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## A fact or an Illusion: Effective social media usage of female entrepreneurs

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand if social media, as frequently stated, provides an opportunity for micro scale entrepreneurs who cannot act on traditional media because of certain financial and structural challenges or it is only useful as a supporting digital tool to traditional media. This research focuses on social media from a more critical perspective in terms of its capacity to reach consumers for not registered businesses but shadow economies. In contrast to the existing literature on large-scale social media campaigns, the originality of this research lies on focusing on micro scale entrepreneurs run by women and their use of social media. In this research it is found most appropriate to apply semi-structured interviews, a qualitative approach since it deals with entrepreneurs' own feelings and perceptions about their use of social media. Besides, the sample consists of only 4 self-employed female entrepreneurs. According to results, interestingly even if Facebook still preserves its function as a primary source of marketing communication, it seems that it has lost the ground to a more recent social networking site, Instagram. Additionally, the data acquired supports the existing literature as frequently claimed that social media is an advantageous tool for businesses thanks to its capability of low-cost information disclosure, instant messaging, and wide networking. However, participants agree upon certain disadvantages of social media as imitation of works, unidentified target audience, unfair competition, more share in the market.

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## 1. Introduction

Diversity, change and information are the main actors of today's world; thus our era is frequently called as "the age of innovation in information and communication". The diversity of data and the speed of diffusion of knowledge are among the dynamics that make this era different. As a result this era might also be called as "information age". Besides, in-distinction of national boundaries, cultural leveling, restructuring of market let this age to be called as "global era". No matter how it is called the main target of this age is to have more shares in the world market and enhance the social wealth in becoming information society.

Within the scope of technological innovations, conditions of competition require new restructurings at every stage of life. Institutional competition is not only reshaped around information, ability and experience but also around concepts such as reconciliation, convention, solidarity, recognition, corporation and improvement. Considering these new structural changes in the business environment, social media plays a crucial role as altering internet usage behaviors and marketing practices (Habibi et al, 2014: 155). Many organizations around the world such as GSM operators, banks, airway companies, universities enlarge their promotional activities on social media.

Large scale companies, in particular, carry out their social media campaigns parallel to their communication practices on traditional media. However, different from large companies small and medium sized entrepreneurs exposed to several limitations in traditional media may act in a much freer environment in social media. In this sense, this research aims to examine the digital marketing and publicity activities of micro scale entrepreneurs who are mostly self-employed female workers. The originality of this research lies on focusing on micro entrepreneurs and their use of social media in contrast to existing literature on large scaled social media campaigns. The problematic of this research is to understand if social media, as frequently stated, provides an opportunity for small scale entrepreneurs who can not act on traditional media or it is only a supporting digital tool to traditional media. And different from the existing literature, this research focuses social media from a more critical perspective in terms of its capacity to reach consumers for not registered businesses but shadow economies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Social Media as a Communication Tool*

Today social media stands as a comprehensive communication tool for its revolutionary characteristics as offering user generated, interactive, fast and cheap content for the last two decades (Whelan et al., 2013: 778). As Schreck and Keim (2013: 69) argues social media "includes all media formats by which groups of users interact to produce, share, and augment information in a distributed, networked, and parallel process". This new communication platform has led to both vital changes and opportunities in business making. Thus it is safe to say that social media has become an indispensable part of organizations' strategies and practices (Peters et al., 2013: 281). This increased use of social media offers businesses an opportunity especially in terms of reaching their target audiences (Meredith, 2012: 89). Indeed several sorts of social media are considered as reasonable platforms for instant information disclosure to audiences (Osatuyi, 2013: 2622). In exchange, target audiences can also generate contents regarding brands, campaigns and corporations (Schreck & Keim, 2013: 68). As a result, consumers increasingly play an active role in marketing communication by creating, disseminating and exchanging information via social media platforms (Pentina et al., 2012: 67; Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012: 320).

Different from early mode of marketing communications, online marketing communication opened up a new phase for reciprocal participation of marketing communicators and consumers (Muniz & Schau, 2011: 209). Social media seen as "a natural extension" of the communication environment (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012: 319) has resulted in a major shift from traditional media (Miller & Lammas, 2010). This nature of social media has made it facile for audiences to interact (Deighton & Kornfeld 2009: 4). With the extended use of social media, organizations are no longer limited to one way communication but rather they can build much more interactive relationships (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012: 320). Especially small scale entrepreneurs take *this* advantage of

social media in terms of building closer and profitable relationships (He & Chen, 2014: 92). In conclusion, the ongoing discourse on new communication technologies suggests these new technologies provide a more democratic and equal society.

