INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF PREFERRED SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN SAFEER MALL, SOHAR, OMAN

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

The objectives of the study are to examine the customer choice of preference among the various marketing strategies (Social Media, MMS/SMS, advertisement through newspapers, magazines, etc.); to investigate the awareness of social media marketing and, to find out the preferred social media platform and the security concerns of the customers with respect to such platforms.

Design/methodology/approach

The sample survey was involving both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. 202 samples were collected through a well-defined questionnaire. The sample included 102 customers of the Mall, 50 university students (both of these samples were selected on a convenient sampling basis) and 50 residents from Safeer vicinity (selected on a simple random sampling basis).

Findings

The empirical results reveal that an easy and good means to influence the customers of the mall is through social media marketing. The study also reveals that the customers do not feel secure through social media, as their identities might be stolen or misused. The study confirms that the customers do not perceive social media marketing as an attractive and effective tool as they still prefer the traditional methods.

Practical Implications

The study confirms that it is good means to approach the customers of the mall through social media marketing as the customers can easily be influenced which will boost the business in an easier way.

Social Implications

The study emphasizes on the mall's participation and posting of more contents to their social media pages, clarifying the customers on the security issues. The malls should use social media marketing along with the traditional marketing method so as to cope up with the preferences of the customers.

Originality/value

No study has investigated the awareness and the preferences of the social media marketing platforms of the malls of Oman, and this study will help the malls to plan on the new marketing avenues and techniques.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Internet Marketing, e-commerce, online Marketing, Retail Marketing, Social Networking sites.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing is an important business function. It is not restricted to simply selling and advertising but involves delivery of correct product to the correct person at the decided time for the determined price. It is an essential business function supporting the financial aspects of business and thus leads the business to success. Marketing draws more attention to the business thereby supports all the other functions of the business. Kotler and Keller (2012) propounded that marketing influences success for an organization as the focus of the business will be ultimately on the demand of the product. The traditional marketing using television advertisements, banners, posters, etc. is becoming more expensive and hence is considered outdated, and most of the shopping malls are trying to reduce the same. Further, e-marketing is more convenient for both – the customer and the organization as a variety of products are offered with a relatively lesser price. Technological familiarity facilitates e-marketing as the best source of marketing for any organization.
‘E-marketing’ viz. Electronic marketing is the usage of electronic means, specifically the internet, towards the implementation of marketing practices. It is a brand-marketing process through the internet (Yannopoulos, 2011). It is nothing but a collection of web pages and applications in an innovative way to trade the customer-preferred products (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). E-marketing connects customers to businesses using different ways either through a direct response or indirectly (Odhiambo, 2012). E-Marketing primarily covers all the business activities conducted worldwide through the web towards attracting the business and developing brand identity so as to ensure the success of an organization. Eid and Gohary (2013) confirmed that the usage of e-marketing had a significant impact on marketing performance and marketing effectiveness.

Baker (2009) advocated that the use of social networks could be an effective tool to encourage prospective customers and to develop a future relationship. Mangold and Faulds, (2009) suggested that the businesses can use social networking to attract potential buyers and hold the existing customers easily. Social networks have also been considered in market research as a new tool for collecting information (Perez-Latre, Portilla, and Blanco, 2011).

The various means of social networking include informal communities, web journals, videos, audits and appraisals (Barnes and Ganim, 2011). Even Starbucks deals with its customers by finding out their customer expectations to reinforce its relationship with the buyers (Starbucks, 2011). Companies worldwide started using social media in their advertising campaigns to introduce their innovations. Social Media is one of the best means through which the whole world stays connected and organizations considering it as a marketing tool socialize, connect and share views and ideas with their prospective customers (Shjarback, 2014). Carter (2006) stated that social media opens the door for a conversation between the public and an organization so as to get the feedback and to improve the product based on the feedback. When there is no face to face connectivity between the customers and the businesses, customer satisfaction is the important consideration for the sellers which can be achieved through social media (Hung, Cheng and Hsieh, 2015). Since 2013, social media has become popular, crossing the boundaries and has been considered as an effective tool for brand marketing due to the trust of customers. Bashar, Ahmad, and Wasiq (2012) reported that social media is a basic tool used for marketing purposes. NikoLova (2012) confirmed the same through his study on social media and its positive attitude formation effect among the consumers. However, it is noted that the marketing department of the malls lacks in using social media effectively (Hooda and Aggarwal, 2012). Presently, the customers of a mall and their related groups browse and follow the websites/web applications of that respective mall only. However, the competitors can use social media as a competitive advantage to compete. This is due to the mobile applications which allow marketing personnel to develop a strategy which can be more intimidating (Muzellec et al., 2016).

