

Strategic use of digital promotion strategies among female emigrant entrepreneurs in UAE

Strategic use
of digital
promotion

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Received 12 October 2016
Revised 12 July 2018
Accepted 13 July 2018

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the strategic use of social media and chat applications of women entrepreneurs to promote their businesses.

Design/methodology/approach – Because of the nature of the study and dearth of sufficient data in the Middle Eastern society on the women entrepreneurship, this study employed a qualitative research methodology. The research comprised of 20 in-depth interviews with immigrant women entrepreneurs in the United Arab Emirates. They were identified through personal contacts and referrals.

Findings – All the expatriate women interviewed are using social media and chat applications to promote their business. Facebook is used for brand creation and WhatsApp is used as a direct marketing tool to evoke purchase response. Though traditional promotional tools are far from redundant, their role is more supplementary. The increasing trend is a combination of traditional tools and digital tools. Digital tools seem to have an upper hand in their business promotions.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited to SME sector in one industry and in one country. The qualitative nature of this study could affect the generalizability of the results. A more extensive study is needed and future research should be more diverse including widening the selection of respondents, industries and countries.

Originality/value – This study is a novel attempt to gauge an in-depth understanding of modern communication tools. It looks specifically at the integrative strategies pursued by the immigrant women entrepreneurs using Facebook and WhatsApp.

Keywords United Arab Emirates, Facebook, Women entrepreneurs, WhatsApp

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The number of social media and chat applications users is increasing rapidly around the world. In 2016, Facebook and WhatsApp, currently the most popular online communication tools, reported a total of 1.65bn active users and more than 1bn total users (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d). How organizations do business has changed due to technological advancements, rapid digitalization and the intricate interdependencies of the global market, which includes emerging and developed economies (Wu *et al.*, 2015). The increased popularity and influence of social media and chat applications have led to the development of organizations that explore the strategic use of these channels to build brand recognition and to establish and maintain relationships with customers. Organizations should carefully plan social media strategies, as each of these channels have different characteristics and can be used to achieve varied marketing objectives. Academic research is struggling to keep pace with these developments because these channels are being adopted so quickly (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2012). Some studies have been done on the influence of social media use (Akar and Topcu, 2011; Sin *et al.*, 2012), on types of social media use (Bonson and Ratkai, 2013; Sarosa, 2012; Wong, 2012) and on the impact of its use (Chu *et al.*, 2012; Karpinski *et al.*, 2013). Akar and Topcu (2011) found that consumers who interact with social networks make better purchase decisions. Wong (2012) found that “liking” friends’ posts is one of the most popular activities among social media users. However, no study has been done on the strategic marketing use of chat applications like WhatsApp. The strategic use of popular chat applications like



WhatsApp and social media like Facebook could be a perfect combination, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SME), which have fewer clientele. This study, therefore, examines the use of these tools by micro-businesses (those that employ fewer than five people) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The UAE is a leader in the adoption of new technology and in encouraging its use, particularly in the service sector. A unique characteristic of the UAE is the large number of expatriate workers and their families, who actually outnumber the local population. The UAE citizens account for 19 percent of its population; expatriates make up the remaining 81 percent. Of the total expatriate population, approximately 50 percent are from South Asia, about 8 percent are from western nations and the remaining 23 percent are expatriates of Arab or Persian descent (GLMM, 2015). The UAE has state-of-the-art infrastructure, which has contributed to the internet's high penetration rate there. In fact, the number of internet and mobile users in the UAE is growing significantly faster than the global average. According to the Internet World Statistics, about 93 percent of the UAE's population are internet users. The UAE residents have been quick to adapt to advanced technology: 37 percent of their online time is devoted to social media or online networking. Furthermore, this percentage is rapidly increasing because of targeted digital marketing. For example, Facebook has more than 6m users in the UAE (around 70 percent of the population), and WhatsApp's penetration rate is about 63 percent (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d). These factors are particularly helpful for SMEs seeking to set up effective communication channels.

Female entrepreneurship is also becoming a significant contributor to the economy. Most scholars agree that female entrepreneurship plays an important role in economic development (Allen *et al.*, 2007). Women entrepreneurs in developed countries need moral support, but in developing countries, they need financial support to improve business performance (Welsh *et al.*, 2018). According to Moore and Buttner (1997), women become entrepreneurs because of a desire for challenge and self-determination, because they seek to balance work and family responsibilities, and because of the corporate glass ceiling. Women do not regard entrepreneurship as a career and, therefore, do not usually seek to turn their firms into big enterprises (Bruni *et al.*, 2008). This is one reason why the majority of women-owned businesses have a single owner (Richardson *et al.*, 2004; Robb, 2002).

This study addresses the use of digital promotion strategies, especially social media and chat applications, by businesses owned by female emigrant entrepreneurs in the UAE. Specifically, this study examines the use of Facebook, a social media channel, and WhatsApp, a chat application, by female expatriate entrepreneurs with online apparel businesses based in the UAE. A robust online strategy is essential due to the popularity of these channels in the UAE. Women have a long history of involvement in the apparel industry; initially, they played a more prominent role in the production process (Barber, 1994). In fact, the apparel industry has been considered a predominantly female-centric occupation for quite some time (Bix, 2002). However, despite their significant role in the apparel industry and in other small businesses, the role of women as apparel entrepreneurs and small-scale business owners has remained under-represented in the literature (Hodges *et al.*, 2015).

