

The Adoption of Social Media and Internet as a Tool for Improving SMEs Performance in Sierra Leone; A Case Study of SMEs in Freetown Central Business District (CBD)

Mr. Shekou Ansumana Nuni, Mr. Ansumana Feika

Institute of Public Administration and Management, University of Sierra Leone, Canada

Abstract: Internet and social media has not only revolutionised business activities but also created a new way of doing business. It has become the new trend among businesses including SMEs. It was on this ground that this study was done to investigate social media and internet as a tool for improving SMEs performance in Sierra Leone. The study specifically examined the factors that influence the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone and determined the influence that the use of social media and internet has on SMEs market accessibility. The study adopted a descriptive research design that collected primary data from a sample of fifty (50) SMEs in Freetown using questionnaires. Data were analysed using SPSS v26. Findings from the study revealed the factors that influence SMEs to adopt internet and social media and the influence of social media and internet on SMEs accessibility. The study further revealed that social media and internet influences SMEs accessibility in many ways. Conclusively, social media and internet is an important tool for improving SMEs performance in Sierra Leone. The study therefore recommended that SMEs conduct a cost-benefit analysis, the SME owners have some basic education needed for the operation of the technologies and training programmes are required for getting the best out of the use of IT.

Keyword: Internet, social media, turnover, profits, SMEs performance

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent and utilization of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) provide opportunities for the promotion of products and services of SMEs (Amoah & Jibril, 2021), of which social media play an important role for SMEs in this facet (Omar & Anas, 2014; Jibril, Kwarteng, Chovancova, & Pilik, 2019; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This has modified the way businesses have been conducting their daily activities. Businesses including SMEs are pushed to adopt internet and social media as a way of conducting business activities. Currently many businesses in the world are using social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok to market their products and services. The new concept “electronic commerce”, known as e-commerce has changed many things in the business; things like distribution, advertising and marketing. Rahayu & Day (2015) assert that to be able to survive in the new economy businesses, including SMEs, are pushed to adopt this technology.

Small and medium sized enterprises account for about 85% of the businesses in many economies including Sierra Leone (European Commission’s definition of SMEs). For this reason, they are the backbone that drives the growth of many economies. They have to find ways to ensure that they remain competitive and perform well in the market. One of the ways is to engage in online business and use social media platforms to conduct their businesses. This is because online business helps firms become cost effective and at the same time improve productivity and quality. Thus, the online business appears to be a new medium to enhance business, especially in achieving better performance and sustainability (Razali et al., 2018). Also, internet and social media help businesses to market, distribute and advertise faster and cost-effectively. So it could be of essence if businesses, especially SMEs start to conduct their businesses virtually by adopting e-commerce and social media platforms.

The performance and growth of SMEs is a major foundation for economic growth, as this drives industrialization and gainful and meaningful employment for many people. Performance is however a relative term, as it entails market share, profit, customer satisfaction, sales growth, cost reduction, productivity and return on investment. Since social media and internet can increase brand awareness, SMEs performance in this study focused on market share, sales growth and cost reduction. All businesses want to gain wider market accessibility domestically, internationally and globally, as this can help them make profit and achieve business growth. Currently online business is seemed to be one of the ways this goal can be achieved. The rapid growth of social media represents potential opportunities for companies to grow and increase their market share as evidence shows that social media has been able to capture more subscribers in a shorter time compared to traditional means of commercial media such as television (Erukusin & Ekanem, 2014)

1.1 Statement Of The Problem

It has been researched that SMEs found it difficult to grow because of they lack access to profitable and large markets besides other factors such as finance, technology, managerial skills. So, the adoption of social media and internet deems

necessary to solve the challenge faced in term of market penetration and accessibility. This is because social media serves as a tool for marketing and advertising, contributing to the growth, competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs. One could expect that SMEs should adopt social media and internet to increase their market accessibility, but it is the opposite. Despite the valuable contributions of social media and internet towards the growth of businesses, SMEs still rely heavily on traditional ways of advertising and marketing. In advance, they still struggle to penetrate the market or increase their market share.

