



Exploring how social media marketing influences small business performance amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago

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The survival of small businesses (SB) is threatened by the economic disruptions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the digital responses of SBs in Trinidad and Tobago. More specifically, the study explores how SBs have integrated social media marketing (SMM) into their business operations and owners' perceptions of its impact on performance. Data were collected from 22 owners via semi-structured synchronous interviews. The findings reveal a series of internal and situational influences that either motivated or hindered SMM use during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results further demonstrate the crippling constraints most SBs face when implementing and evaluating the usefulness of SMM on overall business performance. The results also explain why SBs in developing countries respond differently to SMM than developed countries. The study's insights contribute to SMM knowledge and expose the unique challenges SBs in Trinidad and Tobago face when using SMM during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, e-marketing, small business, social media marketing

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Introduction

The unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are threatening to eliminate the progress made by the Caribbean in human development. It may be the worst test the region has faced since the 2008 financial crisis (Bárcena 2020). Despite the Caribbean's proven resilience, Governments' response to this crisis continues to be significantly undermined by the region's economic and environmental vulnerabilities arising from its smaller size and geographical remoteness. These challenges are compounded by the high level of debt, debt financing, and limited access to international support.

Many Caribbean islands are classified as high to middle-income countries. Further, like other emerging nations, the Caribbean region has vulnerable healthcare systems, inadequate infrastructure, and limited absolute resources to tackle the challenges of any national health emergency. The substantial reduction of revenues from international tourism (the dominant revenue stream for many countries), and high governmental restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the pandemic, have resulted in dire short-

term economic and social consequences for the people of the region. However, experts have warned that these measures will have lasting effects on the region's human capital, productivity, and behavior (OECD 2021). Notably, according to scholars, the COVID-19 pandemic is a different type of crisis (Clapp & Mosley 2020).

The abruptness and global spread make it one of the most defining crises in recent times. The supply chain disruptions, lockdown measures, and global recession have resulted in massive job losses and have a severe knock-on effect on all types of businesses worldwide. In terms of the Caribbean, small businesses (SB) are the backbone to the region's economies, given their significant contributions to the region's social and economic development. In Trinidad and Tobago, they represent over 60 percent of the businesses registered and employ over 30 percent of the country's labor force (Rambocas & Haynes-Burke 2021). They also account for 70 to 85 percent of business activity in Trinidad and Tobago (MOF 2020). But, the contribution of the sector is being threatened by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like their counterparts in developed countries, SBs are disproportionately affected by shocks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic (UNCTAD 2021).

The financial fragility and massive disruptions in business operations have threatened the sustainability and recovery of many SBs. For example, the economic slowdown caused by the numerous governmental restrictions and ongoing lockdowns has temporarily forced many SBs to withdraw from the market or close business operations entirely. According to a report published by the International Labor Organization (ILO 2021), the Caribbean is among the worst affected regions of the world and experienced one of the sharpest economic contractions by seven percent. The vulnerabilities of smaller enterprises and their limited cash buffers have made these businesses less resilient to the crisis (OECD 2021). Like their Caribbean associates, SBs in Trinidad and Tobago are financially fragile and possess minimal reserves.

The mandatory lockdown measures mean severe reduction in customer demand and major supply chain disruptions. According to recent estimates, approximately 50 percent of small businesses only have enough of a cash buffer for two weeks or less (Bartik et al. 2020, Zickuhr 2020). In this regard, many SBs are running out of money and are at increased risk of permanently closing their doors. Fraccastoro et al. (2021) argued that social media could be a beneficial tool to engage customers and increase sales revenue. This tool provides low cost and practical alternatives to diversify sales and marketing efforts. The benefits are magnified considering the rise in social media usage during the pandemic.

Given this reality, researchers are encouraging SB owners to keep abreast of the changing market conditions and adopt social media marketing (SMM) to support their businesses (Liguori & Pittz 2020). However, in actuality, SMM is a vastly underutilized channel, particularly in developing countries where most SB owners experience high levels of discomfort and uncertainty with digital marketing technology (Abou-Shouk et al. 2013). Nevertheless, despite the distrust and relatively low adoption, social media profoundly affects how businesses reach and engage customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This exponential increase has led many experts to believe that the technology will become a mainstay in the post-pandemic period. The hastened acceptance, coupled with the disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, make this context worthy of examination.

