



Digital Marketing Strategies by Start-Ups in a VUCA Context

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Abstract

In the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business environment of today, online marketing has become crucial for connecting with customers and the community. Organisations leverage online marketing to retain and grow their customer base by fostering engagement and building strong community ties. This study explores how start-up leaders utilise online marketing systems to achieve these benefits. Targeting successful small retail business owners in India, the research involved semi-structured and face-to-face interviews, while other data sources include reviews of public documents, company websites, and social media sites. The findings reveal the strategies that start-ups use to boost sales through digital marketing. Four key themes emerged from data collection and analysis: (a) social media platforms and strategies; (b) online marketing strategies and challenges; (c) online content strategies; and (d) follow-up strategies. These findings expounded upon the digital marketing techniques employed by business organisers to increase sales, build strong customer relationships, and promote community development. The study recommended that start-ups should enhance the use of social media platforms, refining online content to better engage target audiences, address the challenges inherent in online marketing, and develop robust follow-up strategies to maintain customer relationships. The study highlights how these businesses would enhance brand recognition, drive progress, and maintain sustainability by utilising various communication networks to advance and promote products and services in the retail industry.

Keywords: marketing policy, small retail business, Online networking, social media marketing, Virtual storefronts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the business world today, start-ups must be cognizant and adaptable to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment to succeed. Digital marketing strategies have become essential for these nascent enterprises to connect with their target audiences, thereby building brand awareness and driving growth. The channel distribution to the end users, coupled with media marketing,



proves beneficial in reaching and engaging potential customers effectively [1]. The benefits of social media marketing policies along with learning include learning how to access new markets, targeting various demographics, and effectively using virtual storefronts [2]. The newest social media indicators, along with the most efficient and effective ways of conducting business and gaining popularity over time, make social media essential for companies and individuals [3]. Social media marketing is the fresh stage of the networking required for fruitful analytical tools which the business owners have intensely applied on online platforms. The strategic decision to implement social media marketing is a daunting task that was introduced by marketers in the Covid-19 times, considered to be a VUCA event. Having accepted the social media platform for marketing strategies, it was discovered that consumer involvement was challenging [4].

Marketing on the internet refers to the promotion of products, brand building, and fostering brand loyalty. Enhanced consumer involvement benefits small retail businesses, start-ups, and management by promoting increased interaction and growth [5]. It is a development that management performs to enhance the successful implementation of online marketing. The leaders of small retail business cum start-ups who aimed to enhance their growth and success rates started adopting technological changes, participating in online forums with an appeal to the target markets for engaging in their products and services [2]. It is considered necessary in social media marketing nowadays for visual progression and influence [6]. The marketing media's impact and influence on consumer satisfaction are notable for identifying adverse opportunities to increase sales. Moreover, online marketing perception and policies are vital for generating avenues across business channels.

The social media highlighted advertising as an opportunity to improve customer support and enhance brand improvement. [7] suggested that social media advertising is an opportunity to transform influencers into advocates. In the same direction, [8] emphasised that social media opens new doors to excellent learning in the changed business environment. The benefits of online marketing include expanded social networking and learning opportunities across various demographics. However, some argue that social media marketing can be less effective, presenting certain disadvantages [9]. The concerns, effects, and beliefs towards measuring the success of online merchandising were evaluated and determined the likes and followers that had a great impact on the sales, thus raising concerns over social media [10]. In this context, this study explores the adoption of digital marketing strategies by start-ups in a VUCA context.

1.1 Background and theory

The use of several online tools by business leaders leads to the creation of new opportunities [11]. The consumer-trusted source is the internet which has

eventually turned into a major platform for purchasing products and services. For financial success, business owners use the internet as a marketing tool for fostering communication, providing visibility to channels using social media advertising [12]. In 2013, there were 28.8 million small businesses, representing 99.7% of all corporations [12]. Therefore, online marketing needs much more attention to enhance the quality of content and to create new customers. Online marketing advantages include economic efficiency, targeting diverse demographics, providing convenient services and products, and allowing customers to easily expedite their purchasing decisions [14]. Online business offers enterprises the chance to gain economic value by association with stakeholders, clients, and employees [14]. Small retail business leaders and their start-ups must incorporate online marketing strategies into their business plans and decrease the possibility of failure, grow their business, and become more profitable.

