

The Use of the Internet and Social Media by Microenterprises in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The main purpose of this paper was to investigate the utilization of the Internet and social media by microenterprises in South Africa. Forty microenterprises participated in the survey and data was collected through the use of self-administered questionnaire in a survey. The convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used in the paper. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and t-test. The results indicated that majority of the respondents are partly aware of social media, however most of them use it for non-business purposes such as reconnecting with friends. Majority of the respondents indicated that online marketing is not included in their business' strategy. The t-test results indicated that there is no gender difference on the use of Internet and social media. It is recommended that the government should device a consortium of strategies aimed at imparting knowledge and creating strong social media awareness among microenterprises in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis (2016) note that microenterprises' activities contribute immensely to gross domestic product and sustainable economic growth of most countries especially in developing countries. According to the parliament of the Republic of South Africa (1995), "A microenterprise is a business with total full time of equivalent paid employees below 5, total annual turnover of less than R150,000 and total gross asset value (fixed property excluded) of less than R100,000". Khosa and Kalitanyi (2014) point out that microenterprises range from spaza shops, Internet cafes, home-based businesses, small-scale construction, mini taxis to textile manufacturing. Munoz (2010) reasons that regardless of the small size of microenterprises, their significance is noted without doubt in both developed and developing countries. According to Jili et al. (2017), microenterprises are one of the most important vehicles to address a plethora of problems facing South Africa. The Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) (2016) concurs by pointing out the significance of microenterprises towards job creation, income generation and towards improving business activities in South Africa. Iwu et al. (2016) identify the

microenterprise sector as the dominant business sector in the country. A significant number of microenterprises in South Africa fall in the retail and commerce sector (Fatoki 2014).

Regardless of their potential to immensely contribute to the economy, microenterprises experience high levels of failure (Fatoki 2014; Griffin-EL 2014). Alarminglly this sector has been neglected in small business research (Samujh 2011). According to Scheers (2016) as well as Bruwer and Van Den Berg (2017), microenterprises experience a failure rate between seventy and eighty percent. This casts doubt on this sector's ability to sustain the developmental needs of South Africa. This high failure rate is attributed to a plethora of challenges among which is lack of funds to make use of traditional media campaigns, and stiff competition from well-established business. The extant literature reveals a low adoption and usage rate of Internet and social media by microenterprises. Majority of them use social media for non-business purposes with just a few utilizing it as a business tool (Lekhanya 2013).

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to highlight the benefits microenterprises can derive from the use of the Internet and social media. Evans (2010) argues that the inception of

Internet based social media has completely changed how business is conducted. According to Goldstuck (2012), South Africa has a well-connected infrastructure as compared to other African countries. Goldstuck (2012) suggests that microenterprises can utilize the opportunity presented by the Internet by creating websites, adopting online payment options and keeping updated on the developments in the business environment. According to extant literature, the inception of the Internet and social media came as an antidote to a plethora of challenges faced by microenterprises. Ukpere et al. (2014) acknowledge the Internet as an effective and efficient payment platform, which microenterprises can use to speed their transactions with customers. Tran (2015) points out that the use of the Internet and social media improves the performance of microenterprises in that it is a two-way communication, and hence gives them a chance to get feedback from their customers. Considering that most microenterprises are faced with budget constraints to promote their products, the use of Internet and social media offer them a cost effective alternative to reach their customers (Tran 2015). More importantly is that good use of Internet and social media by microenterprises gives them a cutting edge over their well-established business counterparts (Tran 2015). On that note, social media creates a platform for microenterprises to equally compete with large business (Peters et al. 2013). The literature about the use of Internet and social media by micro-enterprises is seemingly sparse in a South African context. It is only a few studies such as Marnewick (2014) and Tran (2015) who focused on microenterprises. Therefore, this paper derives its originality from the sense that it focuses solely on microenterprises. This enables the researcher to understand this sector's behavior towards the use of Internet and social media from a large picture. On that note, the paper aims to delve deeper specifically on the urban microenterprises that are exposed to stiff competition from large, well-established firms.