Because of the rapid pace of the adoption of technology, academic research has struggled to keep pace with the development and strategic use of digital channels, particularly by small businesses. Some studies have examined the use of social networking in marketing, but so far, the use of chat applications in business has not been examined. Therefore, this study seeks to gain insight into the strategies SMEs pursue to engage customers and communicate with important stakeholders through social media and chat applications. More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1.* Why do women entrepreneurs in the UAE prefer to connect with their customers and other stakeholders via social media and chat applications rather than through conventional promotional tools?

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- RQ2. How are social media like Facebook and chat applications like WhatsApp integrated in customer communication?
- RQ3. How do women entrepreneurs use digital promotional tools to create a brand?
- RQ4. What are some of the unique characteristics of social media and chat applications, and what causes those differences?

2. Literature review

2.1 *The use of new communication channels by SMEs*

In recent years, SMEs have turned to online applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Flickr and Instagram to connect with their customers. SMEs have adopted these channels quickly; this can be attributed to SMEs' efforts to keep up with new developments to avoid missing out on the opportunities presented by these networking platforms (Drury, 2008). Attributes such as cost effectiveness, speed, ease of use and the personalized nature of communication have contributed to the increasing popularity of social media channels among women entrepreneurs with SMEs. Factors such as the availability of high-speed internet, network coverage and affordable network plans have influenced the internet penetration rate. Another interesting trend is the growing heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs (Venugopal, 2015), from women in rural communities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2014) to educated young women who follow online business models. Thus, due to external factors along with the unique attributes of these technological tools, SMEs run by women expatriates rely on the internet to a considerable degree when marketing their products and services (Langowitz and Minitti, 2007). These phenomena have generated much interest among researchers and practitioners.

However, while increasing number of studies are being conducted on SMEs, there is a lack of research on affluent women entrepreneurs, particularly in the Middle East. Most studies on women entrepreneurs focus on North America and Europe (Venugopal, 2015). The literature also includes studies on women entrepreneurs in the UAE (Kargwell, 2012; Itani *et al.*, 2011), neighboring countries such as Oman and Bahrain (Dechant and Lamky, 2005; Mcelvee and Riyami, 2003) and Saudi Arabia (Ahmad, 2011; Danish and Smith, 2012). Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to bridging this gap in the literature by examining the factors that motivate women entrepreneurs in the UAE to adopt digital communication tools. The findings can offer further insight into the strategies pursued by expatriate SME owners in the UAE who use digital communication tools in the apparel industry.

2.2 *Women expatriate entrepreneurs in the UAE*

According to Levie and Hart (2012), in 2010, there were 104m women entrepreneurs in 59 economies worldwide. Self-employed women comprise between 1.5 and 45.4 percent of the adult female population in their respective economies (Levie and Hart, 2012).

This global trend is reflected in the UAE. The UAE has attracted a disproportionate number of foreign workers, who comprise about 80 percent of the total population and are estimated to number about 4m. Among these are expatriate women who have joined their husbands and settled in the UAE, where they have the choice of staying at home, getting a job, or more recently, setting up their own business. The attractiveness of the third option can be attributed to the UAE's business-friendly environment. The UAE is a multicultural country, and culture is widely thought to regulate both the quality and aggregate rates of entrepreneurial activity in different countries. According to the UAE Ministry of Economy, women own nearly half of the UAE's SMEs (Haroun, 2017). Hodgson (2012) compared women entrepreneurs in Canada and the UAE and found that the latter face fewer barriers than their counterparts in Canada. Tong *et al.* (2012) showed that the temporary residency status of expatriate workers does not prevent them from becoming

entrepreneurs in the UAE. The rate of entrepreneurship is higher among Arab expatriates than among other nationalities.

2.3 Marketing communication via social media and chat applications

The concept of “social media” is somewhat amorphous, and its definition is constantly subject to revisions, especially as the number of new communication technologies grows (Rader *et al.*, 2014). This study will clearly distinguish social media from chat applications. Both channels are used to maintain relationships with people, but the two mediums differ in several ways. Chat applications are more personal by nature and allow users to send instant messages, videos and voice messages directly to the recipient’s mobile phone. Social media, however, includes internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011); it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube has paved the way for new marketing and advertising opportunities (Edelman, 2010; Li and Bernoff, 2011). Companies, brands, products and consumers are embracing this radical change (Davis, 2010; Hanna *et al.*, 2011). More specifically, SME owners are using new technological tools more and more to connect with customers and explore new business opportunities (Harris and Rae, 2010). The rise of social media has also led to a power shift toward consumers through user-generated content, which, in turn, has increased consumers’ knowledge and expectations of products (Barwise and Meehan, 2010). Companies design marketing programs specifically for social media by creating content that attracts readers and encourages them to share the information with their friends (Mashable, 2016). This has helped companies create brand awareness and equity. For example, Coca-Cola’s Facebook page has more than 89,805,855 “likes.” Most of these were acquired through campaigns such as “Hello Happiness,” which helps migrants connect with their loved ones and allows consumers to send a Coca-Cola product to a friend across the world. Social media is quick, efficient and cost effective, and it can be an appropriate tool for certain SMEs to connect with potential customers. At present, Facebook is the most popular social media platform, with more than 1.5bn active retail and business accounts. However, users generally “like” an organization, brand or product on Facebook because of the relationship they have established with the product offline (Charlesworth, 2015). In total, 88 percent of the Middle Eastern population uses social media, and women represent a whopping 35 percent (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d). Social media enables women entrepreneurs to effectively reach and engage customers, partners and other stakeholders.

