

Use of Social Media Marketing in Laundry and Dry-Cleaning Small Businesses in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the use of social media and its perceived impact and value as part of the overall marketing effort of small independent, owner-operated laundry and dry-cleaning firms in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area, in South Africa. Although numerous South African small businesses are starting to adopt social media marketing channels as part of their firms' marketing efforts, the use of social media in the laundry and dry-cleaning sector has not been investigated in South Africa. Laundries and dry cleaners do not typically engender a sense of social interaction or community and, therefore, the value of social media is questioned. An in-depth literature review was conducted on the adoption of social media by owners/managers of laundry and dry-cleaning firms in their marketing endeavours, both traditional and non-traditional. Thereafter, guided by the literature, data was collected from these owners/managers of independent operated laundries and dry cleaners in the metropolitan area mentioned above. A qualitative approach was followed to satisfy the research objectives of this study. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the results of the study. The results indicate that social media is indeed used by firms in this sector and is perceived to be a helpful marketing tool in the marketing activities of local laundry and dry-cleaning firms.

Key words: Social Media Marketing, Laundry and Dry-cleaning Firms, Small Business, Ekurhuleni Metro.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in and widespread usage of digital media has led businesses that are engaged in various business sectors to consider new ways of communicating with customers. Amongst the fastest growing communication tools for reaching out to customers is “social media” (Chen and Qasim, 2021). Statistics have shown that during October 2022 there were over 4.59 billion people using social media worldwide, a number predicted to increase to roughly 6 billion in 2027 (Statista, 2023). According to Statista, Facebook was the first social media platform to exceed 1(one) billion registered accounts and currently sits at more than 2.9 billion monthly active users. Whereas the number of social media users in South Africa totalled 25.80 million during January 2023, equating to 42.9 percent of the total population. The number of active social media users in South Africa grew almost three-fold in the last eight years, reaching 28 million in 2022 (Statista, 2023).

Social media (SM) has become important tool used by many business organisations, as can be seen from the recent marketing activities of such organisations (Khanon, 2023, p.92). Social media has allowed brands and businesses to reach their customers directly, anytime and anyplace (i.e., ubiquitously) and has helped small businesses to grow larger and quicker than previously (Infante and Mardikaningsih, 2022, p.46) It is found by Hafez (2022), that a greater degree of interaction on SM pages will leverage the superior value and brand experience. Hafez also suggest that SM is an interactive and low-cost media for sharing brand-related information with followers, so marketers can easily utilize social media as a vehicle for enhancing brand value and brand equity (Hafez,2022 pp. 141).

Marketing on SM indirectly provides small business firms with free promotional agents and helps firms to market products and services in a timely and exclusive manner (Khanon, 2022, p.89). Moreover, marketing through SM also decrease operational cost for small business firms, improve customer and audience engagement and increase wider range of customers in business (Lyimo and Williams, 2022, p. 96).

A review of the literature suggests that social media marketing in laundry and dry-cleaning (LDC) businesses is not a widely researched topic (Spencer, Lilley & Porter, 2015). Even though there is lack of research in the subject, some LDC businesses have applied some form of SMM by means of “social couponing”. Social couponing is one method of SMM campaign which has enjoyed a widespread popularity in the LDC business sector, online discount coupons also known as “social couponing” is accessible on business websites and Facebook (Chaffey and Smith, 2017, pp.92-93). Literature is sparse, yet the evidence suggests that social media has been successfully adopted in a subsector such as the LDC sector that might ordinarily seem unsuitable for social media (Ajina, 2019, p.1513). Social media may well play an important role in helping to promote LDC businesses to a wider audience, as well as to create enhanced engagement with existing customers (Cooper et al.,2019, pp. 694-695).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to establish whether social media plays a significant role in the marketing activities of laundry services in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study contributes significantly to engage and keeping researchers and laundry and dry-cleaning business services owners and/or managers informed about the developments and SM activities and practices in the sector within the Ekurhuleni metropolitan area. The study also has the expected potential for developing a general understanding of the use of SM in marketing activities of independent laundry and dry-cleaning business services and could feed into further research.

