
Social Media Strategies for Marketing in Micro-Level Women Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Women's entrepreneurship can be seen as the foundation of economic growth. Women's companies thrive during challenging times because of their inherent adaptability and flexibility. This study intends to investigate the social media tactics used by female business owners that have effectively converted their offline to online marketing-related operations during the Covid pandemic. The study focused on micro-level female business owners who moved their operations online during the crisis and were still operating successfully. The results of 12 semi-structured interviews and two focus group conversations were examined using thematic analysis. The study also provides a conceptual framework for the empirical study that could be used by future researchers with specifically identified key themes such as active presence, virtual engagement, seizing opportunity, and online referral. The study's other important result was that, even though women in Asian countries often encounter unique challenges when conducting business, these Sri Lankan entrepreneurs encountered no such problems with gender stereotypes. For various stakeholders, including new business owners, policymakers, consultants, managers, and marketing specialists, a greater grasp of these effective tactics would be helpful in growing their online firms. And, that there is a theoretical gap on this subject since there are few studies, particularly in Asia.

Keywords: women entrepreneurship, micro-level, social media, marketing

01. Introduction

The growing tendency of social media and its development led to a drastic change in how entrepreneurs carry out their businesses- i.e., their day-to-day activities, marketing, and customer handling (Olanrewaju, Hossain, Whiteside, & Mercieca, 2020). Due to unique, innovative, and attractive functionalities, many entrepreneurs have commenced using social

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media to carry out many business functions. While Facebook is used by over 50 million business users to manage businesses, across the world around 2 million use it for direct advertising (Zulgarnain, et al., 2020). A slightly similar trend is evident in other social media platforms such as Instagram, where nearly half of users follow a business page (Constantinidis, 2019).

In this transformation, the availability of social media has given immense support to micro-level businesses to not only sustain but also expand their market during the crisis. Especially this was an advantage for women entrepreneurs who find it difficult to go out and move with people to expand their businesses. Further, they got a chance to directly deal with their end customers avoiding several middlemen. Hence, according to Rajahonka and Villman (2019), women entrepreneurs experience challenges but also benefit from advantages when using digital technologies, especially when involved in online activities conducted online.

The period during which the entire world suffered by Covid 19 pandemic can be considered as a period that led people to see the world with different eyes. During this period most of the activities could not be carried out normally and the internet through smartphones was commonly used to continue the activities.

Studying the strategies followed by these micro-level organizations in their survival game during the pandemic would be useful for other start-ups and micro-organizations.

Hence, this study focuses on exploring the social media strategies used by micro-level women entrepreneurs in the transition of their businesses to the digital phase. Further, this discusses the barriers encountered by women entrepreneurs in this transition process. Accordingly, this study differs from previous literature and contributes to the literature in several ways with contributing to the extant theories.

1.1. Research Gap

First, the current study fills the gap in the literature. Even though the potentiality of social media on women entrepreneurs is globally acknowledged, still there are calls for more research regarding ICT and small women businesses adaptation to the digitalized work (Olsson & Bernhard, 2021).

Secondly, this study can be considered as the significant study focusing on micro-level women entrepreneurs and their social media strategies for business growth in the Asian region. Even though there are studies done in North America and Europe on women entrepreneurs (Jose, 2018), there is a lack of research focusing on women in the Asian region.

Thirdly, the existing research shows that there are gender gaps in the use of ICT for businesses. Hence this three can be considered as a gap that is filled with this study.

02. Literature Review

2.1. Digitalization and Social Media Marketing in Women Entrepreneurship

The prevalence and low-cost, relatively simple-to-use technology that lowers the barrier to advanced technological functions make it possible for both individuals and small enterprises to participate in the exchange of ideas and scientific discoveries, this is the main reason why social media is increasingly used in small scale women entrepreneurship today (Olsson & Bernhard, 2021). Even though Olsson and Bernhard (2021), analyzed the reasons for the emerging social media usage of women entrepreneurs, he was unable to capture the negative consequences that occurred due to inefficient use of social media. Social media has contributed to changes in how entrepreneurs run their daily business activities (Olanrewaju et al., 2019), promoting entrepreneurship and creating new opportunities for entrepreneurs (Ramadani et al., 2013).

