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Unleashing Growth: The transformative Power of Social Media Marketing for Kerala's SMEs

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Abstract

Social Media Marketing (SMM) has become a tool of competitive advantage and sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) especially in the developing regional economies. Although it has become increasingly relevant, there is still lack of empirical evidence on the dimensions behind SMEs adoption of SMM as far as the Indian context is concerned. The purpose of the study is to empirically determine and confirm the latent factors of the adoption of Social Media Marketing among SMEs in Kerala with the help of the factor analytical methods. The selected participants comprised of 200 owners and managers of SMEs in Kerala in manufacturing, service, and trading sectors who are the primary data collection tool through a structured questionnaire. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett-Test of Sphericity were used to determine that the data contained in the suits of the factor analysis. The Explanation provided by varimax rotation (Principal Component Analysis) using the EFA indicated that there are five defining factors of SMM adoption, through which they affect the adoption of SMM, which are Marketing Performance Enhancement, Cost Efficiency, Digital Readiness, Managerial Support and External Market Pressure and all these factors stated above explain 72.43 per cent. of overall variance. The results indicate that perceived increase in marketing performance and cost effectiveness are the most contributing factors of adoption of SMM among SMEs although organizational preparedness and external competitive pressures are significant. The research value is found in the fact that the study offers empirically tested dimensions of the SMM adoption under a regional SME environment and offers practical implications to SME owners, policymakers and digital marketing professionals aiming to further facilitate the acquisition of effective SMM adoption practices. These findings have significant policy consequences regarding the development of specific capacity-building interventions and the development of policy interventions to help hasten the pace of digital transformation among Kerala SMEs.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, SMEs, Factor Analysis, Digital Adoption, Kerala.

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Introduction

In the economic development, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are significant because they make significant contributions to generating jobs, regional development, innovation, and inclusive growth. The Indian and especially the state of Kerala SMEs are the main pillars of the industry and service industry and have to operate in a very competitive and resource-intensive environment. The new wave of digitalization of business has forced SMEs to pursue less expensive and technology-oriented marketing approaches to increase market shares and maintain competitive edges. One of them is known as Social Media Marketing (SMM) which is the paradigm that has helped businesses to connect with customers, create brand awareness, and access wider market spaces beyond geographical boundaries.

Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp Business, YouTube, and LinkedIn represent social media that have paved new path way for the communication between the company and customers. In the case of the SMEs, SMM presents several distinct benefits across all of them, namely; reduced costs of promotion, instant interaction with customers, targeted communication, and marketing insights based on data. This is in contrast to the old marketing channels that social media enables SMEs to get a better competitive position by using creativity, interaction with customers, and content-based marketing strategies as opposed to big financial resources. As a result, the use of SMM has become more pertinent in an attempt to achieve growth, breathing, and sustainability by SMEs in the digital economy.

Although the adoption of social media sites increases, there is a wide range of successful adoption of SMMs by SMEs. Some of the SMEs have implemented social media in their marketing mix but others are afraid to implement them because of limited digital dexterities, managerial reluctance, risk perception and doubts on returns on spending. Such differences demonstrate that SMM adoption cannot be a only a technological choice but rather a complex process which hinges on organizational and some environmental as well as managerial orientations. It is only the knowledge of these background dimensions that would lead to the need to design specific strategies that will encourage effective uptake of SMM by SMEs.

Applying these factors to the case of Kerala, it can be stated that the SMEs are working in a unique socio-economic environment marked by a high level of literacy, a large share of population living online, and the increasing sphere of entrepreneurs. Simultaneously, the problematic issues of Kerala SMEs are high competition, increasing operational expenses, and poor access to developed marketing experience. Although policy interventions and digital programs are encouraging the practice of utilizing online platforms by SMEs. The current body of work mostly focuses on the progressive impact of social media marketing or discusses various adoption intention through the theoretical models but has limited studies that empirically identify the latent variables that influence SMM adoption through sound statistical approaches.

In an attempt to fill this research interested, the present study will attempt to empirically determine and confirm the latent dimensions of Social Media Marketing adoption using Exploratory Factor Analysis. The study will examine primary data that was conducted on owners and managers to identify the most relevant determinant that affect the SMM. The utilisation of the method that analyse factors allows reducing the number of observed variables into meaningful constructs, which would give a better idea of the principal structure of the SMM adoption.