OUTLINE OF THE ASPECTS TO BE INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

In the next sections, the article focuses on the literature review, then pay attention to Laundry and Dry Cleaners (LDCs) in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area, marketing of laundry and dry cleaners, social media marketing (SMM), SMM and LDCs, information gap, research objectives, study methodology, analysis, findings, discussions, and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE LAUNDRY AND DRY-CLEANING SECTOR

The LDC sector in South Africa comprises establishments that provide laundry, dry-cleaning and laundrette services (Sector Skills Plan) (SSP 2018/2019). The broad services sector includes LDC services. The LDCs forms part of the household and services sub-sector which employs approximately "3 million" people and services clients across many industry sub-sectors including the LDC sub-sector, Sector Skills Plan (SSP, 2018/2019). The LDC businesses further extend their service offer into hand washing laundry services, coin-operated laundrettes, sewing as well as special fabric clothing care such as leather and fur. It is currently estimated that just over 225,000 tons of soiled textiles per annum are processed in commercial and hospital laundries. The LDC business services contribute to the backing up on long-term objectives of the economic and social fabric of South Africa (SSP, 2018/2019). The dry-cleaning and laundry services market is expected to witness market growth at a rate of 5.1% in the forecast period of 2022 to 2029 (Data Bridge, 2023).

The increasing need for LDC services across various sectors, including hospitality, healthcare, and textiles, has been the primary driving factor for this growth (Euromonitor, 2023). The market is also being driven by the rise in disposable income, urbanization, and the growing number of working professionals, which has led to an increase in demand for time-saving and convenient services (Euromonitor, 2023). According to (Statista, 2021), it is projected that the revenue of washing and dry-cleaning of textiles and fur products in South Africa will amount to approximately 196.6 million U.S. Dollars by 2023. In 2015, the LDC sub-sector experienced a growth of approximately 1.7% within the household and services sub-sector (STATSSA 2015). Euromonitor (2015), reported the sales of laundry care in percentage value growth from (R10,035.5 million) in 2013 to (R10,920.7) in 2014, forecast sales of laundry care in percentage value growth in 2014/15 was approximately 1.6% to an estimated 11% constant value growth in 2019 (Euromonitor, 2015).

Gauteng Province has the largest concentration of small businesses (SBs) in South Africa (STATSSA, 2022), adding R1.59 trillion to R4.65 trillion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Africa, 2022). According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2018), the South African washing and dry-cleaning industry is part of the personal services sector which has contributed 5.9% to the country's GDP. Moreover, according to the STASSA (2022) second quarter report, the personal services and trade industries were the most significant drivers of growth, with personal services increasing by 2,5%, thus making the services sector, within which the LDC sector falls, an important contributor to the South African economy (STATSSA, 2022).

THE LAUNDRY AND DRY-CLEANING SECTOR IN EKURHULENI

A review of the literature suggests that social media marketing (SMM) in Laundry and Dry-cleaning (LDC) businesses is not a widely researched topic. Literature is sparse, yet the evidence suggests that social media has been successfully adopted in a subsector such as the LDC sector that might ordinarily seem unsuitable for social media (Ajina, 2019). Social media may well play an important role in helping to promote the LDC businesses to a wider audience, as well as to create enhanced engagement with existing customers (Cooper et al., 2019). SMM activities might function as an economic alternative to build successful brand awareness and brand management for businesses in the LDC sector (Bennett, 2017:9). This is because small businesses such as LDCs can engage in SMM to promote visibility and awareness of their brand within the local community.

Business establishments in the LDC sector in Ekurhuleni metropolitan area consist of large, small, and medium-sized businesses. The sector comprises both individually owned firms and larger corporate laundries some of which are franchised. Large LDC business establishments services comprise laundry and dry-cleaning of bulk clothing such as bed linen, table linen, fur, leather, suede apparel and uniforms, normally processed in hospitals and commercial laundries. Whereas individually owned LDC businesses include neighbourhood LDCs that comprise owner-operated or family-run businesses. These individually and family owned LDCs fall within the small business category. Businesses in the LDCs sector are found to compete for the same share of prospective customers in the high-density urban areas of cities and shopping malls, LDCs clients are very busy as well as individuals whose work in environments require a lot of travelling and simply dislike doing their own laundry. The LDC businesses also deal with organisations with high volumes of laundry such as hospitals, factories, Bed and Breakfasts and Hotels.

THE MARKETING OF LAUNDRY AND DRY-CLEANING BUSINESS

In the past, small businesses relied mainly on traditional marketing such as print media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, flyers and billboards) and broadcast media (i.e. television and radio) (Ramasobana, 2017, p.114). The traditional marketing activities have also been common to LDCs. Several LDC businesses have reported success with the use of traditional ways of marketing such as radio, signage, weekly promotions, sweepstakes, discount loyalty cards, competitions, as well as word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing (Wallace, 2014).