Objectives

The objectives of the paper were to assess the awareness of Internet and social media by microenterprises, to examine the use of Internet and social media by microenterprises, to find out if microenterprises have a plan on the use

and measurement of Internet and social media effectiveness and to investigate gender differences on the use of Internet and social media by microenterprises.

Literature Review

This paper is grounded on the theory of Technology Acceptance Model. Davies (1989) used the theory to highlight the reasons why users of a system accept or reject a technological system. According to Davies (1989), the decision to accept or reject a system is dependent on whether the user finds the technology user friendly or whether it is worth being adopted. However, such evaluations depend on external factors such as political, cultural and social factors among others. According to Davis (1989), "perceived ease of use is defined as the extent to which the potential user of a system perceives the system to result in free of effort while perceived usefulness is defined as the extent to which a given technology is expected to improve one's job or life performance." Furthermore, Davis (1989) points out that behavioral intents directly or indirectly affects one's actual decision to use a technology. According to Viehland and Leong (2007), a direct relationship exists between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness in that perceived ease of use directly influences the later. These two factors have a combined effect on the user's behavior intention towards technology use. The TAM has been used widely in the extant literature to explain acceptance and use of technology (Viehland and Leong 2007; Park 2009).

The theory of Technology Acceptance Model is highly applicable for this paper. The theory lays out the basis for understanding the reasons why microenterprises can accept or reject the Internet and social media. Given the flexibility nature of microenterprises, it is easy for them to adopt and use new technology. This is supported by the fact that they do not have much to consider as compared to large organizations that are faced with challenges such as changing their organizational cultures to accommodate new technology. Social media improves competitive advantage of microenterprises through gains from customer loyalty and referrals. Since microenterprises are disadvantaged in terms of size and scale of operation, social media offers them a cost effective alternative to reach their target-

ed customers in the same way large business do (Tran 2015). Social media brings remarkable benefits to microenterprises such as lower overall marketing costs, improved customer service as well improved competitive advantage (Al-Mommani et al. 2015). Social media platforms improve the speed at which promotional messages reach the targeted customers (Osatuyi 2013). In support Schreck and Keim (2013) indicate that the use of social media on the other hand enables microenterprises to get feedback from their customers instantly pertaining their views on the products or services offered. This greatly creates a strong reciprocal relationship between the two (Muniz and Schau 2011). Al-Mommani et al. (2015) believe that social media enables microenterprises to customize their product or service offering to their targeted customers which result in sales growth. Furthermore, social media allows microenterprises to create brand awareness of their products and services, educate their customers about their product offerings while at the same time retaining old customers. Saffo and Brake (2009) advice that microenterprises can yield higher returns by utilizing social media. According to Genç and Öksüz (2015), social media provides microenterprises with advantages such as improved customer base, strong customer relations and positioning. Tran (2015) believes that Internet and social media create an online global business community that can make it easy for microenterprises to expand their markets as well as a rich supplier base. The profitability of a microenterprise business lies in its ability to build and maintain strong and positive relations with customers, and hence social media offers such a platform (Schaffer 2013; He and Chen 2014). Trans (2015) concurs by pointing out that microenterprises that do not engage customers via social media risk the chances of failure since their success or failure depends on the relationship they have with their customers.

Types of Social Media

Jagongo and Kinyua (2013) identify social media as a by-product of the Internet. Tran (2015) traces the emergence of social media from a decade ago. There is no universality in the definition of social media given its diverse nature (Langmia et al. 2013). Lietsala and Sirkkunen (2008) concur by pointing out that it is a difficult

task craft one single definition for social media because of its dynamism. Saffo and Brake (2009) define social media as “activities, practices and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media.” Tran (2015) argues that despite the variances in how social media is defined, three features are contained in these definitions, and these are people, platform and content. Chan-Olmsted, Cho and Lee (2013) remark that the utilisation of social media has proliferated over a short space of time. According to Tran (2015), the Internet contains an infinite number of social media. Langmia et al. (2013) say that social media consists of the following platforms like blogs, micro blogs, message boards, wikis, picture and video sharing, podcasts, and digital scrapbooking. Chan-Olmsted et al. (2013) identify social networking as the most frequently used social media. This paper will briefly discuss the social media mostly applicable to microenterprises.