This study provides added value to the existing academic discourse by investigating three research questions: (1) how has COVID-19 affected SBs in Trinidad and Tobago; (2) how have SBs utilized SMM during the COVID-19 pandemic; and, (3) what are the perceived effects of SMM on SB performance during the COVID-19 pandemic? This study contributes to the limited research on SBs and their corresponding response to the COVID-19 crisis. It also highlights the unique challenges businesses face in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean in general.

Literature Review

Social Media Marketing (SMM): A Theoretical Overview

The revolution of social media in the early 2000s has reduced spending in traditional forms of marketing communications and invigorated the shift to online alternatives (Venciūtė 2018). SMM is defined as an interdisciplinary and cross-functional marketing concept that relies on social media (often combined with other communications channels) to create value for stakeholders (Felix et al. 2017). SMM continues to gain popularity due to its relevance to firms of all sizes. It allows companies to interact with customers in a direct, timely, cost-effective, and efficient manner compared to traditional forms of marketing (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard 2013). It can also improve customer engagement, relationships, transmit information, and enhance market reach (Chatterjee & Kar 2020, Huh 2018, Venciūtė 2018). But, while SMM is being embraced by various organizations and researchers worldwide, many SBs have great difficulties integrating these new tools into their marketing strategy (He et al. 2017, Schaupp & Bélanger 2014). The literature discloses several reasons for the slow adoption of SMM and points to limited organizational capability and scarce resources as significant contributors (Kacker & Perrigot 2016). Relying on the resource-based theory (RBV), these authors argued that the effective use of social media channels requires valuable resources, skills, competencies, and financial commitment. The RBV promotes an inside-out perspective on firm-related strategy by examining a firm's internal capabilities and resources to determine the level of competitive advantage (Madhani 2009). Therefore, to fully capitalize on the potential of SMM, companies should match their strategy with the amount of financial, human, and physical resources available. The harsh realities of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced many businesses to rethink their strategy and allocate resources to survive the current business environment. In the context of SBs, the SMM efforts are usually described as inadequate or poorly executed (Taneja & Toombs 2014).

Although SMM is less costly than traditional marketing, it requires extended time, effort, and skills (Oji et al. 2017). Authors also call for a strategic reform of attitudes and behaviors of entrepreneurs to effectively adapt to the changing trends of the marketplace (Cole et al. 2017). Large companies generally have more financial resources to employ web designers, marketers, and other personnel to effectively use social media, whereas SBs usually have limited financial resources and human resources (Taneja & Toombs 2014). According to Tafesse & Wien (2018), the core dimensions of effective SMM implementation include a social media strategy, an active presence, customer engagement, and social media analytics. The authors assert that an effective social media strategy ensures that social media usage is aligned with the strategic marketing objectives. It involves establishing clear objectives and expectations, reinforcing organization-wide commitment, efficiently allocating resources to support the marketing goals, and adhering to clear policies and procedures that guide decisions, content, and customer interactions (Pentina & Koh 2012).

The second dimension of effective SMM implementation involves establishing an active presence on multiple social media platforms. Maintaining an active social media presence involves continuously updating content, testing innovative promotional ideas, and interacting with customers regularly (Tafesse & Wien 2018). Through an active presence, firms can guide customer conversation in their favor, expand customer reach, increase brand exposure, deter competitors' impact on customers, and quickly respond to competitive threats. The third dimension of an effective social media strategy involves using engagement tactics to motivate customers to participate actively and react to a firm's online presence. Researchers suggest that engagement is usually high when a businesses present fascinating, original, and transformational content to potential clients. Direct and timely responses and incentives such as rewards, discounts, and competitions can also positively influence engagement and brand reputation (Li et al. 2021). The final dimension of social media analytics refers to collecting and assessing customer data to make evidence-based marketing decisions. Businesses can use the data to understand consumer

sentiments and overall market trends. Standard metrics used in SMM include consumer reach, levels of engagement, and web traffic. Other measures include tracking the magnitude and quality of customer responses and the number of brand mentions. Companies also monitor consumers' general feelings and opinions by surveying the volume and valence of consumer-generated content on social media and the conversion rates and return on investment (Rambocas & Pacheco 2018).