The marketing environment has been transformed significantly in recent years, now being extended by the availability of new, non-traditional channels, such as websites, email, mobile apps, and social media (Pascucci, Savelli & Gistri, 2023, p.18)). The newly available non-traditional channels, also called new media, realised the advent of social media. Social media communication involves sharing, liking, commenting, blogging and recommendations among others. The social media have challenged the way in which information is spread in the traditional media (Cao and Weerawardena, 2022 p. 42) According to (Li, Larimo & Leonidou, 2021 p.43) social media is arguably reported as an important phenomenon for the marketing of small businesses. Thus, the influence of social media on businesses has led to the development of social media marketing (SMM) (Li et al.,2021 p.43).

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social Media Marketing refers to the actual use of social media channels for marketing purposes. Social media marketing is described as “A process by which firms create, communicate and deliver online marketing offerings through social media channels to achieve organisational goals and create value for stakeholders (Li et al., 2021 p.54). SMM has opened the doors for small business to do marketing and promotion. Research has shown that businesses are increasingly using social media for the marketing of their products and businesses (Cao et al.,2022 p.51). The adoption of SMM could prove very useful for small businesses in South Africa and LDC businesses specifically, as numerous businesses in South Africa have shown a strong move towards the use of SMM. Approximately, 47% of small businesses use SMM primarily for customer lead generation (Statista, 2022).

According to the South African Social Media Landscape, (SASML, 2022), South Africa’s small businesses are using social media platforms such as Facebook (96,4%), Twitter (87.5%), Instagram (77.7%), LinkedIn (73.2%) and YouTube (67.9%) to promote their businesses. Marketing through social media channels has become the latest trend in South Africa and an essential part of marketing communications for South Africa’s small businesses (Goldstuck, 2022). There are various types of SMM channels that may be distinguished and are available for LDCs and that many other small businesses may exploit for their competitive advantage.

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND LAUNDRY AND DRY-CLEANING BUSINESS.

Marketing through various social media channels is gaining the attention of many businesses including the small businesses (SBs) in the LDC sector. Nowadays, businesses such as LDCs could successfully use SMM to promote their businesses due to the increasing number of social media users. Social Media provides SBs with a significant number of opportunities for both social and business interactions (Mamorobela, 2023. p. 176). According

to Mamorobela (2023), many SBs who have adopted the usage of SMM have enhanced their client awareness and accessibility. The majority of SBs now use SMM to create and manage their company's fan page, maintain public relations, manage promotions, and conduct marketing research (Yapp, 2022, p. 126). SBs use SMM to help build brand awareness, facilitate customer service, and increase revenue. SMM users are able to share posts with friends, further increasing brand awareness (Abbasi et al., 2023 p.2). It is visible that SMM serves as a great foundation in the pursuit of locating customers and creating an environment to engage them anywhere and at any time.

SMM is on the rise, and its importance is evident as the investment in social advertising across the globe is predicted to rise to US 153, 563 million by 2021 (Statista, 2021). South Africa's social media statistics provide an in-depth insight into the potential of social media as a marketing and outreach platform for businesses. Meta reports advertising outreach show that Facebook's ads reach is equivalent to 36.8 per cent of the total South African population. The advertisements on Facebook Messenger in South Africa reached nearly 5.15 million FB users in January 2023. While Google's marketing and advertising resources show that South Africa had over 25.80 million YouTube users in early 2023. The advertising reach of Instagram equals 9.4 per cent of the total South African population. LinkedIn's advertising reach in South Africa equals 18.3 per cent of the total population of South Africa. In the early part of 2023, Twitter's Advertising Resources reported having 3.65 million Twitter users in South Africa, meaning that Twitter's advertising reach in South Africa was equal to 6.1 per cent of the country's population.

From the many SMM channels available, the limited literature suggests that LDC business owners/managers, to some extent, do employ a few SMM channels to market and promote their businesses and services. One popular SMM tool available to LDCs, for example, are "online discount coupons" also known as "social couponing" accessible on business websites and Facebook (Chaffey and Smith, 2017, pp.92-93). For example, if an LDC business has a social media platform such as a Facebook page, the marketer of the LDC business could post a digital coupon or offer a discount for everyone who "Likes" their LDC business Facebook page. In so doing, the digital discount coupon serves as a marketing campaign that encourages people to bring in a certain number of garments and have one item dry-cleaned for free (Chaffey et al., 2017, pp.216-217).