Globally, four of the six most popular platforms are messenger applications: WhatsApp, QQ, Facebook Messenger and WeChat (Simon, 2015). In addition to personalized messages, these chat applications have recently introduced features that can support businesses. For example, WhatsApp added a broadcast feature that allows users to simultaneously send messages to a group of individuals without revealing the recipients to one another. This helps streamline communications and avoid incessant notifications from group members communicating with each other in the group (Puri, 2015). The feature is particularly useful to marketers, who can use it to reach 100 percent of their WhatsApp contact list. Given the growing popularity of WhatsApp and Facebook, it seems essential to explore their effectiveness as marketing tools for SMEs.

2.4 Marketing communication via mobile phones

Today, more than half of the world’s population uses mobile phones, and the role of phones in consumers’ lives appears to be increasing. The worldwide number of mobile phone users is expected to pass 5bn by 2019 (Statista, 2018). More than 1.6bn people (23 percent of the population) access more than 2bn social media accounts on their mobile phones every month (Simon, 2015). The application accessed most often on mobile phones is Facebook, followed by WhatsApp, QQ, Facebook Messenger and WeZone

(Statista, 2016a, b, c, d). These figures clearly indicate the growing influence of chat applications. In addition, marketers are gradually shifting to a mobile-first strategy, in which applications are designed around products to offer unique benefits and encourage their use by potential customers. For example, The Home Depot developed an application that uses augmented reality to provide a realistic depiction of how a certain color of paint will look in a room. Barker *et al.* (2016) found that the top two activities on mobile phones are e-mailing and sending text messages, both of which are also being used to make purchases more and more frequently. This is possibly one of the reasons for marketers' focus on the mobile-first online strategy rather than designing pages for laptops and desktops. More than 76 percent of the population of the UAE has a mobile internet account (Statista, 2016a, b, c, d), making it highly likely that customers use this medium to make purchases. In addition, 4.6m people in the UAE use mobiles to access their social media accounts (GMI, 2015), which could also impact business strategies. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the promotional strategies that consider the rate of mobile internet penetration and are used by women entrepreneurs in the UAE.

2.5 Branding through new communication channels

Because of limited resources, branding is often a challenge for SMEs (Wong and Merrilees, 2005). The most common limit is finances (Ohnemus, 2009), followed by time and marketing expertise, as SME owners may not have sufficient marketing skills (Gilmore *et al.*, 2001). These limitations and challenges have traditionally led to SMEs' constant consideration of the money, time and energy spent on marketing, strategic approaches (Noble *et al.*, 2002) and branding. However, the advent of modern communication tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook has negated, to a certain extent, the branding – and, more importantly, financial – limitations of SMEs. Ojasalo *et al.* (2008) suggested that SMES need brand orientation, distinctiveness, barriers and marketing performance to develop a strong brand. Urde (1999) defined brand orientation as the approach where the processes of the organization revolve around the creation, development and protection of brand identity in constant interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands. One could argue that social media channels have become a cost-efficient, effective tool for constant interaction. An SME's vision must be comprehensive to support the planning of brand-based strategies and sustain brand distinctiveness. Brand distinctiveness, in turn, can set them apart from their competitors (Wong and Merrilees, 2008).

2.6 Women entrepreneurs and technology

Peacock (1998) conducted a study on women entrepreneurs in 14 countries, ranging from developed countries such as Canada, Australia and European countries to developing ones such as Ghana and Ethiopia. This study identified technology as a key to the growth and development of women-owned businesses around the world. Women entrepreneurs' competencies are also a crucial attribute in the development, future growth and success of their ventures (Baum *et al.*, 2001; Lerner *et al.*, 1997). In a study on women's entrepreneurial competencies, Lerner and Almor (2002) established a strong relationship between entrepreneurial skills and a business's performance. The advent of new communication channels, along with the development of mobile applications, has rendered technological competency a crucial factor in running small companies. In other words, a key competency for women entrepreneurs in the modern era is the intelligent use of modern communication technologies. An entrepreneur's perception of a technology's usefulness seems to be a key determinant in their adoption of the technology (Taylor and Todd, 1995). The ease of use of new technological applications, along with the high internet penetration rate, enables women entrepreneurs in the UAE to incorporate such technologies in their ventures, particularly for communicating with customers.