Amoah et al., (2021) point out that SMEs continue to face market penetration and acceptability in both local and international, which has negatively limited their sustainability period in operation and further retarded their profitability and long-term viability. This is the what SMEs in Sierra Leone are experiencing. The constraint faced as a result of poor market accessibility is because SMEs operate in fragmented markets and the use of social media and internet among them is still low. SMEs that use social media networks to communicate directly with their customers perform better and produce better results because it helps reduce companies market-related uncertainty and risk, aids organizations' understanding of customer expectations or demands, and assists in the resolution of various other competitive issues (Al Halbusi, Alhaidan, Abdelfattah, Ramayah, & Cheahk, 2022). However, little is known for SMEs in Sierra Leone.

Consequently, this study would specifically examine the factors that influence the adoption of social media and internet and the impact it has on SMEs market accessibility and market share.

1.2 Aim Of The Study

The aim of the study is to investigate the adoption of social media and internet as a tool for improving the performance of SMEs in Sierra Leone.

1.3 Objectives Of The Study

- i. To examine the factors that influence the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone.
- ii. To determine the influence that the use of social media and internet has on SMEs market accessibility.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. What are the factors that influence the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone?
- ii. In what ways does the use of social media and internet influence SMEs market accessibility?

1.5 Significance Of The Study

The performance and growth of SMEs is important to policy makers such as the Government, Small and Medium sized Enterprises Development Agency. So this study would serve as a tool for policy makers to design policies that would assist

SMEs to adopt e-commerce, thus increasing their market reach. Findings from this study would help policy makers to understand the factors that have been impeding the adoption of internet and social media among SMEs in Sierra Leone.

Also, this research would be a valuable reference material for students, organizations and other interested persons who may want to undertake similar study. Recommendations made by this study would enable organizations to have more insights and better understanding on the impact of social media and internet in determining the performance, growth and sustainability of businesses especially SMEs in Sierra Leone. Finally, this study would help future researchers to investigate the link between SMEs performance and market accessibility due to the adoption of internet and social media.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Definitions of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

The definition or classification of small and medium enterprises differs from country to country (Gbandi & Amisah, 2014, p. 328), because different scholars and authors define SMEs differently. For this reason, there is no universally accepted definition for SMEs. Defining SMEs is extremely based on using either qualitative or quantitative parameters such as number of employees, total investment, sales turnover, capital outlay, market share, structure of operations, available plant and machinery (Ogechukwu, 2009; Aruwa, 2013).

In some countries especially European Union (EU) countries, it is based on number of employees, where as in other countries like Nigeria and Sierra Leone, it is based on capital employed, turnover and number of employees. However, there is variation in defining the upper and lower size limit of the SME' labour force (Abdulsaleh, 2016). SMEs are said to be a very heterogeneous group and they are found in a wide collection of business activities, constituting both informal and formal.

In Sierra Leone, enterprises are categorized or defined as large, medium, small and micro based on annual turnover and/or number of employees.

Table 1: Definition of SMEs in Sierra Leone

Enterprise	Annual turnover
Medium	More than 100 million Leones but not more than 500 million Leones
Small	Not more than 100 million Leones

Source: SMEDA Act of 2016

2.2 Factors Affecting the Adoption of Internet and Social Media among SMEs

Jibril et al., (2019) observe the challenges of social media adoption in most developed countries and revealed that these challenges have driven away SMEs from its usage than the traditional way. Chikandiwa, Contogiannis, & Jembere (2013) established that social media usage is a powerful marketing tool for SMEs but when not properly managed with good strategies and policies, might affect the brand image of the firm. Amoah & Jibril (2020) maintain that despite the valuable contributions

of social media, SMEs in recent times continue to face challenges through its adoption as an advertising and marketing tool for its products and services, particularly, in an emerging economy.

Amoah & Jibril (2020) conducted a study to examine the inhibitors characterized in the application of social media channels as an innovative tool for advertising and communication among SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in Ghana. They found out that the inhibiting factors affecting the adoption of social media were lack of managerial skills/marketing expertise, perceived cost, regular systems/links upgrade, and financial constraints are significant inhibiting factors affecting the application of social media as advertising and communication tools among SMEs in developing economy. Company's size and 'availability of social media channel/tool' significantly control for the outcome variable (internet/social media) as a marketing communication tool.