## 2.2. Use of Social Media by Small- Scale Entrepreneurs

What characterize today's business environment can be exemplified around certain features of small businesses such as relationships, networks and information (Walsh & Lipinski, 2009: 572). The success of small businesses relies on building "committed" relationships; and social media gives a chance in that sense (Schaffer, 2013). According to general assumption, social media offers opportunities to *any* organizations due its active, equal, interconnected and interactive nature (Peters et al., 2013: 281). On a daily base, millions of people take advantage of these popular communication tools for their businesses (Meredith, 2012: 89). Among all social media tools the most commonly used SNS, Facebook, is preferred more frequently by small entrepreneurs for its simplistic and user friendly nature as it requires less technical knowledge in comparison to other SNS such as Blogs, Google+, LinkedIn. With the rise of social media which is characterized firstly by Facebook, then by Twitter and recently by Instagram, "new paths of communication have led consumers create and exchange information by its user-generated feature" (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). For instance different from paid online advertising, SNSs enable consumers communicate with each other through Fan pages of products and services (Pentina et al., 2012: 66).

SNSs have three main advantages for businesses as enlarging their network size, positioning them within a social network and building strong relationships (Greve & Salaff, 2003: 3). Especially the idea of reaching "key consumer influencers, engaging them, and generating brand advocates" by social media is accepted as the virtue of Web 2.0 (Miller & Lammas, 2010). However a survey presented by Keller and Berry in 2006 has interestingly shown that 72 percent of word of mouth (WOM) conversations occur face-to-face, followed by 18 percent of phone conversations, and only 10 percent of WOM is realized in online environments. According to a study conducted by DEI Worldwide in 2008 also reveals that 70 percent of all participants visits a social media platforms to obtain information; 49 of these participants makes a buying decision depending on the information they find; 60 percent of the respondents claim that they would pass on information they find online; and 45 percent of participants searching for information on social media platforms engages in word of mouth in comparison to 36 percent who acquire information via corporate websites and news sites (cited in Fisher, 2009: 190). Besides another research indicates that while 83 percent of Internet users, aging from 13 to 54, visit social media platforms, only less than 5 percent of these social media users frequent these sites for purchase decisions in 9 different product and service categories which are indicated within the research (Knowledge Network, 2009). These research results suggest that no matter how much the importance of building online relationships with consumers valued; messages might be ignored by the intended audiences in online platforms.

## 2.3. Female Entrepreneurs, Social Media and New Business Environment

Considering the current literature, it is obvious that technology has been treated as a revolutionary progressive element. And the discourse on this *mythical* communication technology results in global acceptance (Tutal, 2006: 40). As a result, the irreversible changes in business life lead certain unavoidable changes in social life. Before the rise of "information age", due to challenging financial circumstances, labourers are forced to work in the shadow market. Among those unregistered workers women constitute a considerably crowded group. Those women are mostly work as farmers in rural areas, workers in factories or employees at home by doing manual works such as knitting and sewing (Azaklı, 2009: 22). Informal economy has several disadvantages such as decreased wages, gaps in social security law, isolation from social life (Azaklı, 2009: 20). Thus, it keeps women indoors without any social security rights. Today as a result of technological improvements, the ways of working in the shadow market have also been inevitably affected.

The nature and the structure of the business environment have been altering due to global competition, improvements in communication technologies in particular (Iscan & Naktiyok, 2005: 52). One of the most emerging features of this new business environment is flexible working. With this new environment the increased number of

female and young population has shown up to have a share in the workplace. This demand to participate in business life has been met by new communication technologies enabling flexible working.

Flexibility has been enthusiastically welcomed since it is believed that it provides a balance between work and personal life especially in terms of women's participation. While concerning flexibility much of the literature focuses on women in terms of their family responsibilities. It is argued that flexible work arrangements help women with children by reducing their stress. Thus, they become more productive and satisfied with their jobs (Hill et al., 2008). However, it should be noted that regarding flexibility as advancement for women's participation in business life might reinforce the gender inequalities rather than eliminate (Plantenga & Remery, 2009: 8).