The outcome of this paper should add to the current mass of knowledge by providing empirically based information on the components that cause the acceptance of SMMs within a small to medium SME setting in a region. The findings will be practically useful to the owners and managers of SMEs to understand the key domains that need strategic focus, including digital preparedness, managerial dedication, and responsiveness to the market. Moreover, the research gives meaningful implications to the policymakers and support institutions regarding the design of capacity-building initiatives and digital marketing intervention in order to speed up the digital transformation and sustainable development of the SMEs in the state of Kerala (Arasuraja,2025).

Review of Literature

In the economic growth that creates jobs, innovates as well as industrializing the regions Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) plays significant role. SMEs in developing economies are in the forefront of ensuring inclusive growth through entrepreneurship, and minimization of the regional inequality (Ainin et al., 2015). SMEs are significant contributors to the GDP and play critical role as suppliers in the chain of supply especially in production and service industries (Barreda et al., 2016). In spite of their relevance, SMEs are characterized by threats associated with severe financial limits, poor marketing abilities, and low technology access. These issues compel the company to acquire cost-saving and innovative marketing strategies in order to be competitive.

SMEs are a growing dynamic and competitive business environment in the Indian environment with the force of globalization and digital transformation (Omonov et al., 2024). According to scholars, Indian SMEs have no other option than to adopt digital technologies to effect structural constraints and increase operational efficiency (Bharati et al., 2014). One such obstacle has been found to be marketing delays, notably, and creating digital marketing solutions is a strategy requirement not a choice (Benny, 2021).

All the constructs that have contributed significantly, among marketing performance enhancement has been broadly accepted. Online social media helps businesses to raise awareness, boost customer interactions, and access more markets thanks to interactive and content based communicational processes (Hair et al., 2010). According to empirical research, the relationships applied to social media interactions in SMEs are personalized and relationship-focused, which means that those that follow the SMM strategy demonstrate great customer acquisition, lead generation, and sales performance (Trainor et al., 2014). Moreover, social media also enables two-way communication meaning that companies respond promptly to customer feedbacks and make appropriate changes to the marketing strategies.

Some researchers claim that the perceived capability of SMM to enhance the results of marketing is one of the strongest influencers of adoption in SMEs. SMEs in emerging economies use social media to attain marketing goals in the most effective ways, as compared to the traditional marketing channels which are often expensive and ineffective (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Alwajid,2023). In such a manner, marketing performance improvement happens to be a prevailing force influencing the behavior of SMM adoption.

Cost is another aspect that determines the application of Social Media Marketing. When compared to the traditional method it has much lower cost of promotion; further, it allows measuring and targeting marketing campaigns (Stansfield, 2004). Since one of the factors that limit the usage of SMM among SMEs is the cost of these platforms, it also becomes a suitable alternative in accessing customers and establishing brand presence (Davis, 1989).

Research with SMEs has shown such perceptions to exist because the social media provides a high-return-on-investment (ROI) marketing tool due to its capacity to provide real-time analytics and performance metrics (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Its ability to scale the campaigns depending on the budget at any time is an added advantage. Empirical evidence Adding to the situation, cost-related factors are considered to be influential in determining the desire of SME owners to adhere to and follow social media marketing behavior (Harrigan et al., 2018). Thus, the cost effectiveness makes a conclusive case to encourage the SMEs to incorporate SMM in their marketing techniques.

Digital readiness indicates the level of technology preparedness by an SME to embrace and efficiently use Social Media Marketing. Digital capabilities of the employees, previous exposure to digital marketing devices, and the presence of technological infrastructure are all included (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The studies have shown that SMEs having high digital literacy are likely to embrace and successfully implement SMM strategies (Tabri & Elliott, 2012). Absence of technical dexterity on the contrary, serves as a definite hitch towards adoption.

Especially in the developing economies, digital preparedness is critical because differences in technological capabilities among the SMEs exist (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Research highlights the SMEs increased confidence of in approaches of using social media as tools to backing promotion instead uplifting the business consistently on the platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Nayak, & Mathur, 2021).

Managerial backing has been found to be a major organizational factor when adopting technology by SMEs. Owners and top management attitudes, beliefs and commitment determine a lot the use of innovative marketing technologies including social media platform (Thong, 1999). Research indicates that SMEs that have proactive leadership tend to invest more resources, train more, and take risks and experiment with digital marketing tools (Leung et al, 2015).

