

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Small and Medium Enterprises' Success: Examining Social Media Effectiveness in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a crucial aspect of individuals' daily routines, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. Consequently, it represents a promising channel for businesses to showcase their products and services to customers. This research aims to explore the perception of businesses regarding the effectiveness of social media in relation to business success in Pietermaritzburg's beauty Small and Medium Enterprises (SME), South Africa. This study is qualitative in nature, purposively sampling 22 businesses and conducted semi-structured interviews. Thematic Analysis was utilised to analyse the gathered data. The results reveal the importance and effectiveness of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp in beauty SME marketing initiatives. Content creation was discovered as an important requirement of businesses with a focus on visual appeal. In addition, audience targeting, and engagement were emphasised as crucial components for building ties with customers and promoting brand loyalty. SMEs are encouraged to make use of all the functionalities of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp which offers SMEs opportunities to enhance online presence, engage target audiences and promote business success.

Keywords: SMEs; digital age; social media; content marketing; audience engagement

Introduction

Social media has brought a paradigm shift in the way business is conducted, leading to an era described as the digital age (Agustian *et al.*, 2023). Within this digital age, social media has emerged as a transformative tool for businesses, offering unique opportunities for business marketing and expansion. Knowing which social media strategies work well for businesses, and what challenges they face when using them, especially in South Africa, will help create solutions that match their daily operations and marketing needs. As highlighted by Mahmoud and El-Masry (2023), social media has become instrumental in reshaping business dynamics, enabling organisations to connect with their audiences in innovative ways. Furthermore, in the post-COVID-19 era, there has been a notable surge in digital engagement as evidenced by Wibawa and Arif (2024) in their study conducted in Indonesia. Their findings revealed a noted increase in online content interaction post-pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. This gives businesses an opportunity to present their product and service offerings to their customers.

Moreover, recent studies, such as those by Allison *et al.* (2023) and Byaro, Rwezaula and Ngowi (2023), underscore the prevalent influence of social media and internet usage, with most South Africans actively engaging with online platforms. Recognising the vast potential of these digital channels, businesses across industries are increasingly embracing social media as a strategic asset to enhance their visibility, foster customer relationships, and drive growth. This trend extends to SMEs, which constitute an integral component of global economies, as noted by (Moore and Manning, 2009). SMEs are increasingly acknowledging the significance of leveraging effective social media strategies to fortify their market presence, engage with target audiences and sustain competitiveness (Korcsmáros and Csinger, 2022). SMEs in the beauty industry refer to businesses operating in the cosmetics,

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skincare, haircare, nail care, and wellness sectors. These businesses typically include salons, spas, makeup artists, and beauty product resellers. Due to their service-based and visual nature, they rely heavily on customer interaction and online visibility, making social media an essential tool for reaching their clientele. SMEs in the beauty industry are leveraging the widespread use of social media for marketing. Studies by Motara (2022) in South Africa and by Kaur and Kumar (2020) in India conclude that social media is crucial for promoting beauty businesses. It enables them to reach vast audiences with a single click, with content potentially reaching hundreds or thousands of interested individuals.

While global studies show that SMEs benefit from social media (Chatterjee and Kar, 2020; Sharma, Singh and Aiyub, 2020), there is limited research focusing specifically on SMEs in the beauty industry in some South African cities like Pietermaritzburg. It is well noted that SMEs in the beauty industry operate in a highly visual, trend-driven industry, where digital engagement is critical for customer acquisition and retention (Kaur and Kumar, 2020). However, SMEs in the beauty industry often lack the technical resources and personnel to fully leverage social media, despite its increasing relevance post-COVID-19 (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Mtjilibe *et al.*, 2024). The problem this research addresses is the gap in understanding the commonly used social media strategies, the most effective for these businesses and the challenges they face when implementing them. Investigating this population helps generate tailored recommendations that align with their operational realities and digital marketing constraints. Despite the recognised importance of social media for SMEs, there is limited research specifically addressing the most effective social media strategies and the unique challenges faced by SMEs in the beauty industry in Pietermaritzburg. This study aims to fill the identified research gap by identifying the commonly used social media strategies, the most effective and uncovering the challenges these businesses encounter in implementing social media initiatives. Based on this aim, the study has three objectives.

- i. To discover the Social Media marketing strategies used by beauty SMEs in Pietermaritzburg.
- ii. To identify the most effective social media strategies employed by beauty SMEs in Pietermaritzburg.
- iii. To find out the challenges faced by beauty SMEs in Pietermaritzburg in implementing social media strategies.