Social media provides a wide ground for micro-level businesses to expand their reach to national and international level without much involvement of the middlemen. Especially women-led-micro enterprises use them as a channel to reach customers, closely interact with them and encourage them to purchase. That, it exemplified social media has been allowed to expand the business space in many insights. A recent study of digital subsistence entrepreneurs on Facebook by Delacroix, Parguel and Benoit-Moreau (2019) found that they adopt social media as a tool to underpin their businesses through social capital obtained from digital platforms. This can be considered as the utilization of the undeniable power of social media in influencing and changing the minds of customers (Saeed & Shafique, 2020; Lee, Yoon & O'Donnell, 2018). The social media adaption for small business in European Union can be considered as 48%, while in Australia and New Zealand it was only one in five small firms and still the pattern of low social media adoption rate is prevalent in developing nations (Osakwe & Ikhide, 2022).

2.2. Social Media Tools and Strategies for Women Entrepreneurs

Virtual social networks, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, the Internet and other new communication technologies essentially allow users to overcome geographical distance and time constraints for information and interaction purposes and for entrepreneurs in particular, they provide significant added value in terms of social capital. (Constantinidis, 2011) The easy access to social media resulted in starting new businesses by many women. (Zulgarnain, et al., 2020) According to the Wally and Koshy (2014) “Social media also proved its massive power in spreading new ideologies and several regional studies have thrown light on the use of Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.” (p.2)

2.3. Facebook as a Business Tool for Women Entrepreneurs

“Facebook has become a popular tool among most women entrepreneurs in the world and it can be considered as a significant source to earn income in their livelihood, while staying at home” (Zulgarnain, et al., 2020). On the other hand, usage of Facebook become famous because women can perform their household activities while doing their business. That it exemplifies according to the women’s self-perceptions and positioning specifically in the Facebook, their participation in all-female networks and the implications for their professional

activity (Constantinidis, 2011). Zulqarnain, et al. (2020) stated “The main tool used by the majority of the respondents was creating a Facebook group. Numerous businesswomen posted photographs of their items”. (p.344)

Further, Facebook has an overall positive impact on the lives of women entrepreneurs. Due to the user-friendly nature, customized options and monetary incentives, Facebook is transforming from just social networking site to business platform for women. As well, due to the unique, innovative and novel characteristics of Facebook, more and more women are getting motivated to run their businesses through Facebook. It is expected that this could further imitate strategies directed to improve entrepreneurial movements among women of emerging economies and conclusively increasing female leadership around the globe. (Zulqarnain, et al., 2020) When using Facebook, it is allowing to share advice and experiences with other self-employed women, to make women’s entrepreneurship known and to meet other women entrepreneurs. In terms of activities, they often make women entrepreneurs and their initiatives known via Facebook particular of women executives and entrepreneurs, on virtual social networking sites (Constantinidis, 2011). Moreover, due to the simple language used in Facebook and ability to use Facebook in mother language positively affected for the usage of Facebook by the women entrepreneurs.

2.4. Instagram as a Business Tool for Women Entrepreneurs

Based on Wally and Koshy (2014) “The emergence of Instagram, new aspects of social media were highlighted, one of them was the effectiveness in commercial transactions”. Younger generations are more preferred to use Instagram to propagate and as a strategy they consider of gaining more followers (Raj & Avinash, 2020). According to Latiff et al. (2015), “Instagram was thought as a convenient social networking site that people can adapt to. Instagram is not only for the ambitious homemakers but also for part timers, students and so on who wants to try a chance at it before they could decide to delve into a full-time business”. (Raj & Avinash, 2020)

Miles (2013) compared Instagram to the most popular social media networks in terms of time and energy required, and virality. Instagram is much easier to use and in terms of followers’ expectations, Instagram’s users are satisfied with only sharing some pictures daily with minimal description. “The study found that Instagram is effectively used by women entrepreneurs, especially for home-based businesses. Instagram specific marketing strategies were created to ensure brand awareness and customer engagement”. (Wally & Koshy, 2014). Moreover, most of the women entrepreneurs use Instagram to promote their products by sending samples of products to celebrities and publish that recommendation videos on the business page. This method can be used as a promotional strategy where they can directly influence to the customer mind set.