Social Networking

As indicated by Boyd and Ellison (2008), social networking sites are web-based services that connect people by sharing their profiles. Chan-Olmsted et al. (2013) identify Facebook, MySpace, Bebo and LinkedIn as elements of social networking. Stelzner (2009) notes that off late the majority of users are trending towards the use of Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. To top the list, WhatsApp has emerged as another influential social network used by most microenterprises.

Blogs

Zarella (2010) defines blogs as online journals where users can publish short articles. Mayfield (2008) elucidate that blogs are organized in such a way that new entries are always at the top of the published articles in that order. According to O’Leary et al. (2011), blogging tools include WordPress, Blogger, LiveJournal and TypePad.

Micro Blogging

According to Mayfield (2008), micro blogging is a blend of blogging and social networks. It is characterized by the fact that content shared

by users via instant messaging is limited only to 140 characters (Zarella 2010). Micro blogging platforms include Twitter and Jaiku. Java et al. (2007) acknowledge the efficiency of micro blogging in sharing information more.

Content Community or Media Sharing Sites

Zarella (2010) identify content community or media sharing sites as platforms to upload and share photos, videos, music and bookmarks. Tran (2015) says these include photo-sharing sites (Instagram, Flickr, Photobucket and Picasa), video sharing sites (YouTube and Vimeo), visual discovery, sharing, storage tools (Pinterest), public bookmarking tools (Del.icio.us) and news sharing sites (Digg.com). The use of Instagram and YouTube has proliferated among users with a few of them beginning utilize the two as business tools.

Podcasting

Mayfield (2008) defines podcasts as platforms, which users have to subscribe to in order to post audios and videos on the Internet. Podcast platforms include Sound Cloud, Archive.org, Amazon S3, Ourmedia.org, Podomatic, Libsyn, PodBean and Buzzsprout. Recently, Sound Cloud has proved beneficial for most microenterprises, particularly for those in the music industry. This platform has made it easier for them to share their songs online to millions of listeners worldwide.

Gender Differences on the Use of Internet and Social Media by Microenterprises

According to Ukpere et al. (2014), women have been technologically challenged. However, there is a notable improvement towards the adoption of social media by women since the inception of the Web 2.0 or social media. American Express statistics indicate that thirty-seven percent of male entrepreneurs use at least one social media platform compared to forty-three percent of female entrepreneurs. Ukpere et al. (2014) note that male entrepreneurs invest most of their time in staff training and development whilst their female counterparts invest more on acquiring and utilization of social media. A paper by Hammond (2011) reveals that female entrepreneurs use social networks like Facebook and Twitter more than males. Globally there has been a notable trend exhibiting women as more

active users of social media than males (Ukpere et al. 2014). The literature reveals that female entrepreneurs are the first ones to embrace new social media than males in most cases. Shezi (2014) asserts that women use social media more than men.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this paper a quantitative research design was utilized. The self-administered questionnaire was used as a data collection tool where participants responded to a set of questions by choosing the best of option of the answers provided. The questionnaire was adapted from extant literature. At least forty microenterprise owners participated in the survey. The parliament of the Republic of South Africa (1995) defines a microenterprise as “a business with total full time of equivalent paid employees below 5, total annual turnover of less than R150,000 and total gross asset value (fixed property excluded) of less than R100,000.” The selection criteria for a microenterprise were based on the number of employees. Since it was difficult to get a sampling frame for microenterprises, the convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used. The convenience sampling method is a non-probability sampling technique where the participants are selected based on their availability (Cooper and Schindler 2008). According to Fatoki (2014), the snowball sampling method is a non-probability sampling technique where the available participants help the researcher obtain other subjects connected to them. Convenience sampling was used following similar studies (Fatoki 2014; Khosa and Kalitanyi 2014). A pilot study was conducted on 20 microenterprises to ensure face and content validity. On that note, a few important changes were made on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was organized into parts A and B. Part A contained biographical questions, while part B comprised of enquiries about the use of Internet and social media. The researchers utilized descriptive statistics and t-tests to analyze the data and the Cronbach's alpha was employed as a measure of reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

100 questionnaires were distributed among microenterprise owners in Polokwane and 40 came back. The response rate was forty percent.