1.2 Social media strategies in start-ups

The absence of suitable technologies in small retail businesses and start-ups may minimise their ability to market on social media. The capacities of these companies determine their success, which is particularly important for small businesses [15]. According to [16], Web 2.0 used in small businesses carries competitive advantages. Marketing methodologies minimise technical hurdles and increase the reach for active research, despite financial limitations. [16] explained the high information technology (IT) adoption failure rates encountered by small business leaders because of deficient knowledge, culture, and resources [17]. The challenges undergone globally in the market as well as continuous changes demanded for customer satisfaction in a VUCA context are innumerable. The five challenges faced by small business owners were the following: consequence; commendation; appreciation; association; and product consistent quality [17]. Unexpectedly, adjusting procedures and intensifying policies increase branding opportunities due to online marketing techniques [18]. Investigating studies by [18] noted that web-based social media plans build income and maximise branding. Social media and mobile payments, as technological-based methods, increase and create a trustworthy relationship between the customer and the business owner. The improvement of mobile and wireless techniques has enhanced universal contact data for both consumers and corporations [19].

For consumer experiences, mobile retailing is a novel power which allows higher speed networks with accessibility and pleasure during shopping experiences for the purchaser [19]. The mobile transaction is the concept of accelerated services that remove a long waiting period for both in-store and telephonic purchases. The electronic media transaction provides companies with a broad technology platform as a competitive marketing weapon [20]. However, the web presence created by Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), which allows higher retailing opportunities, is what our generation is witnessing, while at the

same time, small businesses have maximised social capital [21], creating social relationships and opportunities for advertising in multiple demographic parts [21]. The social and technological change outputs constantly occur with dynamic changes. These factors link with the consequences of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). eWOM is a marketing technique for communicating and persuading clients using suitable sources, specific guidelines, and best practices. eWOM marketing is reliable, low cost, and driven by customer activities. Moreover, advertising through Web 2.0 is a way for new business owners to elevate their business profile and increase product awareness.

1.3 Social media as a tool in business

Social media is a connecting tool all over the world. The system of internet social media marketing permits small retail business owners to integrate internet communication into their business plans and has become the platform for advertising [23]. Online communication differs from trend marketing and has emerged as the most critical aspect of any organisation [24]. [25] explained the efforts of business leaders with online communication support with the technological structure and platform. The results of their study provide an understanding of the internet sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, X and YouTube. These web interfaces used in business communication have supported the company's promotions, brand awareness, and customer connections synchronously. The development of the second-generation internet application, particularly Web 2.0, was a crucial growth contributor in business online communication perception [26]. Researchers have identified that the internet creates a necessity for balancing priorities and contributes to effective marketing policies in small businesses [26]. Communication on social media is a necessary tool for the support of business owners to succeed with online sales.

Social interaction offers small business leaders substantial communication benefits, authorising the buyers, and decreasing the marketing prices [16]. According to [27], businesses engaged in social media had a prominence with a multiplier effect. [16] referred to the pioneer marketing policies and how to leverage upon profits with low cost, maximising sales. Those business owners who use social media to interact with their viewers or clients have grown in several demographics. The use of web-based social networks has led to a surge in extensive viewership [28]. The capability leaders offer social networking execution to share their internal actions and decisions with the customers [29] [30]. [The indirect ubiquity of online networking measures serves as a valuable method for connecting the business' name, such as introducing valuable relationships and gaining business patrons. [29] debated the participation of innovative actions within business networks as associated factors in financial performance. Additionally, business leaders should use online communication and establish online corporations to raise sales [30]. Some social networking and web-based

companies strengthened their connection with groups, buyers, and partners [31], thus, increasing the significance of online communication.

To connect the customers with owners, the demographic selection of web-based social networking with the selective application from a few business entrepreneurs is ideal [31]. [32] endorsed entrepreneurs who must increase the network procedures depending on the organisations that require the intrusion of social networking into the common marketing policy designs. To achieve engagements, market leaders used the Facebook platform for more widespread reach [33]. Most of the business leaders adopted online communication for business settlements with enhanced marketing activities.

2. METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. In a qualitative study, the reliability and validity of the study is critical [34]. The consistency of the qualitative analysis is to ensure reliability and validity [35], which is complemented by unstructured questions [36]. Confirming the reliability through data comprehension, continuous data comparison, and different cases of extensive uses becomes critical in such studies [34] [37]. The questions used in this study were of an open-ended nature; however, that was the only way to collect information from the tight situation these start-ups were engaged in. The validity offers the suitability of the tools and instruments used in the data procedures [34]. To validate the research, trustworthiness such as the confirmability, transferability, dependability and credibility of the research were employed.