And Instagram has the option of editing and improving the picture quality before sharing, in terms of follower’s expectations, both sites do not need intensive conversations or interaction as well as in terms of virality, the amount of audience engagement is similar (Miles,2013). “Instagram does not require a conversation after snapping the picture and uploading it”. (Wally and Koshy, 2014). This will provide a convenient shopping experience for the customer and increase the productivity and the efficiency of the entrepreneurs.

03. Methods

3.1. Data

The research adopted a cross-sectional inductive approach and data were collected using 12 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions.

3.2. Sampling Method and Sample Size

The study thus focuses on female business owners who have successfully adapted their enterprises to social media platforms. Therefore, it is unknown how many people made up the study's entire population. Because of that, there is a potential for using homogeneous sampling. Using this method, it is possible to choose participants with similar traits.

Table 1: Participants Profile

Respondent	Nature of the Business	Years of experience in the field
Respondent 1	Beauty culture	5
Respondent 2	Florist	4
Respondent 3	Café and Restaurant	
Respondent 4	Florist	7
Respondent 5	Advertising agent	10
Respondent 6	Designer	22
Respondent 7	Food exporter	5
Respondent 8	Hotel and Restaurant	6
Respondent 9	Eco friendly Product	3
Respondent 10	Plantation	1
Respondent 11	Clothing	Family-owned Business (she joined 2018)
Respondent 12	Fertilizer exporter	4
Respondent 13	Resins	8
Respondent 14	Plantation	
Respondent 15	Baby Care Products	3
Respondent 16	Florist	
Respondent 17	-	5
Respondent 18	Food	
Respondent 19	Clothing	
Respondent 20	Baby Care Products	

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The Ministry of Skill Development in Sri Lanka "Vidatha" skill development program and the Chamber of Commerce Sri Lanka have helped the researchers in their efforts to choose female interview subjects. It was recognized that women entrepreneurs who transitioned to internet business during the current era and found success on the basis of expert support. Throughout the first stage of the study, interviews were used to collect data. Accordingly, from June to December 2022, 12 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions were conducted.

Thematic analysis is used to examine every piece of information gathered. Thematic analysis, a method for evaluating qualitative data, entails searching through a data collection to identify, investigate, and report recurrent themes (Braun & Clarke 2006).

The study used inductive methodology and focus groups, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The study's initial section is grounded in a qualitative investigation. For assessing qualitative data, a variety of approaches and processes are available. Data for the interview was audio recorded, then transcribed to both Sinhala and English. All the gathered data is being analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the process of thematic analysis involves looking for, analyzing, and reporting recurring themes in a data collection. It is a method for summarizing data, but when choosing codes and creating themes, it also takes interpretation into account.

3.4. Profile of Participants

Demographic details of the women entrepreneurs representing different business fields are shown in the table 1 below according to the focus group discussion-based data.

04. Data Analysis

Table 2: Main Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis

Themes	Codes
Active Presence	Active update the WhatsApp status Daily updating the social media On time customer communication Instant messaging/ professional networking sites (FB, WhatsApp, Viber and Telegrama, Linkdin)
Virtual Engagement	Networking with other entrepreneurs Maintaining contacts Social networking Maintain good connection with customers
Seizing Opportunity	Shifting platform Constant Planning Capturing Opportunity Learning & Adaptation
Online referral	Building Trust Word of Mouth Communication Customer recommendations

Thematic analysis was carried out in this study through the process of coding and constructing themes. The researcher uncovers four themes during the analysis (See Table 2).

4.1. Active Presence

The Covid19 pandemic had forced many businesses to shift their operations into the online platform at a very short period of time, regardless of the familiarity the business had. Manolva et al. (2010) states, many women entrepreneurs were new to social media marketing practices and their businesses were set up digitally step by step, while enhancing their knowledge and later comes to a stable developed stage. According to Respondent 3, “With covid many independent bakers have targeted operation, so the competition has gone up”. This further implies that during the crisis, a huge competition and a challenging situation for women entrepreneurs were created. Improving the product quality, understanding the competition, targeting new markets, and differentiating was identified as key factors in coping up with competition based on the research findings.