3. Methodology

This study aims to gain further insight into the digital promotional strategies pursued by women expatriate entrepreneurs in the UAE. Since their businesses are predominantly online, it is expected that their strategies, particularly those related to customer communication, primarily use online tools. However, it is necessary to explore how and why they select and use these tools. This study will take a qualitative approach: in-depth personal interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1984). The exploratory nature of this research requires a qualitative approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1984). Qualitative research is used for inquiries into social and human problems (Creswell, 1994), and interviews help establish an equal status between participant and researcher and allow respondents to describe subjective knowledge, opinions and beliefs (Burns, 2000). Qualitative researchers should seek to establish an intimate relationship with participants and to overcome the situational constraints that shape reality (Denzine and Lincoln, 2000). This will help obtain a broad range of information in the study and enhance the researcher's understanding of the problem. Women entrepreneurs may not be comfortable sharing customer details or how they maintain relationships with customers. However, the use of in-depth interviews will provide researchers with insight into and understanding of complex and sensitive issues. In this study, data were collected using a semi-structured interview that allowed the researchers to monitor the conversation and ensure that all important topics were covered to maintain consistency.

3.1 Sample size and respondent selection

Although there are no rules for calculating sample sizes for qualitative interviews, most researchers prefer small samples. A sample size that is most appropriate for a qualitative study is generally determined by the level of depth expected in the answers to the research questions. For straightforward questions or detailed studies, single digits may suffice (Marshall, 1996). In this study, qualitative data were collected from 20 interviews. The interview protocol was developed manually. The duration of each interview was approximately one hour, and most of them were conducted at the participants' homes in the Emirates of Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi. The snowballing method (Bieranacki and Waldorf, 1981) was used to select respondents. The first four were selected through personal contacts and the remaining 16 through referrals. All respondents were women expatriate entrepreneurs in the apparel industry, i.e., designing and selling custom-made clothing, including women's wear considered traditional in the subcontinent (e.g. salwars, kurtis and sarees). Only two of the respondents had a physical shop in Sharjah; the rest were online retailers.

Heshusius (1994) suggested that, with qualitative data, interpretation subjectivity can be negated by establishing reliability through a form of consensus. Cultural constraints in the MENA region make it challenging to gather information from women (Sohail and Al-Abdali, 2005). My spouse accompanied me to the interviews, and all the interviews were done in a family setting with a husband or close relative of the participant present. Appointments were made at least one week prior to the meetings. Researchers are more likely to gain successful access to situations if they make use of contacts that can help remove barriers to entrance and if they treat respondents with courtesy (Lofland and Lofland 1984). This approach helped overcome the cultural barriers. The interviews lasted a long time and were conducted in a friendly, cordial atmosphere which evoked a collaborative approach. Interviews were conducted with the owners of the businesses.

3.2 Interview transcription and analysis

The research themes identified from the literature review made it simpler to categorize the data; this approach is recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990), King (2004), Gahauri and Gronhaug (2005) and Saunders *et al.* (2006). The data were carefully analyzed to ensure that

the relevant words and sentences in the interview text aligned with a particular category. The women entrepreneurs interviewed in this study all had at least an undergraduate degree and were proficient in the English language. Since the interviews were conducted in English, the researcher was able to avoid translation errors. The information obtained during the interviews was recorded through note taking. Due to the intensive nature of the discussion and the need to optimize data, these notes were written immediately after the interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2006). One interview was conducted per day to allow time for the researcher to write and analyze the results before moving on to the next one (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993).

4. Findings and discussion

First, demographic information was collected from all participants (Appendices 1 and 2), such as age, education, business background, customer profile and international operations, if any. Of the 20 entrepreneurs interviewed, 13 were from India, 4 from Bangladesh, 2 from Sri Lanka and 1 from Pakistan. All of them claimed to be active on social media. Their businesses have between 3,000 and more than 10,000 “likes.” All the participants used two to seven WhatsApp broadcasting groups, and there seemed to be a correlation between number of likes and number of WhatsApp groups. Participating entrepreneurs with more than 5,000 likes have seven WhatsApp broadcasting groups.

4.1 Target market

The participants target primarily customers from the subcontinent. Interestingly, they do not target other non-Arab nationalities or local Emirati women, possibly because their products are most frequently purchased by females in the subcontinent. One respondent stated, “We deal with sarees and salwars; they are widely used by people from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and so the selection of our customers is easy. Women from the Indian subcontinent are our main market.” On the topic of not targeting other areas, one participant said, “We do not have the skills to make designer wear which is appealing to local customers and other Arabs.” The language barrier was also identified as a deciding factor: “Language is a barrier in focusing on customers from Arab countries as most of us don’t speak Arabic.” Four of the participants said they had customers from the USA and Australia who were originally from the Indian subcontinent and whom they contacted through referrals: “We have delivered products to customers in Australia; they came to know about our products through referrals from our customers in the UAE.” All of the women entrepreneurs deal mainly with suppliers from India.

4.2 Use of social media and chat applications (RQ1: preference of social media and chat applications over conventional promotional tools)

4.2.1 *Causes and extent of use.* Today, SMEs are adopting new technological tools to connect with customers and explore business opportunities (Harris and Rae, 2010). The participants in this study were asked about their use of social media and chat applications and their reasons for using them. All 20 participating entrepreneurs use social media and chat applications, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, to connect with their customers and suppliers. Only four of the participants had Instagram accounts, and these were for personal use. In total, 17 respondents had not heard of any chat applications other than WhatsApp. These results confirm the popularity of WhatsApp and Facebook. Almost all of the participants use their smartphones to access these tools. The participants’ top three reasons for using these tools are ease of use, cost effectiveness and acceptance among customers. As one respondent said, “All my customers are on Facebook and WhatsApp. I can easily connect with my customers using them. Customers also prefer this mode of communication.”