The literature affirms that effective SMM is hinged on a holistic and integrated approach to marketing and may involve different customer-oriented initiatives including product/service, marketing and e-marketing, web 1.0 website, and web 2.0 social media (Constantinides 2014, Durkin et al. 2013). The product/service initiative involves offering a high-quality product/service using a customer or market-oriented approach and focuses on the value customers receive from the product or service they consume. Marketers must ensure that the value derived from consumption matches the consumers' expectations. Social media has fostered more sophisticated customers and equipped them to conduct extensive research on a product before purchasing. Therefore, if customers encounter consistent negative reviews on the quality of a product or service online, this can discourage future purchases and defeats the purpose of engaging in SMM. As such, firms must be proactive by defining the primary objectives, unique differentiation and positioning strategy, and selling propositions. Additionally, firms should focus on continuous improvements and innovation of products, processes, and marketing systems (McCann & Barlow 2015).

The second initiative involves maintaining a market-oriented perspective that supports traditional and online marketing activities (Constantinides 2014). Various business processes such as production, customer service, and sales must adapt to the online platform and provide value to customers simultaneously. Although it may be difficult for many small businesses due to their limited resources and capabilities, it is achievable and necessary for survival. Following the formulation of a market-oriented organization, companies must establish a credible web presence. Customers must navigate a firm's website or business page quickly and effectively satisfy their needs or wants through this platform. The literature highlights that website design and performance influence consumer responses, including acquisition and loyalty (Candi et al. 2017). Therefore, companies must ensure that their customers can have an easy and enjoyable online experience with their business page or website.

Finally, a successful online presence sets the tone for SMM implementation, i.e., utilizing social media to achieve marketing objectives. Businesses must assess their internal resources and capabilities to perform their desired social media strategy. A company may choose to implement a passive or active social media strategy or combine both approaches to achieve its goals. The passive process involves surveying the online sentiments and expressions, as an invaluable source of unsolicited information. On the other hand, the active approach consists of aggressively engaging social media as a mechanism for sales and communication. It would involve different tactics and strategies to acquire new customers and retain existing ones (Nakara et al. 2012).

The Relationship between SMM Implementation and Business Performance

Many researchers have made the broad assumption that SMM or e-marketing may influence business performance. Tafesse and Wien (2018) show a substantial and positive relationship between the core dimensions of SMM and firm performance but note that active presence alone may not result in high social media performance. In addition, the social media algorithm does not guarantee that a firm's content will reach a broad audience based on the active presence or customer engagement. Firms should decide on the type of activity based on the specific social media platform being used (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard 2013). The literature also supports a positive association between social media performance and marketing performance. More specifically, the literature suggests that favorable social media feedback, increased follower base, and web traffic, have a strong and positive effect on market-based

outcomes of increased sales and customer loyalty (Chatterjee & Kar 2020). However, these findings were limited to Indian firms that engage in active SMM. As such, this study intends to fill the gap by exploring the relationship between SMM implementation and business performance among SBs in Trinidad and Tobago. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework relating to SMM and SB Performance in the context of Trinidad and Tobago.