In terms of being actively present on social media, posting on WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram comes to the top in the context of most of the Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs (Rahayu,2021). In this era of accelerated digital transformation, this can be considered as one of the best methods to reach prospects at a lesser cost. According to respondent 3, “we have a Facebook page, Instagram page and I upload pictures as a collection and boost those posts within 5 to 10 km. that is what I do twice in a term which attracts many customers” Hence, the more visible the business is on these platforms, in terms of frequently sharing posts on, it enables to reach out to different audiences.

4.2. Virtual Engagement

From an entrepreneurial and a marketing point of view, maintaining regular contacts with the customers, promptly addressing their concerns, and keeping in touch even after the sale is made is crucial for a long lasting, mutually beneficial relationship. Most of the social media applications available, aid the users to maintain interactivity in different ways. Respondent 1 says that “status updates have good feedback. A message will come with one or two hours after posting status”. Hence, it can be observed that, using the platform alone itself isn’t considered to be useful as reflecting the presence frequently is crucial. Moreover, these updates have proved to be beneficial to the business as the customers have become interactive while responding to these. As respondent 1 further states, “in WhatsApp status I received more feedback. I started nail service two weeks before and got more inquiries from WhatsApp status”. Accordingly, compared to the other social networking platforms, the use of WhatsApp seems to have benefited the entrepreneurs mostly in terms of reaching the customers and maintaining interactivity. These indicated about the use of WhatsApp status was not pointed out by previous scholars and it appears to be a finding which is prominent in the context of Sri Lanka.

4.3. Seizing Opportunities

Meanwhile, aggressive promotions, boosting activities, promotional campaigns are widely being used to reach out the new audience (Rahayu, 2021). Respondent C said that “We have Face Book page; Instagram page and I uploaded pictures as a collection and boost those posts... We had a plan to use online based marketing” Similarly respondent D describes that, “We use face book as we can boost and also through google advertisement and Instagram...” Boosting, aggressive promotions are the main marketing practices used by business entrepreneurs in this era. Aggressive marketing is a tactic of communicating directly with potential customers and it’s a method of actively pursuing their engagement to a relevant business. This can be achieved through several different strategies such as cold- calling and email campaigns. These findings specifically identify what aggressive strategies can be used to boost sales.

4.4. Online Referral

Despite the presence of numerous marketing practices, backed with the application of digital touch and technology, the traditional methods that are still in use, have enabled many businesses to attract and retain customers through online referrals. As Respondent 11 says “word of mouth is very efficient for my business. I have got orders from fb, from foreign countries, also”. The major advantage of word of mouth specifically in this is highlighted the

virtual recommendation it is the creation of trust and credibility which enables the business to build their image while increasing the visibility too.

At times, the spread of positive and favorable recommendation according to the existing experience will not only aid in enhancing the reputation but will also aid in terms of expanding the business of the opportunities are exploited. Hence, the businesses could simply expand and pave way towards being successful. Describing her experience and advantage gained over word of mouth specifically virtual recommendation respondent 6 states, "I remember at one point one person had said that "Go to that shop, you will get a gift for your birthday". When the potential customers seem to be having a good impression on your business and its offerings, it leaves a room for the business to avoid risks in terms of the offering being non-receptive over the target audience, while attracting many potential customers. These findings generally describe how advantageous word of mouth, specifically virtual recommendation as a marketing strategy could be.

05. Conclusion

The study's overall goal was to better understand how social media is used effectively as a tool of marketing by women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka encounter when implementing social media strategies for their businesses. To accomplish the goal, thematic analysis was utilized, and four themes were found.

The results of this study will therefore help women's entrepreneurship develop in the fields of new knowledge integration, social and environmental improvement, and sustainability of entrepreneurship. Additionally, this study would help women enhance their entrepreneurial ventures, creating income and jobs in the process specifically adapting with social media practices as a tool of marketing. This in turn supports lowering the unemployment rate, particularly for women, and raising the standard of living for families with female breadwinners in the nation. Future researchers may concentrate particularly on the time before and after the Covid19 pandemic to conduct a chronological comparison of the usage of social media techniques.

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