The empirical data confirms that managerial support is more beneficial in increasing organizational receptiveness towards innovation and decreasing technological change resistance (Oldenburg & Glanz, 2008). Regarding the SMM, management support is important in the inclusion of social media in more comprehensive marketing practices compared to a sporadic practice (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). Thus, the managerial support can be regarded as a trigger of the long-term and strategic adoption of SMMs by SMEs.

External market pressure is defined as the impact on SMM adoption by competitions, customer expectation and industry trends. Studies show that SMEs are increasingly being forced to embrace social media marketing with an intention to encounter the competition and the increasing number of customers on online platforms (Michaelidou et al., 2011). It is clearly indicated that addressing customers in the social media can lead to a lack of market relevance and competitive edge.

Research based on Technology Organization Environment (TOE) paradigm states that environmental forces like competition in an industry, and market forces are important factors in determining digital adoption decision

(Lippert & Govindarajulu, 2006). Due to the intense competition levels, SMEs use SMM proactively to keep tabs on competitors, address the issues raised by customers and keep up with the current conditions in the industry (Harrigan et al., 2018). This leads to the external market pressure as a factor of great importance in SMM adoption behavior.

Research Gap

Establishment of Social Media Marketing become an inherent instrument, where growth of the SMEs is increasing, there is only limited number of studies which clearly define and confirm the latent aspects of the SMM adoption through factor analysis methods. The current research is largely dependent on a prior assumed theoretical framework and will-based models and is insufficient in terms of the innate structure of SMM adoption. This report captures this gap in that the principal dimensions that affect SMEs in selecting SMM are empirically discovered and confirmed by use of the Exploratory Factor Analysis.

Statement of the Problem

Social Media Marketing (SMM) become an important trending and strategic instrument to increase visibility, interaction with the customers, and competitively used in case small and medium enterprises (SMEs). With increasing access and possible opportunities of digital technologies, growing popularity of internet and the social media platforms, in Kerala SMEs show high levels of significant diversity in terms of uptake and performance of SMM. This implies that there is a multitude of underlying factors affecting the adoption of SMM as opposed to basing on the factors that are largely technological or cost based.

The results of the adoption of SMM, though there is previous research on the determinants and outcomes of SMM adoption, most of the studies that are conducted on the same depend on the preset theoretical construct and model of intention without an empirical validation of the underlying dimensions of the adoption. Besides, there is a limited papers providing accurate and reliable information in the case of SMM adoption in SME in Kerala, although the state has a good online landscape. This weakness of the empirically validated, context, and dimension limits the scholarly knowledge as well as the development of specifically targeted managerial and policy interventions.

An investigation of this sort will give a better interpretation of the structural forces behind the adoption of the SMM and support the evidence-based decision-making among the SMEs and the policymakers.

Objective of the study

To determine and validate latent dimensions in Social Media Marketing adoption among SMEs in Kerala using factor analytical techniques.

Research Methodology

Primary data is collected by using structured questionnaire. The target population will consist of the Small and Medium Enterprises based on manufacturing, service, and trade sectors in Kerala. Through purposive sampling method 230 samples were collected out of which 20 are not returned and 10 are incomplete. In this way the sample size is 200. Simple percentage analysis and factor analysis are applied.

For the analysis of data SPSS research software was used. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were summarized using the descriptive statistics. Exploratory factor analysis techniques have been applied using the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to determine the latent dimensions. Factors loading more than 0.60 and include means that have an eigenvalue higher than one were kept to be interpreted.

Findings of the Study

Table 1 indicates the demographics of the 200 SME respondents that were surveyed about application of Social Media Marketing (SMM), which provide critical contextual details about SMEs in Kerala. Most of the respondents were comes under the category of male 66 percent with females making 34 percent of the sample. This distribution is a reflection of current gender ratio investor and management roles in the region of SMEs ownership and management, but the fact that a large percentage of female respondents shows the increased involvement of women in entrepreneurial and managerial activities.