By uncovering insights, best practices, and challenges, this paper aims to equip SMEs with the knowledge and tools necessary to thrive in the digital age and be competitive in their respective industries. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 comprises the literature review. Section 3 presents the research methodology, outlining the process and steps undertaken to collect and analyse the data. Sections 4 and 5 are dedicated to the presentation of the results as well as discussion of the findings. Lastly, Section 6 provides the conclusion of the study, summarising the key insights and implications drawn from the research.

Literature Review

In South Africa, SMEs are registered businesses employing between 11 to 250 employees, with an annual turnover not exceeding R220 million, depending on the sector (Department of Small Business Management, 2019). These SMEs are key to South Africa's economic growth as they employ about 60% of the labour force and contributes approximately 34% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (SEDA, 2024). Such statistics highlight the importance of SMEs to the economy. Statistics from the Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (EDTEA, n.d.) show some interesting figures about the contribution of SMEs in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), where the study is located. The statistics show that although KZN is the third smallest by size, it contributes approximately 16% to national GDP, second only to the Gauteng province. In the province, the business services sector, which includes SMEs in the beauty industry, contributes the most to GDP at 17% which is above manufacturing at 15%. This shows the importance of the services sector to the economy of the province.

Social media marketing, as described in by Bajpai, Pandey and Shriwas (2012), includes the use of social media platforms to drive website traffic and attention. In today's digital environment, social media has developed into an accessible platform, allowing for better customer service, increased brand visibility, and improved organisation-to-organisation collaboration. For SMEs, it has become an indispensable instrument for building brand awareness, interacting with target markets, and stimulating business expansion. The focus is on content generation to encourage audience engagement and loyalty. Rossiter (2014) emphasises the importance of attracting new clients and building brand awareness which is aimed to promote customer loyalty. When a customer becomes loyal, they repeatedly patronise the products of the business, leading to an increase in revenue. According to Singh, Lehnert and Bostick (2012), social media has become a key part of media, providing SMEs with another way to reach a

worldwide customer base and stand out against competitors. Studies by McCann and Barlow (2015) and Capitello *et al.* (2014) further posit that SMEs can improve brand visibility and awareness by utilising social media platforms, which are cost-effective and offer user-friendly interfaces. According to Bajpai, Pandey and Shriwas (2012) and Rahamn (2023), social media's cost-effectiveness is a significant advantage for SMEs, allowing businesses to conduct targeted advertising and the ability to communicate with potential customers for a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing channels. As traditional media is highly discriminatory against small businesses, social media levels the playing field. There are different types of social media platforms, including social networking, video sharing and streaming, image-based sites, blogs, community platforms and discussion forums (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). All these platforms serve specific audiences looking for specific content. According to Tlapana and Dike (2020), the most popular social networks are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, with Twitter having the most users (over 216 billion). Facebook appears to be the most popular social network in South Africa, with 16.1 million South Africans using it.

Social media, according to Islam *et al.* (2021), are easily available electronic tools that promote user connection development and information sharing. The social media platforms, which are distinguished by their accessibility and ease of use, come in a range of formats and are employed by a wide range of international users (Masekoameng, 2018). Examples of social media networks are Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Given their popularity as the main social media platforms used by SMEs, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp will be the focus of this study. Businesses find it challenging to navigate the use of social media tactics, especially in the always changing digital ecosystem. The internet world offers potential, but it also adds complexity and problems to the social media marketing process as Nadaraja and Yazdanifard (2013) pointed out. Social media has evolved into an essential tool for SMEs, providing considerable benefits in terms of enhanced brand visibility and customer engagement (Mwaanga and Hapompwe, 2024). According to Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins (2019), South African businesses are demonstrating the importance of using social media marketing tools as these tools enable online users to gain access to their businesses. As part of the South African business sector, it can therefore be deduced that SMEs in the beauty industry can use these strategies to attract a larger audience, engage with them and market their products to them to promote business success. However, mastering the nuances of social media strategy is still a struggle. Understanding these dynamics is critical for SMEs seeking to maximise their marketing efforts and achieve long-term success in an ever-changing digital ecosystem.