2.1 Research design

Ethnography was adopted as a research design for this study. Ethnographic researchers provide insights into experiences of daily life such as political, economic, and social dynamics [38]. A total of 30 start-ups were approached for this research, with 12 responding with varied thoughts via a qualitative inquiry. The data were collected by obtaining company business documents and conducting semi-structured interviews. The researchers used field notes and tape recorders to collect data [39]. Business reports, such as the company's marketing strategy and monetary forecasts for every region, had been reviewed and supplied the perception of the strategic mindset of the ways the enterprise leaders regard growth profitability. The researchers' position in this study was to listen, review, and decode the trend of online marketing adoption and application. Open-ended questions helped to engage the participants in higher-order thinking [40]. Relationships developed with the aid of creating a smartphone name to recap the purpose of the study while researcher descriptions of the participants' responses added accuracy. Member checking confirmed that interpretations of the participants' responses preserve their identities.

2.2 Data analysis

The next measure in the data analysis procedure is managing the data by classifying and encrypting the information [41]. [42] postulated that identical patterns could be utilised to increase the interior validity of a qualitative study. Data analysis is a methodical procedure recalling the research question while encrypting supports narrow down the qualitative investigators' attention to associated codes. Each note and transcript were analysed to guarantee that themes, problems, and patterns were correctly encrypted. Coloured highlighters were used for coding, thematic grouping, and classifying the relevant information. Analysing the literature and comparing it to recent information as well as the themes conclude the data analysis procedure [43]. All the participants explained the significance of communication in the retail industry. Sharing the company data using eWOM was essential for enhanced sales, and acknowledging the ways to attract consumers was crucial for an augmented crowd on the website. The discussions with the incumbent small-time retailer cum leader were based on some basic understanding of the emergent themes.

- 1) Emergent theme 1: Social media platforms and strategies
- 2) Emergent theme 2: Online marketing strategies and challenges
- 3) Emergent theme 3: Online content strategies
- 4) Emergent theme 4: Follow-up strategies

The opinions mattered most, as they were more practical than book knowledge and wisdom that were usually important for large businesses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Emergent theme 1: Social media platforms and strategies

The initial insights derived from the data collection focused on the social media platforms and strategies that participants employed in their retail businesses. Social media platforms serve as a medium for people to interact online and share their data [44]. These platforms are used by the company leaders to interact with the customers and to share the content relevant to the products, facilities, and events in addition to networking and assisting in addressing the tasks of the company [45]. According to [46], business leaders depend more on online platforms and use Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and X more often. However, online sellers have given more priority to Facebook over other social media platforms for building up relations and maximising sales. The social media platforms each participant used in the following study include Facebook advertising, Instagram, and X advertising. Some participants suggested that Facebook is largely used for marketing purposes, that is, to publicise products, to network, and to attract public attention. The participants used other platforms such as LinkedIn Ads and Pinterest Ads for communicating as well. Some had prioritised LinkedIn Ads over Facebook advertising and Instagram for attracting customers and sharing information.

3.2 Emergent theme 2: Online marketing strategies and challenges

The second theme established was online advertising techniques and challenges. Online advertising is a technology employed to gain notice in the industry [47]. Participants observed various challenges while using online advertisements to raise sales. Tracking website views was the most fundamental challenge. Online marketing offers marvellous chances, but the information regarding the hurdles faced by companies while employing online marketing is insufficient. Participant 2 explains that the implication of pay-per-click advertising is a technique used additionally with social media posting on the pages of the company. All participants observed the challenges and tactics linked with executing digital marketing. The usage of data, information, and knowledge is a typical element of novelty. Knowledge implies a level to overcome emerging challenges throughout the dispersion process. The business organisers have discovered a way to deal with the hurdles by using online marketing.

3.3 Emergent theme 3: Online content strategies

Online content was the next theme to emerge. Online content posted by the organisations on their websites or social media platforms enhanced consciousness and brought more customers. The sellers use a technique known as ‘retargeting’ to target advertisements to separate customers according to interests and priorities [48]. The content that the organisers post on the online business platforms is personalised and offered to the people to reflect customer’s interests [47] [48]. Online mass personalisation was a tactic each participant used to spread over various areas synchronously and non-synchronously. All the participants in the research choose techniques to apply online marketing to maximise sales. Also, the participants used multiple digital tools to interact with customers, build relations, enhance product information, and develop brand recognition to stay sustainable in the retail industry.

3.4 Emergent theme 4: Follow-up strategies

The last theme was the follow-up techniques the participants used. Each participant mentioned using follow-up techniques to retain consumers. For consistent accomplishment, organisations must maintain a healthy relationship with their current consumers and pre-plan for the forthcoming necessities [49]. The participants further explained the follow-up techniques, for instance, communication, phone calls, establishing interpersonal relationships, and providing product knowledge. In their opinion [50], the increased use of online marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is crucial for making communication beneficial. Even though every participant used electronic communication, participants 1 and 3 favoured phone calls to follow up with

consumers. Interaction with the clients is significant, and business organisers acknowledge that it is beneficial.