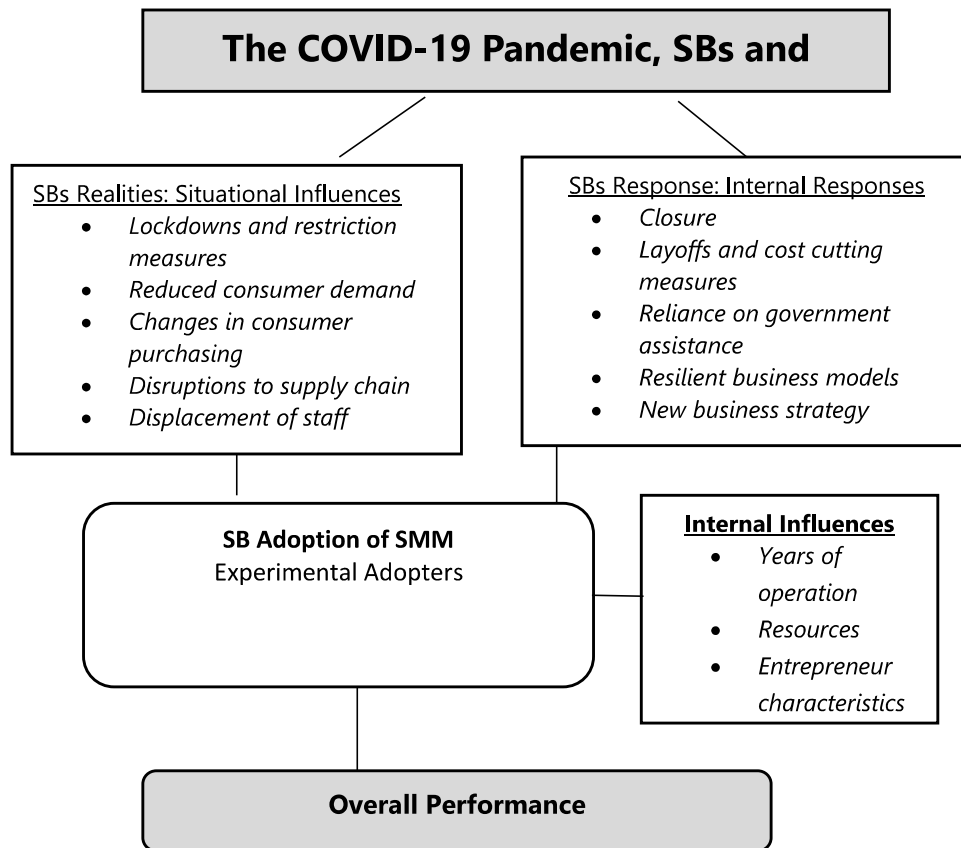


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework – SMM and SB Performance in Trinidad and Tobago

Source: the authors

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach to its research design. The exploratory, naturalistic and purposeful nature of the qualitative research design deemed it the most suitable approach for exploratory studies (Abdou & Zaazou 2021). The data collection involved the use of synchronous semi-structured interviews. This method allowed the elaboration of responses and further probing to clarify the answers. It also facilitated nonverbal recording cues, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and observing other non-verbal cues, which would result in better communication with the interviewee (DeCarlo 2018). The semi-structured interview method involved using an interview guide with solid theoretical support from the literature (Dumay & Qu 2011).

Sampling Technique

The non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed for this study. This process entailed using the researcher's knowledge of and judgement in the contribution of the participants to guide the

selection of participants (Taherdoost 2016). The qualifications for participation included three selection criteria: namely, (1) business owners must employ 25 or fewer persons (based on the Ministry of Finance's (MOF 2020) definition of micro and small enterprises); (2) maintain a social media presence by owning a business page(s) on a social media platform such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, operating their business website or utilizing social messaging/networking apps like WhatsApp to conduct business operations; and (3) must have been in existence before COVID-19.

Data Collection

The primary data were collected over five weeks and involved a series of stages. First, a list of 101 potential participants was compiled from online searches on the Trinidad and Tobago business directory and two popular social media platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram, as well as referrals from small businesses owners. Second, the researchers verified the legitimacy of each business presence on social media by visiting the pages and searching for indicators of legitimacy, which included evidence of active customer reviews, a listed location, images of their products or services and follower/following count ratio. Third, a pre-notification e-mail was dispatched to the owner of each SB, followed by a formal invitation to participate in the study. Twenty-two qualified businesses agreed to participate. Although small, this sample size meets the Durst et al. (2021) range of 5 to 25 interviews. Our sample size of 22 fell within the authors' upper limit and was deemed appropriate. The majority of the participants were located in Trinidad (20) and represented seven business sectors, including food and beverage (9), tourism and event planning (3), health and personal care (3), retail services (3), transportation (2), childcare (1) and maintenance (1). Relative to experience, most businesses had less than five years of experience in the market (14) and employed less than ten employees (19). Each participant was given the option to be interviewed via the videoconferencing platform Zoom, or telephone. Both options satisfied the COVID-19 protocols and facilitated the ability to communicate in real time with geographically dispersed individuals (Ambagtsheer et al. 2019). All interviews were guided by an interview guide containing approximately 21 questions to ensure consistency, adequately address the research objectives, prevent unnecessary distractions and keep each session within an appropriate timeframe. Additionally, each interview was recorded and transcribed by one of the authors of this paper.

Data Analysis and Results

For analysis, the study followed the guidelines discussed by Punch & Oancea (2014), which involved a series of steps. Firstly, each recording was transcribed by one of the authors. Each author independently coded all the interviews by categorizing the statements into key themes, sub-themes and categories using axial coding. The authors repeated the coding process until all significant ideas from each interview were grouped into themes, sub-themes and categories. Finally, every theme, sub-theme and category was discussed by the co-authors and disagreements were resolved before the process continued. A description is presented in Table 1.