A systematic review conducted by Al-Haidari, Kabanda and Almukhaylid (2021) categorises the challenges that SMEs face when implementing social media strategies into two broad themes: namely, organisational and environmental. On the organisational side, many SMEs struggle with internal limitations such as the lack of credibility as trusted information sources, inadequate digital skills and the time-consuming nature of maintaining an active social media presence. These internal factors often hinder consistent engagement and weaken the overall impact of their marketing efforts. Externally, social media platforms give users significant power over content and feedback, which means that businesses have limited control over how their brand is perceived. This exposure to public opinion, combined with the fear of negative comments and a highly competitive online marketplace, further complicates the ability of SMEs to manage their digital footprint effectively. Further challenges like resource constraints which includes financial limitations, time constraints and staffing shortages holds businesses back from putting their social media plans into practice (Mokhtar, Hasan and Halim, 2017; Owolabi *et al.*, 2024; Mtjilibe *et al.*, 2024). The participatory aspect of social media is highlighted by Nadaraja and Yazdanifard (2013) who stress that sustained engagement requires time and dedication. It takes time and staff to monitor every network, reply to remarks, answer questions and share important product information. However, performing these duties can be difficult for SMEs with a tight budget and with little staff. Financial constraints tend to prevent SMEs from employing experts to effectively manage their social media presence. As a result, some businesses are unable to employ qualified and experienced social media managers who are skilled in implementing targeted social media strategy for businesses. Organisations looking to increase their visibility and engagement face major obstacles due to the ever-changing world of social media algorithms and platform dynamics. Appel *et al.* (2020) characterise social media platforms as an "ever-changing" environment that necessitates constant observation and flexibility. Keeping up with upgrades and understanding platform nuances requires constant observation, adjustment and testing, which frequently strains organisational resources.

According to McCann and Barlow (2015), evaluating the effects and return on investment (ROI) of social media initiatives remains a difficult task for enterprises. The authors found that even if SMEs believe that some social media apps are more useful than others, a startling 65 percent of polled businesses acknowledge that they do not

track ROI. Metrics such as likes, shares and comments provide information on audience involvement, but it is still difficult to connect specific commercial results to social media activity. The complexities of linking social media interactions to sales, conversions and client acquisition particularly in multi-channel marketing scenarios are clarified by Nisar and Yeung (2018). Studies by Chyrak *et al.* (2024) and Valos *et al.* (2017) also discovered difficulty in measuring ROI as a major problem facing businesses. This measurement complexity is further compounded by difficulties gaining access to sophisticated analytics tools and proving a causal connection between social media initiatives and business performance. In conclusion, social media presents countless avenues for participation and organisational success, but its proper use necessitates a deep comprehension of its dynamics, careful resource allocation and reliable measuring techniques. In an ever-evolving digital landscape, organisations may fully leverage social media to create commercial success and cultivate enduring connections with their audiences by proactively tackling these obstacles and implementing a strategic approach to social media management.

Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivism paradigm which assumes that reality is subjective and multifaceted and researchers using this paradigm seek to understand phenomena through participants' perspectives, typically using qualitative methods (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). The study proceeds to use a qualitative research approach, gathering data from SMEs in the beauty industry situated in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Pietermaritzburg is the capital city and the second largest city in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province. Kimanzi's (2019) study of Pietermaritzburg showed that there are 678 SMEs in the city. Out of this number, the sampling frame only includes SMEs in the beauty industry and to the best of the knowledge of the researchers, this number is unknown.

Utilising a non-probability sampling method known as purposive sampling, data collection was guided by the researcher's discretion. This method involves deliberately selecting specific situations, individuals or events to glean essential information unattainable through other means (Taherdoost, 2016; Leavy, 2017). Beauty SMEs actively engaged in digital marketing were chosen based on their relevance to the research questions and objectives. Given qualitative research parameters, Dworkin (2012) suggests a sample size ranging from 5 to 50 participants. For this paper, data saturation was reached after interviewing 22 participants, a figure in line with Dworkin's (2012) recommendation. According to Stern, Jordan and McArthur (2014), inclusion criteria refer to the persons who will be included in the study based on their capacity to meet the qualities of those needed in the study's sample. In this paper, the beauty SMEs chosen included those that specialise in hair, cosmetics and fragrances. These businesses must employ digital marketing and be in PMB. Furthermore, the participants must be fluent in isiZulu or English. These participants must own or manage SMEs in the beauty industry. SMEs in the beauty industry who do not possess these traits were excluded. Employing semi-structured interviews, predetermined questions allowed flexibility and exploration, facilitating rich data collection and potential dialogue during interviews (Taherdoost, 2022).

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a technique for finding, evaluating and summarising patterns (themes) in data as well as arranging and providing a (rich) description of it. The authors further provide a six-step process of conducting thematic analysis which this research paper followed:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data – after conducting and transcribing interviews, the researcher reads through each transcript multiple times to gain familiarity with the content and take preliminary notes on patterns.