Social media could provide the information regarding the customer expectations which are essential factors for marketing, in turn, result in accelerated sales. But, in the recent past, the shops in the Saifee Hyper Mall are trying to use social media as their marketing medium to attract their customers but are not successful. Therefore the researchers are trying to focus on the causes giving room to this study.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Nowadays it is becoming too difficult to predict consumers in terms of their shopping habits (Resnick, Foster, and Woodall, 2014). The interest in mobile shopping for both in-store shopping and the online distribution channel has increased (Grob, 2015).

Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) insisted that the businesses should give priority to consumers ‘opinion and develop strong relationships with the buyers. Social media enables organizations to get connected with the customers to achieve the customer demands through interpersonal interactions. However, small organizations are still struggling to win clientele (Halligan, Shah, and Scott, 2009). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Social media provides a direct connectivity between the businesses and the consumers resulting in more productivity especially to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Jones (2010) claimed that social media offers a plenitude of opportunities to be used by the organizations on the web so as to succeed in marketing. A study confirmed that the firms with public access to websites had been visited by lots of customers recently (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010). In the case of SMEs, product promotions are based on the client suggestions and requirements (Stokes and Lomax, 2002).

SMB Group (2012) found out the fact that 20 % of SMEs lacks in marketing and are supported by the loyal customers through ‘electronic word-of-mouth’ and their involvement requires e-marketing as an instrument for business promotion.
In the current era, marketing of SMEs is nurtured through innovation and the developed relationship (Walsh and Lipinski, 2009). Demangeot and Broderrick (2016) defined the engagement of a customer through a retail website, is a critical “moment of truth” during which the attention is drawn to build rapport and prompting them to act. Bressolles, Durrieu, and Deans, (2015) confirmed that accessing a website is not only used for obtaining product orders but also for obtaining information about the quality of goods or services. The devices to communicate with the potential buyers have changed (Sarwar, Haque, and Yasmin, 2013). Mangold and Faulds (2009) argued that social media contains all the features of a unified marketing device to improve the marketing performances through the loyal customers, who can better influence the new customers than the businessmen through their positive opinions. Social media can be used as an apparatus by the business firms to communicate with potential buyers, through their loyal customers to establish the details of products/services, brands, proper specifications and to appraise the limitations (Editorial Staff, 2010). Social media helps the small businesses with meager assets to achieve desirable results through building a relationship, honesty and brand loyalty with the customers (Wallington, 2016). Stelzner (2011) found that the growth of the marketers was faster when they use social media for their campaigns, and the cost of promotion also has declined and is also reported that approximately 58% of businesses advertise 6 hours per week through social media while 34% of business use beyond 11 hours per week. As per the Facebook (2011) report, approximately 800 million users are browsing the websites on a regular basis. According to Taylor (2011), Twitter's CEO report indicated that approximately 200 million registered customers are using the Twitter platforms, which were creating 230 million tweets per day through blogging. Various social media platforms are helping the businesses to bring in new strategies and develop their brands through blogging, tweeting, etc. (Fournier and Avery, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study focuses on the three diverse platforms of social media viz. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter that are widely used by the customers - Omanis and the foreigners who visit and reside around the Safeer Mall in Sohar, Oman. The focus of the study is to ascertain the customer awareness on social media marketing and to examine the customer preferences towards different marketing strategies and, to find out the preferred social media platform and the security concerns of the customers with respect to such platforms.

202 samples were collected through a well-defined questionnaire. The sample included 102 customers of the Mall, 50 university students (both of these samples were selected on a convenient sampling basis) and 50 residents from Safeer vicinity (who were selected on a simple random sampling basis).