Even small-scale businesses use popular channels such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Flickr and Instagram to connect with their customers. A possible reason for this fast adoption is SMEs' growing concern about losing out on the opportunities offered through these channels (Drury, 2008). The responses in this study clearly reveal that women entrepreneurs are aligning with the global trend of using Facebook and WhatsApp for business purposes.

4.2.2 Creating and maintaining stakeholder relationships. Social media is a tool for establishing and maintaining relationship with friends and families. In addition, it has a significantly greater capacity to disseminate information to the public than traditional media such as television, radio and print advertisements (Keller, 2009). Organizations have tapped into this feature of social media platforms and identified potential marketing channels. More specifically, prominent brands maintain a social media presence and regularly update their customers through these channels. Respondents were asked about the efficiency of social media tools for creating and maintaining relationships with their customers. Some of their responses follow:

For WhatsApp communication, I get contact numbers from them and ask their permission before sending them messages; the customers who are in my WhatsApp contacts like my products and want to be regularly updated on new arrivals.

Facebook is my online shop; this is where I get new customers. I upload pictures of all my latest collection on Facebook so that potential customers can go through it and express their interest.

WhatsApp is a medium to connect with my existing customers; they like my collection and most of them make repeat purchases.

Nine respondents said they used WhatsApp to communicate with their suppliers. One explained, "I have two main suppliers of cloth materials, both based in India. Every week, they send me pictures of the latest materials through WhatsApp. I select the materials I like and place my order through WhatsApp."

Facebook and WhatsApp have different objectives. Facebook can be used as an online shop to acquire more customers and establish brand familiarity, whereas WhatsApp helps businesses focus on existing customers and encourage repeat purchases. In other words, SMEs use Facebook to acquire new customers and WhatsApp to provide personalized contact and to communicate with suppliers. These findings are similar to the findings of Le Figaro (2013), which concluded that French SMEs can substantially increase their business visibility and activities by actively utilizing Facebook.

4.3 Integrative strategies (RQ2: how are social media and chat applications integrated in customer communication?)

Next, respondents were questioned about how they integrate chat applications and social media platforms with their businesses. Following are some of the notable responses:

We use Facebook to gain more visibility for our products and brand. Facebook is used to create a brand and connect with more customers. We regularly take part in trade exhibitions and use Facebook to communicate the date, time, and venue of the event. We then use the contacts we receive during the exhibition to create a WhatsApp group.

We create a broadcasting group on WhatsApp; these contacts are received through referrals, and when we meet our customers in trade exhibitions, Facebook helps us establish credibility. The number of likes we have denotes the popularity of our brand. This instills confidence in our customers to share their phone numbers, which are added to the broadcasting group [...] At the moment, there is no restriction on multiple broadcasting groups, provided the group names are different.

These responses clearly show the distinct, well-defined roles of Facebook and WhatsApp: the former is the initiator and the latter is the maintainer. Facebook helps establish credibility and build contacts, and entrepreneurs then use these contacts to set up a WhatsApp broadcasting group. Most of the participants in this study have two to seven broadcasting groups. The strategies used with each digital tool complement each other and help organizations broaden their customer base. These findings are in line with previous studies on the use of social networking sites. Businesses use social networking sites as two-way communication platforms with customers to communicate product information and also to initiate dialogues and interactions (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016; Gonzalez-Lafaysse and Lapassouse-Madrid, 2016). However, the literature does not include any studies on businesses' use of WhatsApp. The results of the current study include an important insight for marketers regarding WhatsApp's role in maintaining customer relationships.

4.4 Brand development (RQ3: how do women entrepreneurs create a brand using digital promotion tools?)

Social media has experienced exponential growth in recent years. Moreover, it has changed the very nature of marketing; it is no longer an additional marketing tool but an essential one (Davis, 2010; Hanna *et al.*, 2011). A factor distinguishing social media from other marketing tools is the marketer's lack of control when messages are shared (Edelman, 2010). Social media lets consumers communicate with hundreds and even thousands of other consumers from all over the world, so companies are no longer the sole source of brand communication. The first step to creating a brand using social media is to set up an account (or a Facebook business page). This is free and allows businesses to gain information about consumers. One of respondent in this study even said, "On Facebook, the number of likes is the brand; brand is the number of likes." Another added, "We use Facebook to create awareness and ask users who visit our page to hit the like button and share our page, thus exposing our brand to all their friends on Facebook."

However, one participant pointed out a flaw in the system: "If a person 'likes' many pages on Facebook, updates from all the pages will not reach the person. There is some statistical policy on Facebook that limits the number of posts seen by a person. As a result, only very popular posts are visible." About seven entrepreneurs in this study used the insight feature on Facebook. One young respondent said, "Facebook has some amazing features which help us track our likes. The insight option gives us a breakdown of our page views, pages likes, people reach, and post engagement." She further elaborated, "I was going through my last week's Facebook activity, which showed a reach of minus 18%. This means that compared to the previous week, our reach has declined. Facebook also helps compare the number of likes and reach."