Rahayu & Day (2015) found out that perceived benefits, technology readiness, owners' innovativeness, owners' IT ability and owners' IT experience are the determinant factors that influence Indonesian SMEs in their adopting e-commerce. To add, limited financial and human resources are the reasons the adoption of IT by SMEs is rare as compared to large organizations that have enough resources (Islam & Nasira, 2017). Wamba & Carter (2014) conducted a study in USA, UK, Australia and Indian that investigated the factors that can motivate SMEs to adopt Twitter and found evidence of firm innovativeness, age and geographic location, which they conclude that these factors have a significant impact on Twitter adoption by SMEs.

Ainin et al. (2015) revealed that factors such as compatibility, cost effectiveness and interactivity were identified as factors that influence Facebook usage among SMEs. Dahnil et al. (2014) reviewed some academic literature and concluded that internal factors such as users and individual has been identified as a main contributor that affect the adoption. For SMEs, it is valid to include factors such managerial and organizational. As business environment and global economy factors are also important, thus to include such factors as external determinant is also relevant for future research direction.

2.3 The Uses of the Various Social Media Platforms in Businesses

The advent of the Internet and, more recently, of social media - where Internet users collaborate, share information and opinions - is the critical phenomenon of the last decade in communication (Mandelli & Mari, 2019, p.456). Defining social media, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010, p.61) point out that Social media is "a group of internet based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Laroche et al. (2012) later defined it as technologies and practices which people use to share knowledge and opinion.

Ekanem & Erukusin (2014) claim that the acceptance of social media tools, particularly Twitter, Bebo, YouTube, Facebook and many more has the ability to attract millions of users, many of which have integrated their daily practices with these sites and therefore giving businesses the chance of targeting and reaching millions of people through these sites with minimal cost. They cited that the first social network site launched in 1997 was called SixDegrees.com. This was trailed by others such as AIM and ICQ, Hi5, MySpace, Friendster, and LinkedIn (Armellini & Villanueva, 2011). Ainin et al. (2015) observe that Facebook can be applied in any businesses with no additional resources if they are already connected

Also, customers/consumers are capable of monitoring their favorite brands, post questions, and make comments related to services or products on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Yelp, and Instagram (Amoah & Jibril, 2021). According to Razali et al. (2018) the online business seems to be a new medium to enhance business, especially in achieving better performance and sustainability. Mandelli & Mari (2019) conclude that Social media can be the crucial communication channel (or better practice and culture) just when the crisis hits. However, they further suggest that it is important that managers learn how to integrate them strategically into the overall communication strategy.

2.4 Impact of Internet and Social Media on SMEs Performance

Razali et al. (2018) conducted a study that aimed at investigating the influences of effectiveness, competitive advantage and market accessibility on SME performance in Malaysia and found out that the internet which included of the online business can be a critical factor in enhancing SME market reach and its operational more efficiency.

In another study conducted by Ekanem & Erukusin (2014), wherein they critically analysed the emergence of social media (SM) and its impact on SME performance, the outcome of their study revealed that there is a relationship between the growth of a company's market share and the adoption of social media. There is also evidence that SM helps to improve sales figure, brand image and awareness. Also, the findings of this study also suggest that SM helps to improve communication between companies and customers.

To assess the use of social media as a promotional tool for SME development, Amoah & Jibril (2021) employed a nonprobability sampling technique for the collection of the data of which 648 respondents were dully accurate for the data processing/analysis. They found out that use of social media as an advertising tool has a significant effect on a firm's financial performance, business motivation, customers' perspective/attraction, and an increase in market share; these serve as a key in reflecting a positive change in their marketing and promotional activities in the consumer market.

Rahmana et al. (2016) explored the theoretical review of technological innovation on SME survival by looking at literature review with SME. The outcome of their study revealed that online customers are greater than the typical

offline customers. They conclude that the effect of online marketing via social media is more powerful and diverse due to its ability to reach customers regardless of geographical locations.

In their study “the Social media and entrepreneurship growth”, Jagongo & Kinyua (2013) investigated how social media can affect Market access; Customer Relationship Management (CRM); Innovativeness and found out that Social media tools provide greater market access and CRM which have a significant impact on the growth of SMEs. The outcome of their study revealed that social media had impact towards SME growth.

2.5 Research Gap

The empirical literature review done has shown that only few studies have been done to investigate the impact of social media and internet on the performance of small and medium enterprises. For example, the study done by Ekanem & Erukusin (2014) critically analyzed the emergence of social media and its impact on SMEs performance, which is similar to our study. However, our study is different from the previous study because our study would provide a wide scope of the impact of social media and internet on SMEs performance as well as the factors affecting the adoption of social media.