Moreover, LDCs engaging with consumers using SMM channels, could extend opportunities to promote the business' goods or services without incurring a significant financial cost, especially when compared to the traditional marketing channels (Barlatier, Josserand, Hohberger & Mention, 2023). The study provides some evidence of LDC's Facebook pages, promotional content, Facebook likes, including the availability of emails, mobile app usage, and websites for LDC businesses as depicted in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below.



FIGURE 1. LAUNDRY AND DRY-CLEANING BUSINESS FACEBOOK PAGES

While Figure 2 below denotes the use and availability of mobile apps and websites displayed in the advertisement as evidence that some LDCs have well adopted the social media marketing strategy.



*Adopted and anonymised from the original pages. The original names, contact details, numbers, and emails of the businesses in the figures above are removed due to the privacy of personal information.

FIGURE 2. LAUNDRY AND DRY-CLEANING BUSINESS APP, EMAIL AND WEBSITE

The above evidence indicates that small businesses in the LDC sector can no longer be ignorant of the fact that the non-traditional marketing channels [websites, apps and social media] are innovations used for marketing (Jordan, 2018, p.7). Non-traditional marketing channels such as websites, emails, and push notifications through social media apps, for example, have enabled users to socialise solely at a click of a button and collaborate more with users in the public sphere, thus, affording ordinary customers the opportunity to transform from content users into content creators (Darga, 2018, p.23). This study's objective sought to determine whether SMM activities are deployed within the small business sector and the LDC subsector in particular, to enhance the growth of LDC services. The above discussion also suggests how LDCs could manage their marketing activities using a few SMM channels and how they could view the effects of SMM in their marketing activities.

INFORMATION GAP

Given the above background and literature review, the information gap that underpins this topic is the dearth of research on the use of social media in the LDC sector, as well as the lack of insight as to social media's perceived impact and value as part of the overall marketing effort of independent/owner-operated LDC firms in Ekurhuleni. The LDC sector was selected for this reason, as it is seen as the antithesis of a socially interactive community where social media is typically to be found. Even though literature on social media usage by consumers is widely explored and the impact of social media on businesses has been extensively acknowledged (VanMeter et al., 2018 pp. 95-96, Li et al., 2021, pp.50-51, Jacobson et al., 2021, pp. 2-4), few studies have empirically investigated the adoption and use of social media specifically from the perspective of LDC businesses.

Ekurhuleni, in turn, was selected as a microcosm of the broader South African context and, in part, because the researcher lives in the area and the metropolitan area is an important part of Gauteng the largest and most economically active province in the country (City of Ekurhuleni, 2021). According to the City's website, Ekurhuleni metropolitan region is one of the most densely populated regions in Gauteng with a population of more than 3.3

million % of the Gauteng province(City of Ekurhuleni, 2021). In the context of Gauteng, the city contributes 23.4% to the total provincial economy Global Africa Network (GAN, 2021), around 26.4% of the City's economic capacity is produced in the Kempton Park areas, followed by Alberton (19.3%), Edenvale (15.2%), and Benoni (14.7%). The Metro's GDP is projected to grow at an average annual rate of 1.75% from 2019 to 2023 (GAN,2021). The study is guided by the following objectives.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In order to address the information gap of this study, the primary objective of this study is to *identify the extent to which social media is used and found useful by the owners/managers of the independent/owner-operated laundry and dry-cleaning services in the marketing of their businesses, in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area, in South Africa.*

This insight is expected to drive future promotion of social media in this sector and also in similar sectors.

To achieve the primary objective, the following secondary objectives are formulated.

- To clarify the extent of social media use or non-use by the laundry and dry-cleaning businesses in their marketing activities in the Ekurhuleni metropolitan area.
- To clarify the way social media is being used within the laundry and dry-cleaning sub-sector, including the channels used, assuming it is used at all.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is both qualitative and exploratory in nature, since it strives to explore and understand the use of SMM in LDC businesses in the Ekurhuleni metropolitan area in South Africa. This is a topic that has received little attention in the past, justifying the exploratory nature of the research. The researcher also applied a qualitative approach whereby in-depth face-to-face interviews with LDC business owners/managers were conducted. The in-depth interviews allow for extensive discussion, enabling the interviewer to ask numerous questions while probing for in-depth answers and explanations (Knott, Rao, Summers & Teeger, 2022 p1). The study was delineated to focus on LDC services firms in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area and the focus is on small and independent firms. The study population was refined to include all owners of independent LDC firms located in the Ekurhuleni metropolitan area. A qualitative and purposive sampling the study (Obilor, 2021 p.4).