Women entrepreneurs clearly use Facebook to increase their online presence, and consumers consider social media a more trustworthy source of information than the traditional instruments of marketing communications used by companies. In addition, Facebook's insight feature appears to be a powerful tool to help businesses plan their strategies. Finally, the number of likes should be positively correlated with page reach; otherwise, corresponding strategies will need to be formulated.

4.5 Participating in exhibitions (RQ3: brand development)

All of the respondents in this study participate in trade fairs for designer wear organized by various associations. These exhibitions are mainly held in Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi. On average, the respondents in this study participate in three to four exhibitions per year. One respondent said, "I make sure to attend exhibitions. It is an opportunity to meet potential customers in person. I post messages on my Facebook page in advance, inviting all my contacts to visit us." Another stated, "It is a venue to poach other exhibitors' customers

as these events have a high participation rate. Some exhibitions have more than 100 participants and around 2,000 visitors.” All of them said they give their business card and the link to their Facebook page to new contacts: “We request customers to visit our Facebook page and ask them send us a WhatsApp request.” All the respondents also firmly believe in Facebook’s popularity and its effect on customers’ willingness to share contact details. Many studies have identified sales promotion as a way to gradually increase a business’s customer base. Special offers such as sales, promotions (e.g. cash rebates; buy one, get one free; and gift certificates), suggestions (e.g. bundling) and purchase ideas (e.g. new products and one-stop shopping) can encourage impulse purchases (Dawson and Kim, 2010). Dawson and Kim (2010) also suggested that online impulse purchases are related to e-retailers’ special offers and promotions. Sales promotions can, therefore, positively influence impulse purchasing behavior (Badgaiyan and Verma, 2015; Etzel *et al.*, 2001). These findings seem to resonate with those of this study; an exhibition is a form of sales promotion, and this seems to trigger brand awareness, online purchases and brand loyalty.

4.6 Social media advertising (RQ3: brand development)

Today, consumers are turning away from traditional media such as televisions, radio and magazines, and they are increasingly using social media to get information (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Social media presents countless marketing opportunities for products and services (Jin, 2012; Mitic and Kapoulas, 2012). Companies use social media by creating brand pages (also called fan pages) to facilitate direct communication with users with the goal of turning simple users into fans and loyal customers (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). This has encouraged companies to use social media as an advertising platform. Four of the respondents in this study reported spending about \$3,000 per year on social media advertising. One of the respondents justified this as follows: “I have started this venture and there are some established online stores. I want to make sure my brand gets noticed. Advertising on Facebook will help [me] get greater brand exposure, and I have also noticed the number of likes going up.” Another respondent stated, “With Facebook advertising, I can precisely cater my message to my potential customers as it gives me the option to choose an area, gender and age.” On the other hand, some of the respondents claimed they are well established and not yet convinced of the benefits of Facebook advertising.

4.7 Comparative analysis of chat applications and social media (RQ4: differential characteristics of social media and chat applications)

The findings of the comparative analysis were mixed: five respondents said that WhatsApp is a better tool than Facebook. One said, “WhatsApp is better. We have direct connection with customers. It is easier to gain customers’ trust as it’s a one-to-one communication tool. We can know whether they have seen the messages we have sent and get instant feedback.” In contrast, another offered a different view that confirmed the opinions of most respondents: “I think these tools have different objectives and cannot be compared. Facebook helps me acquire new contacts, and WhatsApp is more personal and helps me maintain a good relationship with our customers.” These responses also highlight certain issues with these tools. For instance, WhatsApp has a limit of 256 for broadcast groups, and “pictures and messages are permanently stored in the users’ mobiles, which takes up storage space and, thus, inconveniences recipients.” When discussing Facebook, all of the respondents commented on its uncontrollable nature, the importance of closely monitoring the number of likes and comments, and the ability to view competitors’ Facebook pages. One respondent admitted, “I regularly visit my competitor’s Facebook page for new designs and to check the number of likes they have.” These findings confirm the complementary roles of these two tools.

4.8 Reasons underpinning social media and chat applications use (RQ1: use of social media)

All the women entrepreneurs interviewed in this study rely heavily on Facebook and WhatsApp for promotion and communication. Some major reasons are ease of use, the platforms' popularity and acceptance among customers, accessibility with smartphones and the tools' unique features. Social media platforms such as Facebook are democratic in nature and allow users to explore details from a much wider audience. For example, users can browse through their friends' contact lists and send friend requests to friends of friends. Some user posts appear on their friends' timelines, exposing them to a wider network. Therefore, a business's reach on Facebook is broader than on a chat application.

On the other hand, one similarity between the platforms is that both use an opt-in approach to making friends and expanding contacts. However, Facebook does circumvent this limitation by making users' posts visible to their friends' contacts, provided they hit the "like" button or comment on the post. The findings of this study confirm that SMEs are adopting new technological tools to connect with their customers and explore new business opportunities (Harris and Rae, 2010). All of the respondents in this study mentioned the ease of use and perceived usefulness of these tools (Taylor and Todd, 1995). They also said they have Facebook and WhatsApp accounts and access these accounts on their smartphones. The results of this study also emphasize the importance of the mobile-first strategy (Barker *et al.*, 2016).

