

Introduction

Social media, even though it is a relatively novel invention, is increasingly gaining traction as a vital part of any business. The most recurrent use of the platforms is in marketing and expanding a business's client base. The view of social media as a passing fad is fast fading with the realization that it is a strong business defining tool. A business that has been able to leverage the growth of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram is now better placed than a traditional business. Achieving a digital footprint has become important for every business irrespective of the area in which it operates. About a decade ago, having a website was deemed enough for a business. However, this is no longer enough because a business is required to have a robust and responsive platform, which is achieved through a flexible and well managed presence in social media.

A look at social media reveals a number of facts such that most businesses, 94% of businesses, that have an operational marketing department made use of social media as their primary marketing platform. This does point to the variety of tools availed by social media, the flexibility as well as the reach availed by these platforms. At the same time, about 60% of marketers commit a lot of man hours, some up to a day, developing and maintaining a social media marketing platform. Turning attention to users, about 43% of people aged 20-29 spend about 10 hours every week on social media sites. This reveals that there is guaranteed viewership of products or services offered because of the millions turned billions of people in social media sites. Lastly, there is tangible evidence on the effects of using social media as a marketing or sales platform. 58% of businesses that have employed social media for a period of 3 years and above have reported increased sales within that period (Bosari, 2014). This is evidence for new

businesses that spending time, dedicating resources and applying tools availed by social has a definite effect on the business's revenue.

In the backdrop of this evidence, it is clear that social media is the way to go for all businesses. It does not matter the type of business. The success of social media as a marketing and sales platform lies in the nature of the platform. Media generally refers to advertising and the transmission of ideas through different channels (Neti, 2011). On the other hand, social represents the interaction of people within a group or community setting. Therefore, social media represents the interaction of people as individuals or as groups through a specific medium or tool. The platform such as Facebook or Instagram helps generate and sustain the interpersonal communication.

As such, the success of social media as a business tool is hinged on two important factors. One is the fact that it allows people to meet or socialize. Such interactions or meetings are exponential and this means that there is the possibility of meeting people from different social cultural groups as well as from different parts of the world. The second element of the platform that is very important for businesses is its ability to prompt interactions, generate and sustain conversations (Neti, 2011). This means that businesses are in a position to introduce products or services and prompt a reaction to these products and services. This is important to a business because feedback whether positive or negative helps determine the general perception of the public on the goods or services offered. On the other hand, a business is able to generate and sustain interest in the products through the platforms, which is important in generating sales as customers and potentials customers have the chance to scrutinize, inquire and in some cases buy the products at their convenience.

At this point it is clear that social media makes use of what is at times referred to as the “wisdom of crowds” to collate information in a collaborative manner. This is possible through the highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media makes use of web-based technologies to ease communication (Neti, 2011). The ease of communication is made possible through fast dissemination of knowledge and information to many people. These platforms do this by allowing and enabling creation and exchange of user-generated content.

There is a myriad of reasons as to why businesses have turned their attention to social media. The two main cited reasons include the ability of these platforms to cut costs by reducing staff times. The second reason is the potential of these platforms to increase the probability of revenue generation. There are other reasons or applications of social media to businesses, and these include the fact that social media allows businesses to share their expertise and display their knowledge area, which is difficult and expensive to do in traditional platforms (Neti, 2011). Secondly, social media gives businesses the chance to tap into the views and ideas of their consumers. By continually interacting with consumers, businesses are able to understand the needs and preference of their consumers and this goes into improving their products and services. The other important aspect of using social media is that it eases the burden of the business as consumers also participate in aiding and explaining product functionalities to other customers. Lastly, social media platforms engage prospective customers through customer evangelism (Neti, 2011). In this case, customers who may not be aware of the existence, use or functionalities of a product are able to learn of the product through other customers who have experience in the product.

It is clear that businesses stand a lot to gain from the use of social media. This study takes particular interest in looking at the exact effect or impact in a real setting. The focus of this research is social media use among businesses situated in Qatar. Qatar is ruled by the Al Thani family since the mid-1800s. In their reign, the family has been able to transform Qatar from an impoverished British protectorate to a successful independent state (CIA, 2017). This transformation has been made possible by the country's significant oil and natural gas revenue. However, these are natural resources that face imminent exhaustion. Facing this risk, Qatar from the mid-1990s instituted far reaching economic reforms. This was marked by unprecedented economic investments that raised Qatar's profile as a business hub – a status that has since been confirmed by its ranking as the leading business destination in the Middle East and North Africa region (CIA, 2017). The divesture into non-oil sectors such as manufacturing, construction and financial services has not only diversified the income areas in the country but has also ensured a lot more people join non-oil businesses.

The rise in disposable income has also encouraged businesses to grow and the younger generation is no longer concentrated in the oil industry. They have invested in manufacturing and service industries. As expected, the development of these non-oil industries has intensified business competition and there is emerging need to be innovative. This innovation has informed the widespread application and use of social media as a means of marketing and selling products from these businesses. As it stands, there are numerous studies that have looked at the importance of social media as a business tool. This involves examining its application to move sales which involve the marketing function as well as sales, to generate sales and build business leads.

The one element that has been alienated in these studies has been the effect of Qataris culture on the acceptability and penetration of social media as a business tool. Qatar's population is predominantly made up of foreigners. Of the approximated population of about 2.5 million, the Qatari population is 11.6% whereas the non-Qatari population is 88.4% (CIA, 2017). As such, it is expected that the social-cultural environment is largely influenced by foreigners. Notwithstanding, Qatar as a nation still retains traces of the highly conservative Islamic rules. This is signified by the huge Islamic population approximated to be about 67.7% (CIA, 2017). The effect of this is that irrespective of the widespread influence of the foreigners, the social environment is constituted of individuals who more or less ascribe to the same religion and social foundations. A huge number of the non-Qatari population comes from the neighboring states.

The importance of understanding the social-cultural factors that come into play in the use of social media platforms in Qatar cannot be overemphasized. This is because the general level of acceptance of social media, as represented in this case by Instagram, cannot be equally replicated. For instance, in United States, a country known for its freedoms, the penetration, acceptance and application of Instagram is not expected. However, in a country such as Qatar the social-cultural setting is expected to pose a few challenges which are yet to be established. With globalization, which has been astronomically fueled and enabled by social media, many cultures have faced unprecedented influences. This has prompted resistance for almost all application that appears to accelerate or inform globalization. In this case, the will or extent of the business to apply this out rightly favorable technology is limited by social-cultural differences. In these cases, the sound thing to do is to understand the cause of tension between planned technology

and the targeted culture. This is the first step into creating or enabling harmony between planned technology and the business people, whether owners or customers.

In light of this established need, this quantitative research focuses on understanding the social-cultural factors that come into play in Qataris business use of social media, and especially Instagram (Leedy, Newby & Ertmer, 1996). This paper envisions this approach as the first major step in building a coherent study of the social-cultural factors among the Qatari population. At the same time, this research is an important study for businesses that are applying or enlisting social media as a marketing and sales channel. It is also important to note that being a new form of doing business, this research provides an understanding of the unique factors present in the Qatari business environment that favor or downplay the success of social media especially Instagram as a business tool. Ultimately, this research is a proper guide into doing business in Qatar. It raises the chances of success by spelling the social-cultural nuances that would otherwise limit or downplay the success of Qatari business. This will be possible by answering the following question, which will also guide this research:

1. What are the socio-cultural values or nuances that affect the use and application of Instagram as a business tool within Qatar?

Hypothesis: H1 – The socio-cultural foundations of the Qataris affect the use of Instagram as a business tool in the country.

References

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