As far as sample size is concerned, researchers in qualitative research usually focus on relatively small samples (Robinson, 2014:25). Furthermore, Robinson (2014:29), mention that a sample in research is usually selected because it allows the researcher to obtain rich descriptions of participant's experiences and their willingness to express their experiences and provide information that is suitable to challenge and enhance the researcher's understanding of the topic at hand. A sample of 20 firms were selected for this study. This is because qualitative samples are purposive, that is, selected by virtue of their capacity to provide richly textured information, relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Sandelowski (2014, p.183) recommends that qualitative sample sizes are large enough to allow the unfolding of a 'new and richly textured understanding' of the phenomenon under study, but small enough so that the 'deep, case-oriented analysis' of qualitative data is not precluded.

Firms and their owners/managers were selected from a list of malls located within the Ekurhuleni region. The participants were contacted telephonically to arrange an appointment for interviews. The participants were provided with information about the study, about why they have been selected, and how the results will be used. In an effort to make the data gathering process comfortable for the participants, the researcher then arranged a meeting with the participants at the place and time most convenient to the participants. The researcher introduced the research topic to study participants and the purpose of the study, then requested to participate in the research study and thus, appointments were confirmed. Therefore, study interviews were conducted until acceptable data saturation point was reached (Moser et al.,2018, pp 11-15). The researcher then ensured that saturation has been reached by asking all additional participants the same interview questions up to the point where a sense of closure was attained because new data yielded redundant information.

This study used the semi-structured interview approach as this approach allows for extensive discussion, enabling the interviewer to ask numerous questions while probing for in-depth of answers and explanations (Moser et al., 2018, pp 11-15). Additionally, the approach also presents the interviewer with the freedom to elaborate on issues relating to the perceptions of LDC owners and/or managers as to the usefulness of SMM and the benefits and challenges that they have experienced with these channels.

For this study, the researcher obtained the compulsory University research ethical clearance to conduct research (obtained from the University of South Africa's (UNISA's) College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC), Ethics reference number: 2019_MRM_012. The data collection was done over a period of thirty (30) days. Owners/managers of LDC businesses were contacted telephonically to request their participation in the study and to confirm interview appointments. In-depth face-to-face interviews were used in order to allow LDC owners and/or managers considerable scope to express their views and perceptions on issues of social media and laundry business marketing and what they consider to be important and useful for their respective businesses to grow.

The interviews were guided by an in-depth interview guide in order to guide the interviews and ensure that the researcher did not overlook important interview questions (Wallace Foundation, 2017, p.10). Interview guide attached below in Table 1.

TABLE 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Objective	Interview questions
Background and demographic information	<i>Question 1:</i> Respondents will be asked to provide biographical information such as: Age, position or title, experience, skills
	<i>Question 2:</i> Respondents will be asked to provide characteristics of their LDC businesses such as: Size of the business, income, period of operation, sector overview, successes and challenges
Objective 1: Laundry and dry-cleaning business marketing	<i>Question 3:</i> Respondents will be asked to tell the researcher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If they view marketing as important for their business • Who oversees the marketing activities of the business? • What is their prevailing businesses' marketing approach? • The marketing activities which they employ to engage their audience?
Objective 2: Marketing channels	<i>Question 4:</i> Respondents will be asked as to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which are the most preferred marketing channels do they use to promote their business? • The value of using the chosen marketing channels? • Merits and demerits inherent in the use of the marketing channels?
Objective 3: Marketing and budget	<i>Question 5: follow up to question 4:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much budget do they allocate to marketing (in percent)? • Do they divide the marketing budget for the different marketing channels? • To what extent are they considering to connect the different marketing channels?
Objective 4 Social media marketing and usefulness	<i>Question 6:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are they participating in any social media marketing activities? • If the do...which channels are they using? And how often? • What are the benefits/value or challenges of using social media marketing? • If they do not use social media at all...then why?
Objective 5: General open-ended question	<i>Question 7:</i> The respondents will be asked to explain to the researcher in general, their perceptions of using traditional marketing as compared to using social media marketing...and which marketing activities they find useful for their businesses. How the activities have benefitted their business? And provide examples.

In qualitative studies, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation indicate validity. Therefore, the concepts of appropriateness and accuracy, as applied to a research process, together refer to validity (Leung, 2015 p.325). According to Serumaga (2015:36), validity also refers to the ability of an instrument to measure what it was designed to measure.