The Themes

Theme 1 - The Effects of COVID-19 on Business Operations

The disruption to business operations is experienced across both islands, although the effects appeared direr for tourist operators in Tobago. Both participants from Tobago reported substantial losses because of the border closure. The participants indicated that although domestic travel persisted during the pandemic, the amount of business received from local tourism was insufficient to justify operations. In addition, the ongoing governmental restrictions is causing severe difficulty in planning and coordinating operations to accommodate domestic tourists. Our results also show that the impact of COVID-19 on

business operations also varied by type of business (brick and mortar vs online establishments). Based on the interviews conducted, 12 SBs were classified as brick and mortar businesses, i.e. they operate from fixed locations.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Sub-themes and Categories

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories
Effects of COVID-19	Operational challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent and lengthy lockdown measures • Closure of businesses • Changes to business hours • Severity of effect vary by type of business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe effects on tourism • Brick and mortar businesses unable to cope • Restaurants and retail service sectors significantly affected
	Human resource challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee retention • Employee productivity • Employee compensation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High absenteeism and turnover • Inability to support staff during pandemic • Cutbacks and layoffs • Rely on government assistance to pay staff
	Changes in consumer behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant reduction in demand • Panic buying of food and medical supplies • Low demand for hedonic purchases • Shopping anxiety
	Supply chain challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to plan and forecast demand • Rationing of supplies • Cash flow constraints • Unable to receive timely supplies • Higher prices
Decision to Adopt SMM during COVID-19 pandemic	Internal influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newly established businesses were more comfortable with SMM • Personal experience with using social media platforms • Age of the entrepreneur • Reduction in spending on traditional advertising media • Availability of financial resources
	Situational Influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desperation driven by restrictions and lockdown measures • Changing consumer patterns • New business opportunities
Implementing SMM	Early Adopters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low cost • Ad hoc implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning through trial and error • Used mainly for information and online ordering • Unaware of how to optimize the use of the media
Performance	Absence of evaluation and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change to sales but unable to monitoring effects on customer acquisition and retention

Seemingly, the pandemic had a more negative effect on this type of business than those with an online presence. Perhaps the variations in impact could be attributed to the nature of the local government's restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, which predominantly focused on cutting face-face-contact and large congregations. The participants operating brick and mortar businesses also reported crippling losses incurred as a result of government's ongoing lockdown measures. Closure of business operations means no sales revenue despite having to service recurring expenses such as rent, utilities, and salaries. For those allowed to operate, the drastic decline in sales revenue added to the financial stress and anxieties. Although there was a rollback of restrictions in Trinidad and Tobago towards the latter half of 2020, many customers would have been laid-off and made drastic cuts to their consumption patterns. Many citizens also experienced severe financial difficulties, which ultimately resulted in a significant change in type of goods purchased and quantities. Further, the purchase of non-essential and luxury items has been drastically reduced because of the uncertainties, panic and anxieties being experienced. The employees also endured hardship. During lockdown periods, most businesses are unable to continue to pay employees. Several of the interviewees relied on local government assistance programs. They assisted with and encouraged employees to apply for governmental for government support in the form of salary relief grants, income support grants, food hampers and other social assistance programmes.

In other cases, the disruptions resulted in consumer panic buying, causing an enormous logistical and operational challenge for some SBs, particularly those in the food sector. In some cases, retailers were overwhelmed with rising demand and a challenging supply chain. To cope with the surge, some businesses rationed supplies or altered business hours. Others faced rising prices from suppliers, which could not have been passed on to the consumers. This increased operational cost was also evident by the additional security measures that had to be implemented to continue with operations and the high overtime cost for those servicing the increased demands. These rising costs of operation contributed to the reduced return on investment. The carnage from the COVID-19 pandemic also had a drain on the skills and human capital available to SBs to continue business operations. Many SBs lost talented and trained staff due to the forced displacement, restrictions, business closure and anxieties. This turnover caused additional costs in hiring and training new employees. Further, the level of productivity seemed remarkably lower for some. These losses have forced these businesses to adapt by re-strategizing and seeking alternative avenues to increase sales. Examples of these strategic measures mentioned by participants include the addition of new services, such as a delivery options, flexible opening hours, and offering online ordering platforms.

