of importance. If the content is found engaging for the customers, only then the social media campaigns will even benefit the organizations in the long-run. Research studies have stressed upon creating attractive and engaging content for the social media in order to attract more customers towards their brand. It is also important for the SMEs to plan their posting schedule because posting advertisement at the right time can gain better results on social media platforms, as compared to posting randomly. It is also important to possess analytical skills to understand the results and performance of the ads. Accurate analysis can strengthen the SMEs and guide them to improve their content and other factors as well to translate the social media marketing efforts into some profitable numbers for the businesses as well. Moreover, the businesses can also make use of social media marketing to gauge the consumer patterns as well, based upon their usage and overall patterns on the social media. The restaurant owners relied more upon the

interactions with the customers since their opinions mattered the most when it comes to introducing any new product or planning to revamp the business model altogether. In order to reap maximum advantage from the social media campaigns, the business owners need to have command over the specific analytical tools to carefully analyze and basically decode the information collected through social media platforms altogether. If the business owners are not able to make appropriate use of the information collected through social media marketing, the time and the money invested upon its campaign will only result in more and more losses for the business in the long-run.

The main concern of some of the respondents was whether the information shared over the social media platforms was genuine enough or not. Since anyone can post anything about the brand, their products, or services, they cannot filter out genuine posts from bogus fake posts. Research shows, as the technology is getting advanced and people are shifting more towards digital world, the number of users of social media platforms all over the global world has risen. It has provided these SMEs with an opportunity to reach a large pool of customers in an effective manner but does expose everyone, from clients to customers to competitors, free access to large sums of information that can be sometimes used to cause losses for the business in the long-term. If the social media marketing campaigns are executed in a manner that the posts are regularly scrutinized and the social media pages are given the due attention by the SMEs, it will not be difficult to filter out irrelevant and bogus customers posts from the genuine ones. It is a concern for businesses, to ensure that they are showing a positive side of their business through their social media pages and that can only be done through establishing separate teams for social media campaigns and a lot responsibilities to each individual member to ensure that the information is screened and filtered out.

On the whole, social media marketing is an effective marketing tool for SMEs as it enables the businesses to establish a strong connection with their targeted customers altogether. Social media has enabled everyone to stay connected with one another 24/7 around the clock, be it between people or with business altogether. This is the actual strength of this particular medium; it takes the information about your products and services to your target populations in a time effective manner with the most minimalistic costs incurred altogether.

Conclusively, sharing information helps the SMEs acquire an identification in public, good relationship with customers, achieve financial gains, and attract clients to buy products. The

information gathered from references bridges the gap, compelling businesses to continue using the public broadcasting platform in their operations wisely due to its advantages.

### **Limitations and Future research**

The factor is the small range in understanding the platforms' operation—besides, limited knowledge on the acknowledgment of the advantages of using the platforms to the businesses. Finally, inadequate necessary skills are needed to run the platform. As the interviews were conducted among 10 SMEs, we only managed to achieve limited opinion of the participants. Also, the research was done specifically with small and medium-sized enterprises, and with the limited questions do not clear many areas of maintain awareness activity through social media.

This study still requires more research to develop a better understanding on social media usage to continue awareness among customers. Wide survey or interview process can be done in future to investigate more among SMEs and including clients. Further studies with a broader questions range can develop a deeper picture of awareness maintaining activity through usage of social media platform in SMEs.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1. Interview Questions**

1. In general terms, what can you say about how the company raise awareness regarding its products? (Johansson, 2010)
2. What can you say about the significance of social media for your enterprise to spread awareness regarding your products? (Johansson, 2010)
3. Is your company using only social media platforms to spread awareness of its products? If not, what are the other platforms? (Johansson, 2010)
4. Which social media platforms are used in your company and why are they used? (Johansson, 2010)
5. Why do you think social media is an important marketing tool for your company? (Corvera & Johansson, 2012)
6. What are the pros and cons of social media for raising awareness? (Johansson, 2010)
7. What is your company doing in order to address the mentioned pros and cons of social media for raising awareness (in case social media are used for this purpose)? (Johansson, 2010)
8. How does your company intend to use social media to raise awareness? (Ahmad, 2020)
9. What are the strategies your company is using to raise awareness through social media? (Corvera & Johansson, 2012)
10. Why is your company using these strategies? (Corvera & Johansson, 2012)
11. How does your company measure the success of its social media activities? (Johansson, 2010)
12. Why is it important to measure the performance of social media activities? (Johansson, 2010)
13. Is there anything else you would like to say regarding your company's usage of social media to raise awareness of your company and its products? (Johansson, 2010)

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**Appendix 2. Interview recordings**

[https://livettu-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/ahrazu\\_ttu\\_ee/Eoy9trDbUThAkAzOO6YM-HYB09WicDxxJwihMSPLD\\_RVYw?e=11whPr](https://livettu-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/ahrazu_ttu_ee/Eoy9trDbUThAkAzOO6YM-HYB09WicDxxJwihMSPLD_RVYw?e=11whPr)

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