The results showed that 21 respondents were female and 19 were male. This implies that males still own more businesses than females (Cilliers and Strydom 2016; Mazonde and Carmichael 2016). The results indicate that majority of the microenterprise owners (45%) are in the 31-40 years age group. It is also reported that most of the microenterprise owners (53%) have matric as the highest qualification and operate as sole proprietors. The findings tally with similar empirical studies (Mbumbo 2015). Furthermore, the results showed that most of the microenterprise owners operate mainly in the retail and service industry with majority (64%) in the service sector. Similarly, Small Enterprise Development Agency (2016) found that a significant number of microenterprises operate in the retail and service industries. The authors of this paper believe that microenterprises choose these sectors because they do not require much start-up capital as compared to other sectors like mining. The results indicate that fifty percent of the respondents have no employees while fifty percent employ less than 5 employees. Majority of the microenterprises (65%) have been in operation for a period of between 1 and 5 years while others (35%) have been in business for less than a year.

Descriptive Statistics

The results showed that fifty-two percent of the respondents use social media as explained by a mean of 3.30 and SD of 1.36, which is low. In addition, the findings showed that forty percent of the respondents spend at least 4 hours per day while the remaining sixty percent spend at least 2 hours per day on social media as indicated by a mean of 3.8 and SD of 1.4.

Purpose of Social Media

The results in Table 1 indicate that the respondents agree that they use social media mainly to reconnect with their friends as compared to business purposes as shown by a high

mean of 4.2 and SD of 0.8. The results indicate that the respondents still lag behind considering using social media for business purposes as indicated by the low means. Most of the respondents cited the fact that it is expensive to be always on social media. Lekhanya (2013) shares similar findings. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.7 showed high reliability of measures.

Social Media Types Used By Microenterprises

Table 2 shows the media types used by microenterprises. The results indicate that social networks like Facebook and WhatsApp are frequently used by respondents more than other types as indicated by higher means, Facebook 4.3 and WhatsApp 4.3, respectively. The results are consistent with findings of Stelzner (2009), Chan-Olmsted et al. (2013) and Lekhanya (2013). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient measures are above 0.7 showing high reliability.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of social media types used by microenterprises

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
<i>Social Networks</i>			
Facebook	4.3	1.2	0.9
LinkedIn	1.9	1.3	0.8
MySpace	1.5	0.9	0.8
WhatsApp	4.3	1.3	0.8
<i>Blogs</i>			
WordPress	1.08	0.4	0.7
Blogger	1.08	0.4	0.7
TypePad	1.08	0.3	0.8
Livejournal	1.08	0.4	0.7
<i>Content Community/ Media Sharing Sites</i>			
YouTube	3.3	1.4	0.7
Photobucket	1.6	1.2	0.7
Digg.com	1.1	0.2	0.7
<i>Micro-blogs</i>			
Twitter	3.3	1.4	0.8
<i>Podcasts</i>			
Sound Cloud	2.1	1.2	0.8
Amazon S3	1.0	0.0	0.8
Ourmedia.org	1.1	0.1	0.8
<i>Others</i>	1.0	0.00	0.7

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of purposes for social media

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
Reconnecting with old friends	4.2	0.8	0.8
Increasing customer's awareness of our brand and products/services	3.6	1.0	0.8
Reaching potential customers	3.53	1.0	0.8
Developing customer loyalty	3.5	1.1	0.8
Listening to customer's feedback about company's products/services	3.5	1.1	0.8

Benefits of Social Media

Table 3 shows the benefits of social media to microenterprises. The results indicate that majority of the respondents do not see clear benefits of marketing their products and services using social media as indicated by the low means. This can be attributed to the fact that majority of them have only matric and below as their highest qualification. The results also showed that there is reliability of measures.