To ensure **validity** for this study, the researcher proposed a qualitative approach as appropriate for the research questions being explored, the researcher has also taken into consideration that the design of the instrument used for data collection is critical in ensuring a high level of validity (Mohajan, 2017, p.14). For example, it was deemed important for the researcher to be aware of the potential bias that could influence the design of the research instrument. Therefore, the researcher attempted to remain objective reflecting on the effectivity of the instrument in collecting data which answers the research questions and which ensures the representivity of the sample. The researcher ensured validity of the data collection instrument by confirming that the instrument is reviewed, discussed and refined by the institution's research ethics committee or other academic staff members willing to provide scholarly guidance (Mohajan, 2017, p.14). The researcher also made sure that all questions formulated in the interview guide were in simple English language and that follow-up questions could be asked to clarify some questions.

This assisted the interview process to be more interactive when a natural conversational English language was used and also allowed the researcher the freedom to follow the interviewee's sequence of ideas and re-order the questions if it better suits the flow of the discussion.

Reliability: The principle of reliability means the possibility that any other independent researcher can replicate the study and generate the same findings (Sign, 2014:83). Whereas, Leung (2015:36) mention that in qualitative studies, dependability indicates reliability and some qualitative researchers use the term 'dependability' instead of reliability, suggesting that, the results of a researcher are considered reliable if consistent results have been obtained in identical situations but different circumstances. The fact that a single interviewer was used for this study, should contribute to reliability. The current study attempted to produce reliable and valid tests and questionnaires in order to enhance the accuracy of their assessment and evaluations. The researcher ensured that appointments were secured with participants and no interruptions were caused. When working with qualitative data, the concepts of trustworthiness, dependability, transferability, and credibility are of great significance to the findings of any scientific research (Leung, 2015:36).

Trustworthiness: One of the major issues in qualitative research content analysis is the trustworthiness of the entire process (Mandal, 2018:479). The trustworthiness of content analysis results rely on the convenience of rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data (Mandal, 2018:480). Qualitative researchers use four alternatives proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, in order to measure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Each of the suggested qualitative research trustworthiness criteria are briefly discussed next, with and how to apply them during research.

Credibility: Credibility is defined as the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Mandal, 2018:480). To ensure credibility for the current study, the researcher made sure the data collection instrument measured what it was intended to and was able to guide the researcher to answer the defined research question (Serumaga, 2015:36). The researcher has decided on the selected sample from the relevant population, which in this case were owners and/or managers of independent or family/owner-operated LDC businesses whom the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews, as relevant sample cases to answer the defined research question. The researcher will provide a clear and systematic description of the research path, the research design, the data collection, and including the steps taken to manage, analyse and report data to further enrich the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2015:252).

Transferability: Transferability refers to the ability of the findings to be engaged to a similar situation and delivering similar results (Noble & Smith, 2015:34). In order to make a fitting judgment with other possible contexts, the researcher produced a 'thick' description of the context which allowed comparison of the context to other possible contexts (Moser & Korstjens, 2018:11) which means a thorough description of the characteristics processes and

contexts that constitute the phenomenon being studied. Thick description is a way of writing that includes not only describing and observation (usually of human behaviour) but also the context in which that behaviour occurs (Clark & Chevrette, 2017).

Dependability: Dependability refers to reliability of the research findings and the researcher's effort to account for any changing condition in the phenomenon of the study, the design, or methodology as appropriate (Mandal, 2018:480). To ensure the dependability for the study, the researcher accounted for any contradictions and inconsistencies that evolve during separate analyses or peer review/debriefing processes. The researcher provided the reader and other researchers with sufficient information needed to determine how dependable the study and researcher are. For example: testing the analysis and interpretation against the documents that were used during data collection before producing the final document.

CHROME CLEAR COOKIES: Confirmability refers to the steps taken by the researcher to demonstrate that findings emerge from the data and not their own biases and that is achieved by ensuring credibility, transferability, and dependability (Koonin, 2014). For the study, the researcher ensured that the interpretations of the findings were clearly drawn from the data and his own judgement was minimised. The researcher provided detailed account of the research process in order to enable readers and other researchers to determine whether the data analysis procedures were carried out appropriately (Moser and Kortjens, 2018 p.4),

The research data was analysed using thematic analysis to determine whether social media had an influence on the marketing activities of LDC services, and to establish which social media activities are employed by LDC business owners. The aim of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, for example: "patterns in the data that are important and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, pp.3353-3354). The researcher also used the ATLAS.ti software (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software) to assist with data coding, management, and analysis (Lewis, 2016, p.3).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study participants were predominantly sole owners of the LDC businesses in question. The participants' data indicated that the gender of participants comprised both female and male participants, thirteen (13) females and seven (7) males. although it emerged that the businesses in question (the sample) were owned/or managed by a higher percentage of females. The participants' data also showed that businesses within the sub-sector have been in operation for quite a substantial period of time, with the oldest businesses having been in operation for a period of seventy-two (72) years.