Step 2: Generate initial codes – the NVIVO software is utilised to organise and categorise key responses into initial codes based on frequently mentioned topics.

Step 3: Search for themes – the researchers further analyse the coded data and identify common themes across individual experiences. Similar codes are grouped into broader themes.

Step 4: Review themes – the researchers review each theme to ensure that it accurately represents the data. Some themes may be combined, refined, or discarded based on relevance.

Step 5: Define themes – the themes are then defined and explained.

Step 6: Write-up – The researchers then use the defined themes in the findings chapter, supporting it with direct quotes from participants to provide evidence. The write-up connects the themes to the research objectives.

NVivo version 14 software facilitated the above processes. The next section discusses the research findings.

Discussion of Findings

This paper has three objectives which include discovering the social media marketing strategies used by SMEs in the beauty industry in Pietermaritzburg, identifying the most effective social media strategies and identify challenges they face in implementing these strategies. The emerging themes for each objective are discussed in the ensuing sections. All participants are female, reflecting their strong presence in the beauty industry. The majority of the businesses are in the hair sector (36%), followed by those offering a mix of all services (23%), eyelashes (18%), nails (14%) and other services (9%). Regarding educational status, 28% of participants have a matric qualification, while 24% hold a degree and another 24% a diploma. A further 19% are currently studying towards a tertiary qualification, with 1% unknown. The average age of the businesses is 5.3 years and the average number of years using digital media is 3.6. This indicates the growth of digital marketing after COVID-19 as noted by Wibawa and Arif (2024).

Only one theme named “Social Networking Sites” emerged for this objective. Social networking sites’ main objective is to connect people via text, videos, pictures and other creative forms of content. Three main social media platforms were identified by the study on SMEs’ use of social media; namely, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. According to the participants, Facebook is a key platform for consumer interaction and business promotion since it can effectively reach a large audience, build customer loyalty and ease business transactions. Conversely, Instagram functioned as a centre for creativity, advertising and content production, providing SMEs with a vibrant platform to present their goods and interact with customers. WhatsApp, known for its user-friendliness and direct communication skills was essential in enabling customer contacts and sharing marketing materials. Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly mentioned Facebook as their key medium for business promotion and consumer engagement. Its widespread use by SMEs demonstrates its success in reaching a large audience, including loyal customers and potential leads. Many SMEs had both personal and commercial Facebook profiles to differentiate their brand identity and communicate with a variety of audiences. Furthermore, sponsored posts, targeted adverts and business insights were identified as valuable marketing and audience analysis tools.

“I mostly use Facebook as that’s where I get most of my customers, Facebook you get people that know you, and people that order quite a lot on Facebook and share our posts.” “Facebook – 500 active followers that includes my buyers and people that buy in bulk. Yesterday I celebrated 500 followers.” - Participant 5

“I think it’s Facebook that I use the most I feel like on Facebook you interact more with people unlike Instagram you know under the comment section people are more comfortable with Facebook and their chats with you and they’re more friendly on Facebook I’ve got more friends even and following on Facebook than I do on Instagram so I tend to use Facebook a lot because that’s where most of my interactions are.” – Participant 20

Instagram has also become the go-to medium for SMEs when it comes to inspiration, marketing and content creation. The participants commended Instagram’s high degree of interactivity, personalised pages and efficient use of hashtags to promote content. SMEs used Instagram to track market trends, pick up tips from rivals and adapt their content to suit the tastes of a growing audience. Most SMEs kept up active Instagram profiles, making effective use of the platform’s user-friendly features and extensive audience to market their goods and services.

“I use Instagram a lot as I have a large following and my clients and followers engage with my content a lot there. Instagram makes it easier for them to repost and share the content I post.” – Participant 4

“I use Instagram mostly and my reason for that is that everyone is on Instagram when I look at my target market young people are on Instagram. I feel against the gun is very easy for my target market mostly my target markets are students and young professionals or young people Instagram is set up in a way that it accommodates businesses Instagram allows for hashtags to be used in their platforms and in that way if

a person is searching if I am using hashtags in my post if a person searches for anything around lashes in Pietermaritzburg I am then able to be to pop up” – Participant 11

I use Instagram the most because that's where I get a lot of inspiration from other businesses. South African cosmetics businesses and you know and international. Because cosmetics businesses, that's where I learn from, and I create my content based around something like the big business and what they also have. That's where I can get the trending. I can see what's trending so that I know that I can associate my business if I can be able to associate my business with that trend, I'll do it. And if it just doesn't go with us with our image – Participant 2

Participant 2 placed a strong focus on keeping up with trends, getting ideas from other companies and using Instagram.