Social Media Strategy

The findings reveal that a significant number of the respondents see social media as fairly helpful in creating competitive values for their business as indicated by a scale mean of 2.3 and SD of 0.6, which is low. Microenterprise owners said they wish to adopt social media for business purposes in the future. The results indicate that the usage rate for social media will increase in the future as indicated by a mean of 3.2 and SD of 0.7. However, majority of them do not have a plan at hand to evaluate the usefulness of social media as indicated by a mean of 1.4 and SD of 0.7, which is very low. This is consistent with similar empirical studies such as Tran (2015).

Reasons Why Microenterprises Decide Not to Use Social Media

Table 4 shows the reasons why microenterprises decide not to use social media for business purposes. As indicated in Table 4, majority

of the respondents strongly cited the shortage of time, lack of skills, difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of social media as the reasons why they are currently not using it for business purposes. Furthermore, as reported in Table 4, the results also indicated that they do not see clear benefits associated with social media as a marketing tool. This is consistent with findings of Al-Mommani et al. (2015) and Tran (2015).

t-tests

t-tests were run on a sample of 40 microenterprise owners to determine if there were gender differences on the use of Internet and social media in this group. As indicated in Table 5, the results indicate that there are no gender differences on the use of Internet and social media, as all the significance levels are above the required significant level of 0.05. This is consistent with studies such as South Africa.info (2016).

Table 5: t-test for gender differences

Variable	t-value	Significance level
Purposes for social media	1.5	0.4
Social media types used by microenterprises	1.1	0.2
Benefits of social media	0.2	0.7
Social media strategy	1.6	0.5
Reasons why microenterprise decide not to use social media	0.3	0.8

Sig 0.05

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of benefits of social media

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Increased awareness of our, products, services	3.2	1.3	0.7
Helped us to reach new customers	3.20	1.3	0.7
Helped us to obtain customers' feedback or complaints	3.0	1.4	0.8
Increased visits to our webpages/stores	3.0	1.3	0.8
Others	1.9	1.3	0.7

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of reasons why microenterprises decide not to use social media

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
We do not see clear benefits of social media for our business purposes.	3.6	1.4	0.8
It is challenging to evaluate the usefulness of social media.	4.5	0.5	0.8
Online marketing is not included in our business's strategy.	4.5	0.7	0.8
We have a shortage of time	4.5	0.5	0.7
We do not have qualified staff to strategize and implement social media activities.	4.5	0.75	0.8

CONCLUSION

Microenterprises' activities contribute immensely to gross domestic product and sustainable economic growth of most countries especially in developing countries. However, their level of discontinuance weakens this sector's ability to sustain the developmental needs of South Africa. This paper investigated the use of the Internet and social media by microenterprises as a panacea to the random failure occurring in this sector. The results of this paper revealed a low adoption and usage rate of Internet and social media for business purposes by businesses in the country. Majority of microenterprises use social media for non-business purposes such as reconnecting with friends. It was noted that social networks are widely utilized by the respondents more than other social media types. Furthermore, it was found that majority of them do not see clear benefits of utilizing this platform to market their products. This leaves them vulnerable from stiff competition from well-established firms who have strong financial muscles to use other media for marketing their products. They cited problems such lack of qualified staff to strategize and implement social media activities, shortage of time and that online marketing is not included in their business's strategy. This suggests lack of knowledge about the use of the Internet and social media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The adoption of Internet and social media by microenterprises can go a long way in enhancing the performance of this sector. Therefore, the government is recommended to initiate programs aimed at creating strong social media awareness among this sector in South Africa. In addition, different government bodies should organize a variety of workshops for micro-entrepreneurs, where they can obtain more information about social media use. Furthermore, microenterprise owners should take it upon themselves to attend workshops that can improve their skills particularly on how to harness social media as business marketing tool. This can help them lower their marketing costs and be able to equally compete with large business. Also, microenterprise owners should consider including social media in their business' strategy and device a plan to measure its use and effectiveness.

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