The data from the study also shows that all businesses employed less than fifty (50) employees, while other LDC small businesses employed fewer workers ranging from 4 to 6 employees, indicating that the sample reflects a typical small business organisational structure, which is also relevant given the scope of the study. All businesses were fairly dispersed and located in Gauteng East, in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan area.

The findings from the analysed data emphasised the importance of marketing as it was espoused by the study participants. It was uncovered that LDC business owners/managers still conform to traditional sector norms in order to conduct business, mainly because they are small and would usually find it difficult to develop their own unique marketing approaches. During the interviews it was found that participants have a clear objective on how to market their businesses and also understand that marketing plays an important role in assisting their businesses to achieve a competitive advantage. Table 2 below, provides some participants' comments about marketing of their business.

TABLE 2. PARTICIPANT'S COMMENTS ON MARKETING.

Participant code	Comment
PD:INT 1	"I have graphic designing background, so I do marketing myself. I design my own pamphlets. I go to cheapest printers and do about 10 000 copies and distribute them myself."
PD:INT 8	"I think marketing is important. It is important for people to know that you exist, we just take it for granted that people come and drop off their clothes but to me is something that I can say it's an oversight in our part. We rely heavily on our existing customers that's it. So, I think that it something we need to consider doing for our business."
PD:INT 9	"I am the person who ensures that the business is marketed, and we get customers to bring their clothing. I am responsible for almost everything in the business, that's your marketing, doing laundry, ironing, admin, stock taking, buying washing chemicals and business finances."
PD:INT 15	"I think marketing is important like maybe, if we get somebody who can go out and do marketing for you, you can even go out to lodges, hotels, schools (we need those school blazers for the business). Market the business."

The above interview extracts suggests that marketing activities in LDC businesses are intertwined with other activities of the firm such as doing finances, stock-taking and taking orders. Thus, the marketing function does not exist as a separate unit. From the interviews, it was uncovered that the marketing activities, in most cases, were owned, instigated, and undertaken by the owner and/or manager of the business.

The findings also revealed that a wide variety of internal activities influence the LDCs implementation of marketing activities and that most of the study participants are owners of the LDC businesses who oversee the marketing activities within their businesses. In addition, it was found that LDC business owners and/or managers were less likely to market their businesses because of the high costs associated with traditional marketing channels of marketing. These findings suggest that LDC business owners and/or managers require simple, inexpensive, efficient and innovative marketing approaches (Salifu, 2017, p.10)

The findings also revealed that to some extent, some of the LDC business owners/mangers used some form of SMM for their businesses, with the aim to of being innovative in their marketing approaches, but they were challenged on how to incorporate the SMM into their prevailing traditional marketing activities. Some LDCs owners/managers appeared to concur with data from several studies that have been conducted by other researchers to determine the importance of SMM in businesses, in that, SM channels such as Facebook are playing a vital role in improving communication and sharing of information effectively and on time (Sarkama, 2016; Bennett, 2017; Doyle, 2017; Koch 2018, Soelaiman et al.,2022; Okonkwo et al, 2023).

The study findings uncovered that investing in SMM can meaningfully strengthen the relationship between LDC businesses and its customers. SMM channels such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were also mentioned during interviews by participants, when they were asked whether they use SM to market their businesses. For an example in Table 3 below, participants' comments about SMM were inserted as shown.

TABLE 3. PARTICIPANT'S COMMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Participant code	Comment
<i>PD:INT 1</i>	"Yes, Facebook, Instagram, and a website, I use Facebook mainly as an informational channel and Instagram for inspirational pictures."
<i>PD:INT 6</i>	"Yes, the business is listed on social media through Hibiscus lifestyle centre [Mini-Mall where the business is located]. If I have some specials, I give it to them and they put it on social media for us, Yellow pages has told us that they have a package such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. They charge a monthly fee for that as well."
<i>PD:INT 8</i>	"Yes, Facebook, Instagram, and a website. So every-week I load posters of blanket specials, [She shows me uploaded pictures on mobile phone] on Facebook, I also do it on WhatsApp, Instagram so I put them everywhere."
<i>PD:INT 13</i>	"I post the picture of my Laundry business sign, and start the conversation about the laundry, what we do here, how we take good care of the business, how we do our ironing and quality service we offer."