In conclusion, no matter how the current discourse on communication technologies painstakingly emphasizes that the widespread use of these affordable technologies has rendered societies more democratic and homogeneous, this research primarily considers the counter arguments which suggest that "it has polarized the society instead of homogenizing it" (Bauman, 1999: 26).

### 3. Research Design

The aim of this study is to reveal what goals, strategies and methods that micro sized female entrepreneurs undertake to enhance their work and the opportunities and difficulties they confront during this process. In this research it is found most appropriate to apply semi-structured interviews, a qualitative approach (Walliman, 2006) since it deals with entrepreneurs' own feelings and perceptions about their use of social media. The sample consists of only 4 self-employed females. All 4 participants make use of social media professionally. All the participants work alone; however only one of them claimed when she needs assistance she employs part-time workers and pay their both salaries and insurances. The professions of the participants are as follows: Two of them works as an event organizer, one as a photographer and one as a make-up artist. While 2 of the self-employed women work informally, the other 2 female participants are officially registered. This equation in different employment modes enables making comparisons between different perceptions towards flexible working arrangements.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. *Social Media Boom in Flexible Working*

All participants think that in the last 3 years there has been a boom in social media usage for self-employed businesses. According to the interviews, it is safe to state that among micro scale self-employed entrepreneurs social media is highly recognized and frequently consulted as a communication tool. However, no matter how frequently this communication tool is used, it should not be inferred that it is free from any disadvantages. 2 of 4 participants indicate making business through social media has certain disadvantages one of which is negative perception of "others" towards their works. The following comment of Aylin, an event organizer, can be taken as an indicator of unpleasant perceptions towards flexible working:

"I work from home and I feel that my friends and even my family do not think that I run a professional business.

For example, when my husband comes home after work, I sometimes ask him to look after our son but he usually refuses to do so saying that he works all day and gets tired. But I also do work! But he thinks it is not a real work. If I had an office or I worked in a corporate company, he wouldn't talk this way."

##### 4.1.1. *Advantages*

According to all participants, one of the most important advantages of social media for micro-scale businesses is its capacity to provide fast and low-cost information disclosure as well as effective research features.

Seda, event organizer, emphasized that she takes advantage of many features of social media. First of all she runs all her publicity activities through social media, she makes sells over the internet and she even organize campaigns so as to promote the market recognition and sales of her business. She stressed that she did not employ any traditional media tool for those activities. Because she thinks her target audience is consisting of young people capable of using social media and as a result she finds traditional media unnecessarily expensive.

Another advantage of social media that all of the participants mentioned is its capacity to display the photos of their works. Especially the structure of Instagram which is more transparent and allows connection between people that do not know each other in person serves as a portfolio for people preferring to show their work.

#### 4.1.2. Disadvantages

Without any exception all participants mentioned that this causes certain disadvantages such as decrease in the market share and increase in competition. They are agreed upon that as more and more people join to social media platforms and share the photographs of their works, other people, less qualified ones, recognize new job opportunities as event organizer, birth photographer, and make-up artist, designer and so on. According to participants, those less qualified job seekers may copy and even duplicate their works for more affordable prizes. And the cheap copies might become more preferable in time for customers and as a result it creates a financial and professional challenge.

Aylin stressed also several times that another disadvantage of social media is that it is not possible to determine one's target audience. She explained the difficulty she confronted as follows:

“It is almost impossible to determine your target audience on social media. For example I work for ‘A+ customers’. If I found an office, I would prefer a location suitable for these customers. But in the internet you cannot assign your audience; there are millions of potential customers each with different financial and professional expectations. And I have to tell each of them the quality of my work. If I had an office, I would only encounter with customers who can see the quality of my work so that I would not have to waste my breath by talking to customers below my target audience.”

On the other hand, Seda pointed out another disadvantage of social media, which results in unjust competition. She underlined how social media is responsible of this unjust competition commenting:

“I definitely believe that competition in social media shouldn't be this much unfair. I have an office so I pay rent and tax for my work. I have also additional charges. When I sell a product or service, I have to add the cost of all my expenses to the final price. But other women working from home make sells without any charge. I find it quite unfair. Each of these women takes a slice from the market share and this means less customer, less gain for people working officially like me.”