The third social networking site, WhatsApp, was found to be an essential communication tool for SMEs, enabling easy exchange of promotional content and direct client connection. SMEs placed a significant emphasis on its accessibility, large user base and capacity for communication without airtime. Features on the platform, like contact lists and status views, gave SMEs important insights into customer interaction and market penetration.

“WhatsApp, I use WhatsApp everyday as most of my clients use WhatsApp, and almost everyone has WhatsApp, and it's easier to use.” – Participant 1

“For my business I am using the new ways, the digital marketing ways. I do not use the traditional way as I do not go house to house to sell perfumes nor do I go to ranks or busy places to sell. I depend on digital marketing as a form of marketing even though I am not digitally savvy. The reason I say that is because I only use WhatsApp as a form of marketing.” – Participant 7

“I think I use WhatsApp a lot since I am not always on Facebook so I use my WhatsApp a lot to share my posters with my contacts and ask my contacts for them to share with their contacts” – Participant 8

These results align with studies such as Rugova and Prenaj (2016), whose literature survey highlighted the effectiveness and importance of Facebook for SMEs in acquiring new customers and retaining existing ones. Malesev and Cherry (2021) also found that Facebook and Instagram are critical to marketing for SMEs in Australia. Similarly, Sugiyantoro, Wijaya and Supriyadi (2022) concluded that WhatsApp is crucial for SMEs in Indonesia to reach out to customers and maintain close relationships with them. These findings suggest that social media platforms play a significant role in the marketing strategies of SMEs worldwide. Utilising various platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp can help businesses effectively engage with their target audience and build brand loyalty. Effective social media strategies are critical to the success of SMEs in the digital age, as noted by Bajpai, Pandey and Shriwas (2012). Two themes emerged for this objective namely: “Content Creation” and “Response and Feedback Management”. It was discovered that in terms on Content Creation, consistency in posting schedules and the effective use of visual content to captivate viewers and communicate brand messages were key. The significance of prompt participant management and feedback handling in cultivating robust customer connections and exhibiting a dedication to customer satisfaction was also emphasized by the participant as effective social media marketing strategies.

Theme 1: Content creation

According to Öztamur and Karakadılar (2014), effective social media strategies for SMEs rely heavily on content production. During the interviews, the participants emphasized the importance of creating compelling, consistency and relevant content to engage their audience and sell their products or services. The participants stressed the necessity of staying consistent with posting schedules and content themes to retain audience engagement and brand awareness across social media channels.

“I normally post 3 times a week on Instagram and almost daily on WhatsApp I post stories a lot then actual post. In my personal account I post stories tag my business account” – Participant 3

“I post as often as I can, I post a lot about my business, almost every day” – Participant 5

These participants emphasised the value of visual content in successfully capturing their audience's attention. The participants also acknowledged the effectiveness of visual elements, such as images and videos in captivating audience interest and communicating brand messages with impact.

"I am a makeup artist and I mostly post videos." – Participant 8

"High quality pictures, I usually take pictures using the latest iPhone sometimes I use a photographer to capture the work." – Participant 19

Theme 2: Response and Feedback Management

To build strong customer connections and demonstrate a dedication to customer satisfaction, participants emphasised the importance of prompt participant and feedback handling.

"Customer feedback is very importance to me as a beauty owner therefore, all feedback received as actioned upon and I do improve my services to my clients" – Participant 19

"We do incorporate customer feedback like in terms of complaints and stuff we don't take down our complaints if you've given us a bad review for whatever reason we confront the issue we leave the participant there for everyone to see we leave the complaints there for us to be able to participant and for other people to see that we make mistakes and we are a business and we're not perfect we're not hiding it we are human we make mistakes we're not robots and we're not magicians we leave it there for people to see that as well. However the other part of your question of how we incorporate their feedback it's very hard for clients to come to us and tell us that they don't like a certain thing that we posted on our social media because at the end of the day it's our platform yes we get permission from them to use them as our models but at the end of the day it happens in our platform so you can't tell us how to portray our art or our work." – Participant 16

Participant 19 demonstrated a pro-active attitude to meeting client needs by underlining the significance of consumer input in improving services to match client expectations. Participant 16 discussed the significance of accountability and openness while managing client feedback. They stressed the importance of participant to concerns in an open manner and making answers visible to show sincerity and accountability.