FINDINGS

| Characteristics | Frequency | % |
|-----------------|-----------|---|
| Gender          |           |   |
| Male            | 112       | 55.4 |
| Female          | 90        | 44.6 |
| Age             |           |   |
| 18 - 21 years   | 56        | 27.7 |
| 22 – 24 years   | 70        | 34.7 |
| 25 – 27 years   | 26        | 12.9 |
| 28 – 30 years   | 50        | 24.8 |
| Nationality     |           |   |
| Oman            | 117       | 57.9 |
| India           | 44        | 21.8 |
| US              | 1         | 0.5 |
| Philippines     | 15        | 7.4 |
| GCC             | 2         | 1.0 |
| Pakistan        | 8         | 4.0 |
| Egypt           | 6         | 3.0 |
| Others          | 9         | 4.5 |
| Occupation      |           |   |
| Employed        | 73        | 36.1 |
| Unemployed      | 17        | 8.4 |
| Student         | 112       | 55.4 |
| Residing in Oman|           |   |
| Less than one year | 17      | 20.0 |
| 2 - 4 years     | 22        | 26.0 |
From the above table no.1, the demographic details of the respondents are observed.

Table 2. Customer perception of social media advertising

| Statement                                                                 | SA  | A   | N   | D  | SD | K-S value | Chi$^2$ value | p-value |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|-----------|--------------|---------|
| Instagram is a good platform for Image advertising                        | 67  | 85  | 39  | 9  | 2  | 3.69      |              |         |
| Facebook is a good tool to communicate with customer and the mall         | 35  | 92  | 57  | 12 | 6  | 3.21      |              |         |
| A tweet is more convenient for the public to understand the message       | 36  | 82  | 60  | 18 | 6  | 3.31      | 37.771       | 0.000   |
| Social media advertising is more effective than traditional marketing modes | 69  | 79  | 40  | 9  | 5  | 2.70      |              |         |

Source: Questionnaire
Quality of the images, videos, and texts posted are important than the quantity

|                         | SA   | A    | N    | D    | S D  | K-S value | Chi² value | p-value |
|-------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------|------------|---------|
| I am aware of the Mall’s social media activities | 40   | 77   | 50   | 26   | 9    | 2.88      |            |         |
| I am aware of the shops and brands in the Mall   | 30   | 97   | 49   | 20   | 6    | 2.81      |            |         |
| The Mall is promoting their products and services on social media platforms | 24   | 76   | 67   | 29   | 6    | 3.15      |            |         |
| I am aware of the Social Media Platforms used by the Mall | 21   | 82   | 62   | 26   | 11   | 3.23      |            |         |
| The Mall targets the appropriate market segments of safer mall | 34   | 80   | 61   | 21   | 6    | 2.93      |            |         |

**Null Hypothesis:** There is no relationship between the Customer preference of social media platforms and the choice of the respondents.

The above table no.2 indicates that the p-value < 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis gets rejected. i.e. there is a significant relationship between the customer perception of social media platforms and the choice of respondents. Comparing the K-S values obtained from Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it is observed that ‘A tweet is more convenient for the public to understand the message’ ranks first followed by ‘Facebook is a good tool to communicate with the customer and the mall’ and ‘Quality of the images, videos, and texts posted are important than the quantity.’

### Table 3. Social media awareness

| Statement                                                                 | SA     | A    | N    | D    | S D  | K-S value | Chi² value | p-value |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|------|------|------|------|-----------|------------|---------|
| I am aware of the Mall’s social media activities                          | 40     | 77   | 50   | 26   | 9    | 2.88      |            |         |
| I am aware of the shops and brands in the Mall                            | 30     | 97   | 49   | 20   | 6    | 2.81      |            |         |
| The Mall is promoting their products and services on social media platforms | 24     | 76   | 67   | 29   | 6    | 3.15      |            |         |
| I am aware of the Social Media Platforms used by the Mall                 | 21     | 82   | 62   | 26   | 11   | 3.23      |            |         |
| The Mall targets the appropriate market segments of safer mall            | 34     | 80   | 61   | 21   | 6    | 2.93      |            |         |

**Null Hypothesis:** There is no relationship between the Social Media awareness and the choice of the respondents.

The table above indicates that the p-value < 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis gets rejected. i.e. there is a significant relationship between the customer’s awareness of social media and the choice of respondents. Comparing the K-S values obtained from Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it is observed that ‘I am aware of the Social Media Platforms used by the Mall’ ranks first followed by ‘The Mall is promoting their products and services on social media platforms’ and ‘The Mall targets the appropriate market segments of safer mall.’