The above comments reflect the participants' awareness of the growing importance of participating on SMM channels, particularly considering the positive effect these channels have on customer interaction. Owners/managers of LDC businesses who use SMM realise the benefits of having such platforms. It is evident that some of the owners/managers embrace the use of SMM for their businesses. The above excerpts from interviewed participants also illustrate that there is a clear awareness of various SMM channels. Some LDC business owners/managers certainly understand that the basis of SMM includes creating and posting content that attracts customers and inspires them to share information with others (Chary, 2014). Other participants expressed diverse opinions on how they used social media to market their LDC businesses and it was one interesting comment that caught the researcher's attention as one participant mentioned that they also engaged their customers via surveys on Facebook.

PD:INT 1: "Yes, as I have mentioned about the survey...we refer our customers to fill this [Survey] on Facebook."

The above comment resonates with the findings of Faisal (2015, p.115) who argues that doing surveys and gathering customer feedback can improve small businesses' marketing efforts. Faisal (2015, p.115) notes that the information that is collected from customers through surveys is very important for any marketing decisions. Similarly, Sha and Rai (2022 p. 674) agree that survey results analysis may also reveal impacts on the profit and provide a foundation for improvement, moreover, they mention that satisfaction surveys or questionnaires collect data to identify behaviours that lead to happy or unhappy customers. These views suggest that businesses that are active on social media channels such as Facebook have more opportunity to engage, build relationships and start conversations about their services and products with customers or friends who 'liked' them. Notwithstanding the positive comments about marketing and SMM from participants, it was uncovered during the interviews that LDC owners/managers might have limited experience in the use of SMM. The reason for this lack of experience is that, their messaging is limited to the announcement of upcoming events; they seem to lack regular conversations or engagement with their customers (Smith, 2021, p.2). In addition, the findings indicated that a further potential barrier was that owners/managers of LDCs lacked the expertise on how to integrate the social media into their marketing activities (Klein and Todesco, 2021).

CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

The study examined the use of SMM in a sub-sector that might probably not use SMM, and one such sector chosen for this study is the LDC sector. It is evident that there is little research conducted in South Africa on the use of social media in the marketing activities of LDCs. The study also aimed to address the gap and therefore will contribute to the LDC sector and the study can be used by small business owners and/or managers in South Africa, as it provides a broad view of the use of SMM in the small business sector and the LDC sector specifically. The study hopefully provides current and future small businesses in the LDC sector with insights as to how they might use SMM to engage customers effectively and better understand the influence that SMM could have on their businesses.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

LDC owners and/or managers should consider training on SMM activities and how to integrate SMM into their business practices. Furthermore, SMM training should be offered on technology-enhanced management to prepare LDC business owners and/or managers to cope with social media mediated knowledge as well as the skills to manage SMM activities. The training should also include the LDC businesses employees and provide them with necessary functional skills on the correct use and proper application of SMM in the business context.

The growth of SMM channels is supported by both literature and the findings, in that, SMM channels are better and effective at target marketing than traditional marketing channels. Indeed, social media might be an easy-accessible and low-cost option for keeping the pace of sectorial transformations and thus, creating a competitive advantage for small businesses in general. However, successful implementation of SMM consists of a balance of various factors, namely: understanding social media channels and SMM principles, setting clear and achievable goals and objectives, a good strategy, developing and providing valuable customer centric content, being constantly present on social media. The growth of social media is also making it possible for SBs to conduct innovative forms of business promotion involving the use of business websites, mobile apps, and social media channels.

SMM activities are implemented in some LDC businesses and not implemented in others. The study also uncovered that the impact and success of social media usage for marketing purposes (SMM) in LDC businesses was ultimately determined by the LDC firm's ability to engage the customers and the motivation behind positive usage of SMM to attract customers. Whereas the present study offers insightful information and increased understanding on SMM and LDC businesses there is still plenty of room to expand this field of research with other issues, particularly given the rapid changing development in SMM practice. This study could direct or guide future research in other sectors where SMM has not been utilised and realised.

Different research in the use of social media in LDCs could also be conducted quantitatively rather than qualitatively as it was done in this study, in order to generate statistical information on the subject that could be used to support the conclusions drawn from this study. Future research could focus on specific SMM channel for businesses in the LDC sector rather than many channels, the use of specific SMM channel could increase the consistency of the findings. Research could also provide more thoughtful information if each SMM channel is studied one at the time.

The study thus concludes that, even for industries that might not seem ideal for social media marketing, that is, for those industries where there is not obvious social community to support the industry, social media still offers value and should be considered as part of the marketing efforts of all businesses.

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