4.9 Integrative strategies using Facebook and WhatsApp (RQ2: integrated strategies for communication)

The comparative analysis in this study revealed that these two tools are complementary but support different strategic objectives: Facebook is mainly used to reach potential customers, and WhatsApp is used for direct communication with existing ones. For example, broadcasting groups allow businesses to send personalized messages without showing recipients the number of members in the group or their contact details. Figure 1 illustrates these integrative strategies.

The first step is setting up a Facebook business page and increasing the page's number of followers. The ultimate goal is to continuously gain page likes and site visits, which is mainly achieved through referrals from satisfied customers. Customers are requested to like the page and share posts, which mainly announce new arrivals. Some of the respondents reported using Facebook as an advertising tool to increase their visibility and credibility;

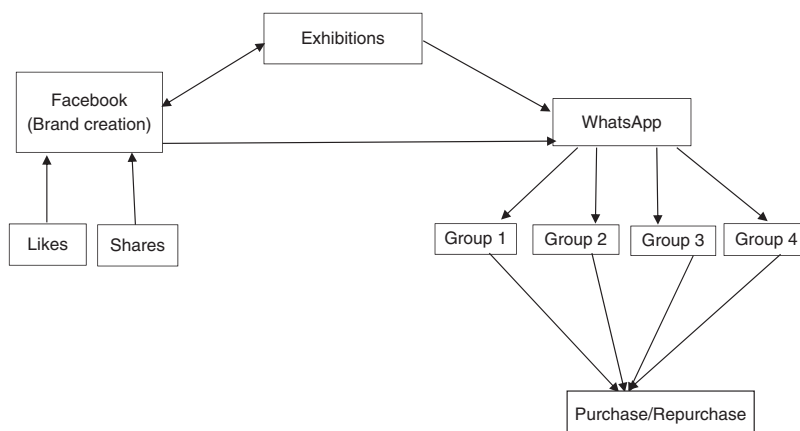


Figure 1.
Integrative strategies
adopted when
using Facebook
and WhatsApp

they seemed satisfied with the results. This step is crucial to developing a brand. Companies, on the other hand, use word of mouth by inviting consumers to promote their brands to friends and acquaintances.

Entrepreneurs also build brand awareness by participating in exhibitions, where they can meet customers face to face. They can then offer customers their business cards, which generally include their Facebook page and other contact information. These customers are also requested to like the Facebook page and share their phone number via WhatsApp. These contacts are then organized into various broadcasting groups of up to 256 members. Then the entrepreneurs send photographs of new clothing items to these groups. The frequency of the broadcasts depends on the frequency of new product arrivals, but most participants in this study send broadcasts once a week. Group members can then express their interest via WhatsApp or call to place an order. Money is then collected via bank transfer, and the materials are sent by courier to the customer's address. The participants in this study implied that customers' trust in a brand is based on the company's number of likes and shares by their friends on Facebook. This helps them feel comfortable sharing their contact details for WhatsApp broadcasting groups. In sum, the strategies pursued through Facebook trigger WhatsApp contacts.

4.10 Brand creation (RQ3: brand development)

The role of social media in brand creation has become paramount. A key reason is the growing trend for customers to rely on social media rather than traditional media for information (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). However, the rapid increase in social media platforms has raised the question of whether this development has diminished marketers' control of brand management (Berthon *et al.*, 2007). This study revealed that Facebook and, more specifically, the number of Facebook likes and shares, largely determines the scope of a company's brand creation. Brand loyalty and product visibility on Facebook generally result from relationships formed outside the platform (Charlesworth, 2015). However, this study found that SMEs develop consumer relationships online predominantly through shares and likes. Thus, data such as the weekly number of visits and likes can help women entrepreneurs make better strategic decisions.

4.10.1 Relevance of promotional tools. According to Kotler (2013), traditional advertising and 30 s commercials are still needed to communicate a company's overall image. Furthermore, large companies still use traditional promotional tools. One emerging trend is for companies to use traditional promotional tools such as newspaper advertisements to ask consumers to like their Facebook pages. However, SMEs promote their products and create their brand predominantly via social media, rendering traditional media advertising almost redundant, with the exception of face-to-face promotion at exhibitions. In addition, in 2010, investments in social media were expected to increase to more than \$3bn per year by 2013 (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). While the marketing mix is still important, marketers should stay abreast of technological changes, particularly in promotional techniques. A combination of traditional media and social media communication is particularly effective, although for SMEs, the role of traditional media remains limited and digital marketing strategies take center stage. Traditional media has become a support strategy for modern promotional tools and is now more supplemental than central.

5. Research contributions

The findings of this study make several contributions to the existing literature on gender, entrepreneurship and marketing. First, it offers insight into the integrative marketing strategies using Facebook and WhatsApp employed by expatriates in countries such as the UAE. There is a dearth of such studies in the literature, particularly on the strategic use of

WhatsApp and how it can be used in conjunction with social media to connect with customers and encourage them to make purchases. Second, most studies on women entrepreneurs are limited to western countries. This study on women entrepreneurs focuses on the Middle East, which has been largely neglected in related literature (Itani *et al.*, 2011). Third, this study contributes to the evolving but minimal literature on digital marketing and the adoption of social media by SMEs (Meadows-Klue, 2009). It also examines the strategic use of popular chat applications, something no previous study has done. Finally, this study identifies the challenges and advantages of entrepreneurs' use of chat applications and social media and explores the integrative strategies used by companies with social media and chat applications.