Regarding age, a large number of the respondents were of economically active age between 31 and 40 years (36 percent). This implies that a majority of the respondents are seasoned individuals and will probably strike equilibrium between managerial maturity and an open mind to embrace the use of digital marketing innovations. The sample size of younger respondents less than 30 years was 14 percent, which means that there was an emerging

entrepreneurial involvement, and those who were older than 50 years was 18 percent, which indicated that old decision-makers had continued their involvement with SMEs. In terms of organizational role, majority (59 percent) of the respondents owned the company, and 41 percent were managers. This is especially the case with the study, since owners and managers are the main decision-makers on marketing behavior and the use of technology in SME. Their representation will give an accurate reflection of the how important to implementation of Social Media Marketing (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Number (n=200)	Percentage
Gender	Male	132	66
	Female	68	34
Age	Below 30 Years	28	14
	31-40 years	72	36
	41-50 Years	64	32
	Above 50 years	36	18
Position	Owner	118	59
	Manger	82	41
Type of MSME	Manufacturing	62	31
	Service	88	44
	Trading	50	25
Year of operation	Less than 5 Years	46	23
	5-10 years	78	39
	above 10 Years	76	38
Lecel of SMM Usage	Low	42	21
	Moderate	88	44
	High	70	35

Source: Primary Data

The distribution sector-wise indicates that the population of SMEs conducting in the service sector was 44 percent, then the manufacturing sector (31 percent) and trading sector (25 percent). It means that SMM adoption applies to the various industries of the SME, but the services sector has a larger percentage of representation which may be because they have a higher dependency on customer touch and online exposure. Regarding the years of operation, 39 percent of the SMEs operated 5-10 years, and 38 percent of the SMEs operated during more than 10 years. This indicates that most of the engaged SMEs are established businesses which mean that it is not only that start-ups adopt SMM but also that the established businesses can adopt it to achieve growth and competitiveness.

Lastly, the intensity of SMM use indicates that a high percentage of SMEs indicated moderate (44 percent) to high (35 percent) use of SMM in business marketing which points out to the growing acceptance and incorporation of SMM in business activities. The relatively low percentage of SMEs with low usage (21 percent) may indicate an opportunity to increase the digital usage of the SMEs, through specific training and policy measures. Generally, the demographic summary shows that the sample used is diverse, representative and suitable in exploring the latent factors of the Social Media Marketing uptake among SMEs in Kerala. The credibility and generalizability of the study findings are enhanced by the fact that there are people with experience in the various sectors and management.

Social Media Marketing Adoption among SMEs

The Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of the dataset collected from 200 respondents was 0.874 which indicates there is high sampling adequacy and that the correlations between the variables are compact enough so as to justify factor analysis. Also, Bartlett Test of Sphericity was statistically significant (χ^2=2154.638 $p > 0.001$) and this shows that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and variables are interrelated enough to extract factors. Cumulatively, these findings confirm the suitability of the data to be used in Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) such that the factors found are sufficient to capture the underlying dimensions of the adoption of Social Media marketing by the SMEs in Kerala.

Principal Component Analysis, which was further employed as Exploratory Factor Analysis through Varimax rotation, produced a five-factor solution with eigenvalues exceeding one that collectively accounted for 72.43 of overall variance which is very strong and allows the definition of factor structure. The variable corresponding to brand awareness, customer engagement, market reach, lead generation and sales performance combined to form the first factor, which was the most influential and explained a variation of 32.46 and was called Marketing Performance

Enhancement. This underscores the fact that Social Media Marketing (SMM) is mainly adopted by SMEs in the quest to attain better marketing results.

Cost Efficiency was the second factor which explained the variance of 16.18 percent which incorporated, cost effectiveness, lessened marketing expenditure, and high payback on investment, and this highlights the importance of financial aspects in the implementation of SMM (Table 2).

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.874
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity – Approx. Chi-Square	2154.638
df	136
sig.	0.000

Table 3: Impact on Social Media Marketing

Particulars	1	2	3	4	5
SMM helps increase brand awareness	0.821				
SMM Improves customer engagement	0.804				
SMM enhance market reach	0.786				
social media generates quality leads	0.742				
SMM Improves sales performance	0.719				
SMM is cost effective		0.812			
SMM reduce marketing expenditure		0.794			
SMM provide high ROI		0.768			
SME has skilled personnel for SMM			0.834		
Employees are digitally competent			0.807		
SME has prior digital marketing expenses			0.762		
Management support SMM adoption				0.821	
Top management encourages innovation				0.789	
SME is willing to invest in SMM tools				0.754	
Competitive pressure encourages SMM					0.806
Customer presence on social media					0.781
Industry trend favours SMM adoption					0.746
Eigen Values	5.842	2.913	1.874	1.326	1.081
% of Variance	32.46	16.18	10.41	7.37	6.01
Cumulative % of Variance	32.46	48.64	59.05	66.42	72.43