Moreover, this study offered small retail business organisers the chance to know how to design digital marketing techniques. The outcomes show that online marketing approaches are crucial for organisational sustainability, and planned procedures are significant. Small business organisers may take advantage of the given data by executing successful methods for enhanced sales with customers and by establishing brand recognition. Customers may participate by sharing their organisational experience with other customers and giving feedback about the products and services.

3.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings on social media platforms and strategies in retail businesses reveal a trend where businesses adopt multiple online channels to connect with customers and promote their products. While Facebook emerges as a primary platform for marketing purposes, including product publicity and networking, the participants also diversify their approaches by utilising platforms like Instagram, X, LinkedIn Ads, and Pinterest Ads. This indicates a recognition of the unique strengths and audiences associated with each platform. Moreover, the study buttressed the impact of regional differences where online engagement and product advertising play a more significant role. Importantly, the variation in platform preferences among participants highlights the need for businesses to tailor their social media strategies according to specific objectives and target demographics.

The findings on online marketing strategies and challenges highlight the role of technology in industry progression through online advertising techniques. Participants in the study identified various challenges associated with adopting online advertising to boost sales, with tracking website views emerging as a fundamental obstacle. While online marketing presents remarkable opportunities, there is a lack of comprehensive information regarding the hurdles faced by companies regarding its implementation. Participant 2 highlighted the use of pay-per-click advertising as an additional technique alongside social media posting on company pages. All the participants acknowledged both the challenges and tactics associated with executing digital marketing campaigns. The integration of data, information, and knowledge emerged as a common theme in addressing these challenges, with participants recognising knowledge as a critical resource for overcoming emerging obstacles throughout the dissemination process.

The findings on online content strategies signify the importance of strategic content dissemination in enhancing brand awareness and attracting customers. Participants in the study highlighted the significance of online content posted on websites or social media platforms in increasing consumer consciousness and

driving customer engagement. The participants targeted advertisements to specific customer segments based on their interests and priorities by employing techniques such as retargeting, as highlighted by [48]. The personalised content posted by organisers reflects a deep understanding of customer interests and preferences, contributing to increased relevance and effectiveness of marketing efforts. Mass personalisation emerged as a common tactic adopted by all the participants which allows for simultaneous and non-simultaneous expansion across various areas. Each participant strategically selected online marketing techniques to optimise sales outcomes, depending on multiple digital tools to interact with customers, build relationships, provide comprehensive product information, and enhance brand recognition.

The findings on follow-up techniques utilised by the participants shed light on the importance of maintaining customer relationships and planning for future needs to ensure consistent success in small retail businesses. [49] emphasises the necessity of maintaining healthy relationships with current consumers for sustained achievement, a sentiment echoed by the participants who highlighted various follow-up methods such as communication, phone calls, interpersonal relationship building, and product knowledge dissemination. [50] highlight the significance of increased online marketing in SMEs for enhancing communication, with phone calls being favoured by some participants for follow-up. The interaction with clients is deemed significant by business organisers, acknowledging its benefits. The outcomes of the study offer insights for future research and business strategies to emphasise the significance of planned procedures and customer engagement in enhancing sales and establishing brand recognition. The participation of customers through sharing experiences and providing feedback further enriches the organisational views and contributes to continuous improvement and growth.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was aimed to discover the strategies used by start-ups to increase sales through the application of digital marketing. The capability of small retail business leaders to maximise sales by employing digital advertising techniques needs engaging suitable people, implying efficient marketing strategies as well as choosing explicit online content. Altogether four themes were developed by data collection and analysis: (a) social media platforms and strategies; (b) online marketing strategies and challenges; (c) online content strategies; and (d) follow-up strategies. The sources used for gathering data in this research involve (a) semi-structured in-person interviews, (b) a review of the companies' public documents, (c) a review of the companies' websites, and (d) a review of the social media sites of small retail businesses in India. The data were collected in order to comprehend the techniques business organisers apply to digital marketing and to raise sales. Furthermore, gathering and scrutinising the data help explore successful

methodologies used by the business organisers for online marketing, establishing good relationships with their clients, and encouraging progress within the community. Also, the business organisers have developed direct connections in society to enhance brand recognition, maximise progress, and uphold sustainability. Multiple communication networks have been used by the business organisers to advance and sponsor products and facilities in the retail industry and to improve an organisation's performance.

The discoveries of this study may be beneficial to small retail businesses by offering data that show the possible significance of online advertising. The outcomes of the study suggest successful online marketing approaches that could be utilised to assist with purchasing decisions and the emergence of relations between small retail businesses and their customers. It has been revealed that business authorities who also join online platforms can take advantage of the media as well to continue producing sales and grow local economies.

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