5.1 Implications

The insights offered by this study can help practitioners understand the commercial applications of digital promotional tools and their importance in marketing. This is significant for countries like the UAE, which has a robust retail sector and a large number of SMEs. SMEs can use social media tools to create brand awareness for much less money than they would spend on traditional media channels. Therefore, marketers could further explore ways to enhance their marketing strategies. Policymakers should ensure the creation of an environment that is congenial for women entrepreneurs and should also make sure that women entrepreneurs know about the opportunities offered by social media and chat applications. They can do this by organizing business networking events, encouraging dialogue and intra-regional discussion within the UAE and offering training programs for women entrepreneurs that include basic and advanced digital marketing techniques, which will increase the women's marketing competence. This study further reveals the supplementary nature of traditional media in marketing, which now primarily supports more modern promotional tools.

5.2 Research limitations and future research

This study included only 20 women entrepreneurs in the SME sector. They all work in the same industry and the same country. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study could affect the generalizability of the results. Thus, further research using quantitative techniques is warranted; a quantitative study could be conducted to confirm the model proposed in this paper. Also, a study focusing on male entrepreneurs could provide interesting insight into the similarities and differences in the motives and strategies of male and female entrepreneurs. The women expatriate entrepreneurs interviewed in this study were all from the Indian subcontinent. Future studies on entrepreneurs from the MENA region could provide different results. In addition, it would be interesting to explore the perspectives of consumers and suppliers on these strategies and their effectiveness. Future studies in this area could suggest the most appropriate marketing strategies.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study investigates the strategic use of social media and chat applications in marketing. It examines the strategies pursued by the women micro-enterprise entrepreneurs in the UAE and provides several insights into the use of these channels. Ease of use, cost effectiveness and acceptance among customers make Facebook and WhatsApp the most popular online communication tools for the women entrepreneurs in this study. The micro-enterprises in this study use Facebook to acquire new customers and WhatsApp for personalized communication with customers and suppliers. WhatsApp helps businesses maintain customer relationships through broadcast groups. Brand awareness and equity are created through online and offline mediums, and traditional promotion through

exhibitions is still popular. A company's number of Facebook likes is another indicator of brand awareness and can boost purchase intention. Respondents were divided on the effectiveness of Facebook advertising. This comparative analysis revealed the complementary but different nature of Facebook and WhatsApp: Facebook is mainly used to reach potential customers, and WhatsApp is used to communicate directly with existing customers.

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Appendix 1

Strategic use
of digital
promotion

<i>Age (years)</i>		
20–30	5	
31–40	10	
41–50	3	
50 years and above	2	1717
<i>Length of business (years)</i>		
1–2	7	
2–3	8	
3–4	3	
5 years and above	2	
<i>Employees</i>		
0	0	
<i>Partners</i>		
None	4	
One	11	
Two	3	
Three	2	
More than three	0	
<i>Previous experience</i>		
Yes	4	
No	16	
<i>Source of capital</i>		
Own	2	
Family	18	
<i>Education</i>		
High school		
University degree	11	
Post-graduation	9	
<i>Target customers</i>		
Emiratis		
Filipinos		
Other Arab Nationalities		
Indian, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis	20	
<i>Main products</i>		
Designer sarees, salwars and kurtis	20	
<i>Emirate</i>		
Dubai	11	
Sharjah	5	
Abu Dhabi	4	
<i>International operations</i>		
Yes	7	
No	13	

Table AI.
Participants'
demographic data

1718

Table AII.
Number of
Face book Likes and
What's App Groups

Nationality	Number of likes on FB (approximate)	Number of broadcasting group (What's App)	Social media	Chat application
1. India	3,500	3	Facebook	WhatsApp
2. India	5,500	5	Facebook/ Instagram	WhatsApp
3. India	6,500	7	Facebook/ Instagram	WhatsApp
4. India	4,000	3	Facebook	WhatsApp
5. India	9,500	7	Facebook	WhatsApp
6. India	3,000	2	Facebook	WhatsApp
7. India	5,000	4	Facebook	WhatsApp
8. India	6,000	5	Facebook	WhatsApp
9. India	11,000	7	Facebook/ Instagram	WhatsApp
10. India	10,000	7	Facebook/ Instagram	WhatsApp
11. India	8,000	6	Facebook	WhatsApp
12. India	5,000	3	Facebook	WhatsApp
13. India	6,000	4	Facebook	WhatsApp
14. Bangladesh	2,000	3	Facebook	WhatsApp
15. Bangladesh	2,500	2	Facebook	WhatsApp
16. Bangladesh	3,500	4	Facebook	WhatsApp
17. Bangladesh	2,000	2	Facebook	WhatsApp
18. Sri Lanka	1,500	2	Facebook	WhatsApp
19. Sri Lanka	2,000	2	Facebook	WhatsApp
20. Pakistan	3,500	4	Facebook	WhatsApp

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