### Table 4. Customers’ marketing preferences

| Statement                              | SA     | A    | N    | D    | S D  | K-S value | Chi² value | p-value |
|----------------------------------------|--------|------|------|------|------|-----------|------------|---------|
| I like marketers to approach me personally | 53     | 86   | 39   | 14   | 10   | 2.65      |            |         |
| I prefer mobile marketing (SMS, Apps, etc.) | 39     | 101  | 45   | 14   | 3    | 2.74      |            |         |
I like the Traditional marketing (billboards, banners, newspaper, etc.) | 31 | 59 | 76 | 26 | 10 | 3.34 | 41.196 | 0.000

I get influenced by Word-of-mouth | 30 | 87 | 58 | 21 | 6 | 3.00 | 0.000

I get influenced by Online Ads | 39 | 59 | 62 | 32 | 10 | 3.28 | 0.000

**Null Hypothesis:** There is no relationship between the Customer’s marketing preferences and the choice of the respondents.

The table above indicates that the p-value < 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis gets rejected, i.e. there is a significant relationship between the customer’s marketing preferences and the choice of respondents. Comparing the K-S values obtained from Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it is observed that ‘I like the traditional marketing (billboards, banners, newspaper, etc.)’ ranks first among the respondents’ choice, followed by ‘I get influenced by online ads’ and ‘I get influenced by word of mouth.’

**Table 5. Privacy Concerns and Security Threats**

| Statement | SA | A | N | D | SD | K-S value | Chi² value | p-value |
|-----------|----|---|---|---|----|-----------|------------|---------|
| The management clearly states the terms and conditions in social media activities | 40 | 91 | 47 | 19 | 5 | 2.65 | 0.000 |
| The customers are aware of the privacy terms involved with the mall’s social media platforms | 14 | 80 | 74 | 29 | 5 | 3.27 | 0.000 |
| The customers fear that their identity may be at risk if they raise a negative feedback | 35 | 66 | 57 | 36 | 8 | 3.11 | 0.000 |
| The identities of customers are safe when a response is released | 29 | 82 | 52 | 32 | 7 | 3.00 | 0.000 |
| Customers fear of their identity might be stolen or misused | 39 | 74 | 60 | 17 | 12 | 2.93 | 0.000 |

**Null Hypothesis:** There is no relationship between the Privacy Concerns and Security Threats and the choice of the respondents.

The table above indicates that the p-value < 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis gets rejected, i.e. there is a significant relationship between the privacy concerns and security threats and the choice of respondents. Comparing the K-S values obtained from Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it is observed that ‘the customers are aware of the privacy terms involved with the mall’s social media platforms’ ranks first, followed by ‘the customers fear that their identity may be at risk if they raise a negative feedback’ and ‘the identities of customers are safe when a response is released’.
Regression Analysis

It is observed from the regression analysis that the p-value .000 > 0.05 and the regression analysis details and the results are as follows:

Table 6.a, b, c & d
Variables Entered/Removed *

| Model | Variables Entered | Variables Removed | Method |
|-------|-------------------|-------------------|--------|
| 1     | Privacy, Awareness | .                 | Enter  |

*a* Dependent Variable: Preferences and  
*b* Independent Variables are Privacy and Awareness

Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|---|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1     | .445* | .198     | .190              | 2.50668 |

*a* Predictors: (Constant), Privacy, Awareness  
*b* Predictors: (Constant), Privacy and Awareness

From the above table, it can be seen that 19.8% of the respondents are influenced by the equation given below.

ANOVA *

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F     | Sig.  |
|-------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|-------|
| Regression | 304.953       | 2  | 152.477     | 24.266| .000b |
| Residual   | 1237.842      | 197| 6.283       |       |       |
| Total      | 1542.795      | 199|             |       |       |

*a* Dependent Variable: Preferences  
*b* Predictors: (Constant), Privacy and Awareness

Coefficients

| Model          | Unstandardized Coefficients | Standardized Coefficients | t     | Sig.  |
|----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| (Constant)     | 6.732                       | .794                      | 8.480 | .000  |
| Awareness      | .187                        | .058                      | .228 | .001  |
| Privacy        | .240                        | .057                      | .296 | .000  |

*a* Dependent Variable: Preferences

From the above table 6 b, it can be seen that only 19.8% of the respondents are influenced by the equation given below.