However, in sharp contrast to the traditional bricks and mortar companies, the non-traditional establishments had a more practical short-term response. Many businesses already had a digital presence, and some had already integrated social media into their marketing campaigns. With some offering e-commerce activities, COVID-19 disruptions resulted in increased sales opportunities from new and existing customers. The digital presence minimized the disruptions associated with restricted movement and governmental lockdowns. The results also showed that the COVID-19 pandemic forced owners to rethink and reconstruct business models to survive and even thrive during the pandemic. Our interviews suggest that many SBs are reimagining what they offer and how they serve the local market. Several businesses are also changing their business models although. For example, our findings showed that many SBs are evaluating the idea of adding e-commerce and online ordering systems. Others are expanding the range of services they offer and targeting new segments of the local markets.

Theme 2 – The Decision to Adopt Social Media during COVID-19 Lockdowns

The results showed that most SBs rely heavily on social media alternatives to reach target audiences. The majority of interviewees (20) revealed that they now rely heavily on social media due to the pandemic. The RBV supports this finding as it alludes to the fact that businesses will mobilize resources and take strategic actions to respond to external changes in the business environment, such as the COVID-19 pandemic

(Venciūtė 2018). The responses show that the less-experienced business owners and recently established businesses appeared more open towards integrating digital technology into their sales and marketing approaches than the older and more experienced business owners. Additionally, many older business owners seemed to be sceptical of the usefulness of SMM for business. For these owners, the decision to adopt SMM was primarily driven by younger family members, who assisted with creating a social media presence. Only two interviewees did not use social media. They justified their response by stating that the traditional face-to-face approach worked for them, although they admitted that social media could be helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was a recurring trend of participants emphasizing the increased investment in sponsored ads during the pandemic, which is an option offered on the Facebook and Instagram platforms. Businesses across varying sectors recognized the benefit of using this advertising tool to gain potential customers. Our results also show that most interviewees either have plans to enhance their SMM presence or have recently upgraded their SMM strategy. With the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, the results show that small businesses recognize the pivotal role of SMM for growth and survival. Another significant finding about the increased reliance on social media is that most participants view traditional marketing methods as obsolete and use SMM as their primary form of advertising.

Theme 3 – Implementing SMM by SBs

The findings from the interview suggest that the majority of SBs were at the early stages of adopting SMM and can be classified as experimental adopters. Many are still trying to understand the media's potential and have not fully executed an active presence or actions to engage consumers. Only a few interviewees were keenly monitoring the social media analytics. Our results show that adoption is primarily driven by a sense of desperation to survive during the lockdown measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Most companies have adopted a low-cost strategy towards managing social media marketing activities and have either built the social media themselves or received assistance from family members and personal associates. Updates are based on the business owner time and resources.

However, several SBs interviewed indicated that despite the ad hoc presence, they intend to use digital marketing, including social media platforms post COVID-19. The findings also revealed little to no structure towards the implementation process, with most content being hastily developed. Further, the interviews suggest that the use of SMM vary by the age of the SB, with owners of more recognized companies being more cautious in adopting the media than newly established operations. For example, one business owner whose business has been in existence for more than 35 years stated that the implementation of his SMM strategy was slow and organic and materialized over two to three years. However, another owner whose business has been in operation for just over two years stated that her presence was almost instant and started with a personal social media page. The results also reinforced the capacity challenge, and several owners indicated that they lack the requisite skills and competencies to manage the SMM functions effectively.

In summary, the findings revealed three main factors affecting SMM adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic, including current business realities and responses, business age, and internal resources. The onset of the coronavirus pandemic accelerated the adoption of SMM. SMM is viewed as a new territory for many of the older businesses with more experienced owners. Therefore, the transition from mainly traditional marketing to SMM is gradual. For new and emerging companies with less experienced business owners, SMM is viewed as the latest trend and a necessity for success. For these businesses, SMM is more likely to be adopted much earlier. Limited internal resources, which many of the participants commented on, can prevent some critical steps of the SMM strategy from being carried out, affecting its quality and structure. Some of the participants of this study believe they lack the resources to pursue an online business strategy.