This study finds that effective content creation and proactive audience interaction through feedback management are essential components of successful social media strategies for SMEs. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of utilising customer feedback to tailor content and improve engagement. By incorporating these strategies, SMEs can build strong relationships with their audience and ultimately drive loyalty and growth. This is corroborated by studies by Sharma, Singh and Aiyub (2020) in Fiji, which found that effective customer engagement positively relates to customer loyalty. Ho, Pang and Choy's (2020) study in Asia and Chatterjee and Kar's (2020) study in India concluded that content creation and effective communication to the target audience generate value for businesses. Therefore, it is crucial for SMEs to not only create compelling content but also ensure that it resonates with their target audience. This alignment can lead to increased customer loyalty and ultimately contribute to business growth.

Theme 3: Resource constraints

This theme captures the various obstacles that participants have when managing their marketing initiatives. The scholarly work of Barefoot and Szabo (2009) highlight the substantial time commitment needed for successful digital marketing initiatives. Participants agreed, noting that it was challenging to find time in their hectic schedules to interact with social marketing tools in a meaningful way.

"Scheduling my time, and I also tell my customers to tag me on their posts; therefore, it is easier to get most of my work." – Participant 19

"Time is a problem; honestly, it takes a lot of time to be able to post." – Participant 22

Participant 19 highlighted the difficulty of finding time to efficiently manage social media marketing obligations while utilising tagging techniques to increase client involvement. Participant 22 also described the time constraints that come with working with social media, recognising that posting and interaction activities take a significant amount of time. Given the circumstances, these observations highlight the various obstacles that participants encountered

when attempting to navigate the complexity of digital marketing, emphasizing the significance of time management techniques and strategic resource allocation for maximising social media marketing initiatives. Implementing social media strategies SMEs has been hindered by resource restrictions, mostly related to time constraints. The participants emphasized the considerable time commitment necessary for successful digital marketing initiatives, many finding it difficult to juggle these obligations with hectic schedules. The theme of "*resource constraints*" in the study highlights the challenges faced by SMEs in managing their marketing initiatives. The participants found it difficult to find time for meaningful interaction with social marketing tools, despite their busy schedules. They also noted the time-consuming nature of posting and interaction activities.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore three objectives; namely, the effective social media strategies used SMEs in the beauty industry, the platforms and techniques they apply and the challenges they face. The findings confirm that visual content creation, consistent posting and feedback management are key success factors, which align with Objective one. The study also discovered that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp serve distinct marketing functions (Objective 1) and highlights time and resource constraints as significant implementation barriers (Objective 3). Based on the study findings, it is recommended that SMEs prioritise leveraging WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram to promote their businesses. SMEs should use Facebook for broad consumer interaction and business promotion due to its extensive reach and ability to build customer loyalty. On the other hand, Instagram should be employed for creative content production and advertising, providing SMEs with an opportunity to showcase their product and service offerings through engaging and well taken pictures and short videos. WhatsApp, with its user-friendly interface and direct communication capabilities, should be used for efficient customer contact and marketing material dissemination. Additionally, SMEs can overcome time constraints by investing in a content creation and feedback management personnel or outsourcing this service.

In conclusion, this study examined the social media environment of SMEs in the beauty industry in Pietermaritzburg to discover the most effective platforms, strategies and challenges in using social media marketing. Semi-structured interviews have yielded insightful information about the usage of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, revealing their functions in audience engagement and business promotion. The significance of constant content development and focused audience interaction on brand visibility and customer connections has been highlighted by the study as crucial components of a successful social media strategy. The study has limitations despite its contributions. The time-sensitive nature of technology, in addition to the sample size and scope, point to potential areas for additional study and investigation. To capture changing trends and practices in social media marketing among SMEs, future studies should undertake a longer-term viewpoint, a quantitative approach and a more larger sample size. Furthermore, adding financial data to analysis may offer more profound understanding of the relationship between social media activity and corporate success. Essentially, this study emphasizes how social media is dynamic in the SME space and stresses the necessity of constant research and adjustment to successfully navigate the complexity of the digital environment. SMEs can improve their social media strategies, build better online presences, and create meaningful connections with their target audiences by utilising the study's findings and recommendations. This will help SMEs succeed in the rapidly changing digital economy and achieve sustainable growth.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study brings together Business, Marketing, and Media Studies to explore how beauty SMEs in South Africa use social media post-COVID-19. It shows how Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp help with marketing, content creation, and customer engagement.

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