Since all the p-values < 0.05, the derived linear regression will be as follows:

\[ \text{Pre} = 6.732 + .187 A + .240 P \]

Where Pre is preferences, A is awareness and P is privacy.

i.e. there is an association between the Preferences and Awareness and Privacy.
RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Most of the respondents (33.7%) use all the three Social Media platforms. Most of the respondents (73.3%) believe that social media is a more effective tool than the traditional advertising techniques. Instagram is the individual social media platform used by 31.7% of the respondents followed by Facebook and Twitter (21.3%, 13.4% respectively).

‘A tweet is more convenient for the public to understand the message’ ranks first among the preferences of social media platform followed by ‘Facebook is a good tool to communicate between the customer and the mall’ and ‘Quality of the images, videos, and texts posted are important than the quantity.’ ‘I am aware of the social media platforms used by the mall’ ranks first among the awareness on social media followed by ‘the mall is promoting their products and services on social media platforms’ and ‘the mall targets the appropriate market segments.’ ‘I like the traditional way of marketing - billboards, banners, newspaper, etc.’ ranks first among the customers’ marketing preferences followed by ‘I get influenced by online ads’ and ‘I get influenced by word of mouth.’

‘The customers are aware of the privacy terms involved with the mall’s social media platforms’ ranks first among the privacy concerns and security threats followed by ‘the customers fear that their identity may be at risk if they raise a negative feedback’ and ‘the identities of customers are safe when a response is released’.

It is proved that there is an association between the customer’s social media preferences, awareness, and the privacy concerns. There is an impact of awareness and privacy over the social media preference, i.e., the customers of the mall might be influenced by the social media marketing, and thus, it could be a good approach for marketers.

Even though customers think that social media is attractive for marketing, their preference is towards traditional way of marketing. Customers also believe that their identities could be stolen or misused through online – social media marketing. The majority of the customers use Instagram and Facebook, but in combination, Instagram and Twitter are used more than the Facebook alone. The study reveals that the most of the customers use Instagram and Twitter since the most of them do have accounts on Instagram and Twitter in combination.

The study confirms that it is good means to approach the customers of the shops of the mall, through social media marketing as the customers can be influenced easily so. However, the study reveals that the customers do not feel secure to participate through social media, as they believe that their identities might be stolen or misused. The study confirms that the customers do not perceive social media marketing as an attractive and effective tool over other marketing tools because the customers still prefer the traditional methods.

SUGGESTIONS

Thus, it is recommended that the mall has to keep the social media platforms for its marketing purposes, but they need to participate and post more contents to their social media pages to gain customers’ attention and awareness. It is also recommended that the mall to use both social media marketing and their traditional ways of marketing to harmonize both preferences of the customers. Further, the mall should apprise the customers on the security issues related to using social media in their account pages to clarify related concerns. The same is explained using a model named Privacy-Awareness-Preferences Model (PAP Model) which is figuratively shown as in figure 1.

Also, the mall should actively participate in all platforms since customers are very active on Facebook and Instagram. By using these platforms companies and businesses can also understand what the trend is and what most customers are demanding for and try to provide them with satisfied products and services to be first in line with that will attract more customers and will create a strong relationship between customers and the business. Companies can also share their ideas or new plans on Facebook by conceptual designs or pictures to see what public thinks and whether they accept the same before implementation and incur the cost thereby. They can understand the customers’ attitudes towards the brand or a product and influence their buying decisions by focusing certain sections inside the mall for customers.

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Fig. 1. Privacy-Awareness-Preferences Model

Customers’ perceptions

- Social Media Awareness
- Customer privacy concern

Customer’s social media preferences

Action of the Malls

- Encouraging & Detailed Social Media Pages
- FAQs on
- Security issues for the websites

Impact on Social Media Marketing

Easy Promotion Channel

Increase in Sales

Customers’ perceptions

- Social Media Awareness
- Customer privacy concern

Customer’s social media preferences