According to Arzu who has been a make-up artist for 13 years, there has been a rise in the number of make-up artist in the last 2 or 3 years as a result of social media usage by micro scale entrepreneurs. In her own terms she says:

“Nowadays everybody is make-up artist. People think that if they cannot be successful at anything; at least they could become make-up artists. For example, I know a woman who was a salesperson a while ago but then she suddenly became a make-up artist. This is so ridiculous. This trend, I mean becoming make-up artist, has started 2 or 3 years ago and reached its pick in last one year. I think while surfing on the internet people do not only search for information but also business opportunities, one of which is unfortunately make-up art ”

Like all other 3 participants Zuhail, a birth photographer, mentioned that sometimes social media creates a challenge for her business. She believes that she is really good at her job so that she even identifies herself as an artist; as a result she puts her artistically taken photographs on Facebook and Instagram which serve as her portfolios. But she mentioned that her style, which means the way she uses camera or the poses that she prefers, is

sometimes being imitated by other birth photographers who follow her on Instagram. According to Zuhul, this is the biggest challenge that social media provokes for her profession.

#### 4.2. Social Media Trend: Instagram vs. Facebook

The research results show that even if Facebook still preserves its function as a primary source of marketing communication, it seems that it has lost the ground to a more recent social networking site, Instagram. All Participants except one state that Instagram is more eligible for businesses since it permits to communicate with not only acquaintances but also people that one do not somehow know. This new platform serves more for marketing communications by its feature as “hashtaging” (#).

Aslı, a make-up artist, says that even if she has been working professionally as a make-up artist, she started to use social media only one and a half year ago. She uses mostly Instagram but she has a Facebook account as well. She considers Facebook as a more intimate platform designed for connecting people that they have already established relationships. In contrast Instagram is more convenient for business purposes. She mentioned that she can follow make-up artists from all over the world. She also stressed that she can also follow the latest trends thanks to publicly open structure of Instagram. In addition, Selin also says she mostly prefers Instagram since it is easier to reach potential customers thanks to hashtags compared to other social media platforms.

Among all participants only Zeynep said that she prefers Facebook to Instagram. She thinks that for her profession trust and communication come first. Since it is easier to communicate on Facebook thanks to its messaging option, Facebook is more indispensable for her.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Social media has become a strategic tool for businesses shortly after its emergence. The increased intention to employ social media for business purposes has rendered it necessary to study. Social media and its usage for businesses are mostly studied from the managerial perspective (Verheyden & Goeman, 2013; Wamba & Carter, 2013; Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011; Bell & Loane, 2010). The existing literature addresses more on positive impacts of social media in business environment. Yet, this study has aimed to discover the impact of social media with all dimensions. Thus, this research deals with social media from a more critical perspective.

According to research findings, Facebook still preserves its function as a primary source of communication for businesses as it has reshaped business making ways thanks to its advantageous features as low-cost information disclosure, instant messaging, and wide networking. However, considering participants' views, it seems that it has lost the ground to a more recent social networking site, Instagram. Participants feel that the transparent structure of Instagram is more convenient for their businesses since they can both follow the worldwide trends and present the photos of their works as portfolios to anyone wish to see in an opener ground compared to Facebook.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of social media

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Low-cost information disclosure	Unidentified target audience
Instant messaging	Unfair competition
Wide networking	Decrease in the market share
Following trends	Imitation of products and services
Portfolio presentation	

During interviews participants also emphasized certain disadvantages of social media that they have encountered. Although social media facilitates potential customers to access the online portfolios of participants, this open access to photos also causes their rivals who follow them to imitate their works. Thus, this characteristic of social media

works as a two-sided medallion. On the other hand, since there have been unlimited number of potential customers on social media, it is not always possible for entrepreneur to identify their target audience. Anyone who has an access to social media has to be considered among target audience even if not. And this means they may waste time and effort for the audience who are out of their target.

Another disadvantage mentioned by 2 participants working officially is that social media stimulates unfair competition. Registered entrepreneurs think that unregistered entrepreneurs who make sells through social media bear the market by prices which do not include any charges such as rent, insurance, and so on. Lastly, the nature of social media enabling new opportunities for job seekers causes decrease in the market share for certain businesses which necessitate hand skills by women.

To sum up, the originality of this pilot research lies on focusing on micro-scale female entrepreneurs and their use of social media. In contrast to current literature, this study has aimed to reveal if social media, as frequently stated, always provides an opportunity for micro (small) scale entrepreneurs who can not act on traditional media or it is only useful as a supporting digital tool to traditional media. Throughout the research, literature reviews show that there is a gap in the literature concerning disadvantages of social media. Thus, further researches conducted with wider sample sizes will make considerable contributions to the literature.

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