Theme 4 – SMM and the Financial Performance

The findings suggest that SBs had very few mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of their social media presence. Interviewees admitted to a hasty implementation, with little to no consideration of monitoring and evaluating the success of their SMM efforts. Further, the SBs interviewed in this study seemed to have only developed a presence on social media as a COVID-19 defense strategy, with minimal implications for long-term business decisions. This conclusion is supported by the following comments

Most of the SBs we interviewed in this study admitted that social media is critical for their survival during the pandemic. However, they were unable to quantify the amount of revenue received from the strategy. In addition, the interview responses revealed that systematic tracking of data is not a common occurrence among the SBs interviewed. All of the participants maintain a system to track their sales. However, the systematic tracking of specific aspects such as social media performance, new customer acquisition and customer loyalty is not prioritized. It may be one explanation for why the full impact of SMM implementation is not realized.

Discussion

Overall, the study offers a unique perspective on SB and SMM. It also adds to the limited research on the impact of COVID-19 in developing countries. More specifically, the study provides insights into the adoption of SMM by SB in Trinidad and Tobago and perceptions of its impact on overall business performance amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While various researchers propose that SMM is necessary for business survival in the post-pandemic period, the issues and challenges faced by SBs in developing countries are overlooked (Salam et al. 2021).

This study addressed the gap. The findings support the notion that SMM is an essential tool for business survival and sustainable competitive advantage. It contributes to existing research by highlighting the intervening factors which either enhance or impede the relationship between effective SMM implementation and improved business performance. Also, the conceptual framework developed in the study summarizes the unique experience SBs in Trinidad and Tobago during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may be different from the experiences of small and larger firms in other geographical locations. Finally, the study explores the perceptions of SB owners on the impacts of SMM during the COVID-19 and revealed mixed results. It demonstrated numerous challenges SB owners confront in planning and implementing the SMM strategy.

It further unraveled a host of difficulties in monitoring and evaluating performance-related outcomes. Many owners could not have accounted for the effect of SMM on overall performance. In addition, several owners appeared unconvinced that SMM can be a viable alternative in the post-pandemic environment. The study uncovered different reasons for this view which were mainly attributed to the characteristics of the SB and its owner, the level of resources, skills and competencies to manage the strategy and lack of monitoring performance indicators. These findings expose the unique challenges of SBs in a developing country, which may be very different from those encountered in developed countries. SBs in developed countries usually have access to well-developed infrastructure, fast broadband speed, access to specialist training and services, and easy access to technology.

Further, this study exposes the specific challenges in responding to the abrupt disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic from a developing country context. The findings can further explain why SBs in developing countries respond differently to SMM compared to their counterparts in developed countries (Rugova & Prenaj 2016). Finally, the findings identified the significant challenges SB face during the COVID-19 pandemic but also recognized the resilience of many SB, as some pursued new marketing opportunities despite the disruptions and uncertainties. It also supports the view that small businesses can enjoy a robust recovery post-COVID-19 pandemic due to their innovativeness and flexibility. Still, strategic support is needed to bolster business owners' self-efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness (UNCTAD 2021).

Implications for Managers

The study also presents practical implications for SBs. Firstly, it demonstrates SMM acceptance by SBs and highlights the unique challenges owners and managers experience with this technology. It is helpful to owners and policymakers as it unearths the future potential of this technology for SBs. Second, the study revealed several internal constraints which impede the effective use of the technology. Knowledge of these constraints will be necessary to owners, policymakers, and business professionals interested in promoting SMM among SBs in Trinidad and Tobago. Also, the findings revealed that some business owners do not believe that their social media performance support significant financial returns and therefore pay little to no attention to it. While sales are valuable, especially during this pandemic, the other essential marketing outcomes such as customer loyalty and customer acquisition appear to be overlooked. Finally, policymakers can meet with small business owners to create mutually beneficial solutions to address increased unemployment following the onset of COVID-19 and the limited resources available to these businesses. Additionally, business owners commented on the costly and challenging process of implementing an e-commerce platform. Therefore, governmental authorities and policymakers can work with independent financial institutions to devise solutions to make the transition to online marketing and e-commerce easier.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite its relevance, the study is not without limitations which create opportunities for future research. An in-depth analysis of the magnitude of the impact of the different constraints unearthed by this study can help further our understanding of the use of SMM by SB and add to the academic and managerial merits of this stream of work. Additionally, extending the study to other Caribbean territories can deepen our understanding of SMM and SBs. Future researchers may want to build on the proposed conceptual model and verify its applicability in different research environments. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the perceptions and use of SMM by SBs in Trinidad and Tobago during a crisis, which can help bolster response and mitigate future challenges.

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