It reveals that 10.41%, contributed to the presence of the competent personnel, digital competence of employees, and previous experience in digital marketing with the focus on organizational readiness b digital readiness. Managerial Support was also the fourth contributor with the percentage of 7.37 showing that top management encouragement, innovation orientation, and willingness to invest are critical in enabling the adoption of SMM (Table 3).

The fifth reason (External Market Pressure) indicated that it explained 6.01% of the variance and this revealed the effect of competition, explore presence of customers in social media and industry trends. In general, the results prove that the multidimensional construct of the SMM adoption in case of the SMEs is influenced by performance, economic, organizational, managerial and environmental factors.

Suggestions

According to the empirical results of the study, a series of actionable recommendations are outlined to SME owners, policymakers, and support institutions.

First, Social Media Marketing (SMM) as a performance-based marketing instrument should be strategically utilized by SMEs in terms of the activities that will result in better brand recognition, customer interactions, lead generation, and sales figures. Romanticised content practices and analytics behind decision-making may maximize performance in marketing.

Second, as cost efficiency is important, SMEs should consider implementing data-based practices in associating their budget allocation procedures and consider using inexpensive social media channels and automations to maximize the ROI and minimize the marketing cost.

Third, the aspect of digital readiness accentuates that skill development is a constant process that should be maintained. SMEs need to incur regular digital training courses to enhance the competence of employees and their competence in handling social media.

Fourth, managerial support was found to be a decisive stimulus of SMM adoption. The top management needs to be actively innovative, provide sufficient resources towards innovation, and consider integrating SMM as long-term business strategies to maintain its sustained use.

Lastly, the industry bodies and policymakers ought to develop specific awareness activities as well as incentives to enable SMEs to adapt efficiently to both competitive and industry challenges to streamline more successful abilities towards adopting SMM.

Conclusion

This paper provided empirical investigation on the various factors that can determine the adoption of recent and trending marketing strategies like Social Media Marketing (SMM) and how it's become advantages to the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It was found that the Exploratory Factor Analysis revealed 5 key dimensions, including marketing performance improvement, cost effectiveness, digital preparedness, management support, and external market pressure, and they are able to account for a good portion of variance in the adoption behavior of SMM.

The results verify that the primary perceptions about SMM by the SMEs are that the tool is used as a strategic means of enhancing brand awareness, customer handling, sales volume generation and the further valuable perceptions on cost efficiency and returns on investment make the adoption options firm. The readiness of organizations, especially the availability of qualified staff and the ability to act online, is an essential factor to facilitate the practice of SMM. Moreover, excellent managerial assistance and responsiveness to competitive and industry pressures are other key factors that have substantial impacts on the adoption outcomes.

Altogether, the research highlights that the adoption of SMM in SME is a multidimensional and ability-based process, which is impacted with various internal organizational and environmental forces. Insights added to the existing literature on marketing accommodation in new economies and offer practical implications to SMEs that aspire to sustainable growth by applying the social media facilitated marketing strategies.

Scope for further research

Although this study may offer SMEs in Kerala, useful information on various part of the Social Media Marketing (SMM) adoption, it presents a number of research opportunities to be explored in the future. To begin with, geographical coverage can be expanded to include numerous states or countries in future research to have more desirable generalization and comparative applicability of the results. Second, although this study used the Exploratory Factor Analysis, future studies can use Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) or Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to make sure that the factor structure is valid, and come up with causal relationships between the dimensions of SMM adoption and the outcome(s) of firm performance. Thirdly, the future studies can include other outcome measures, including financial performance, customer retention, brand equity, and sustainability measures to determine the long-term effect of adoption of SMM. Fourth, longitudinal research designs would be implemented to reflect the variations in the behaviour of SMM adoption over a certain period and the dynamic impacts of digital transformation among SMEs. Lastly, qualitative or mixed-method studies can be used as a complement to quantitative data to provide more comprehensive information on managerial perceptions, strategic issues and that affect the acceptance of SMM.

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