Also, similar studies have been conducted but they focus on the factors that motivate SMEs to adopt social media. Some only focus on one particular type of social media. For example, the study of Wamba & Carter (2014) was based on Twitter; the study of Ainin et al. (2015) was based on Facebook. Although the study of Amoah & Jibril (2020) focused on the inhibitors associated with the application of social media, they focus on its usage as an innovative tool for advertising and communication. There is a rare of literature that investigates concurrently the adoption of social media and internet, their benefits and the factors inhibiting their adoption.

This study therefore will contribute to the available literature in the area of social media and internet and fill the gap of the rare literature that has investigated concurrently the adoption of social media and internet, their benefits and the factors inhibiting their adoption

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design is the conceptual structure within which the research is conducted; it constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data (Mohajan, 2018). This study was done using descriptive survey design to help the researcher determine the relationships between the adoption of social media and internet and SMEs performance due to market accessibility, so as to come up with research conclusion. Descriptive research design was adopted because it finds answers to questions relating to what, who, where, how and when.

Population

According to Cooper & Schindler (2014), a population is a total collection of elements about which the researcher wishes

to make some inferences. The population of the study covered SMEs that operate in Freetown Central Business District (CBD). It captured those SMEs that have adopted internet and social media in their business activities.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Uakarn, Chaokromthong, & Sintao (2021) define a sample as a representative of the population that the researcher is interested in. Sampling is related with the selection of a subset of individuals from within a population to estimate the characteristics of whole population (Singh & Masuku, 2014). Sampling was therefore used because the population of the study was infinite and it was impossible to ascertain data from all the members due to time and others resources available. So the study was done on 50 (fifty) SMEs in Freetown CBD that have adopted internet and social media in their business activities. Convenience sampling technique was adopted to ascertain participants of the study. Convenience sampling was used because some study participants could not be easily accessed.

Data collection instrument

The study collected primary data through the use of questionnaires administered to study participants.

Data analysis and presentation

Data collected from study participants were fed into SPSS v26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were done. Data were presented in tabular form.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Results

The study had 98% response rate. Questionnaires were administered to fifty (50) SMEs. However, forty-nine (49) questionnaires were returned and therefore used for data analysis.

- I. What are the factors that influence the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone?

Results obtained from the questions asked to find answer to this research questions are presented below.

Table 2. Inadequate staff raining warrants the decision for the adoption of social media among SMEs

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	14	30.4%
Agree	19	41.3%
Neutral	3	6.5%
Disagree	10	21.8%
Total	46	100.0%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Based on the data analyzed and presented in table 2, fourteen (14) respondents which represent 30.4% of those who responded to this statement strongly agreed that inadequate

staff training usually warrants the decision for adoption of social media usage, nineteen (19) respondents which represent 41.3% agreed, three (3) respondents which constitute 6.5% were neutral and ten respondents which represent 21.8% disagreed. This therefore means that inadequate staff training warrants the decision for adoption of social media usage.

Table 3. Limited financial resource is a major challenge for SMEs to adopt social media as a new technology

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	23	50.0%
Agree	21	45.6%
Neutral	1	2.2%
Strongly disagree	1	2.2%
Total	46	100.0

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Table 3 demonstrates that limited financial resource is a major challenge for SMEs to adopt social media as a new technology. From the data presented in the table, twenty-three (23) respondents which constitute 50.0% of those who answered this statement strongly agreed that limited financial resources is a major challenge for SMEs to adopt social media as a new technology, twenty-one (21) respondents which constitute 45.7% agreed, one (1) respondents which constitute 2.2% each was neutral and disagreed to this statement.

Table 4. Inaccessibility of internet in most towns usually affects SMEs to use social media

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	26	56.5%
Agree	14	30.5%
Neutral	4	8.7%
Disagree	2	4.3%
Total	46	100.0%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Table 4 reveals that twenty-six (26) respondents, representing 56.5 of those who reacted to this statement strongly agreed that inaccessibility of internet in most towns usually affects SMEs to use social media, fourteen (14) respondents which constitute 30.5% agreed, four (4) of the respondents which constitute 8.7% and two (2) respondents representing 4.3% disagreed to this statement. This is an indication that inaccessibility of internet in most towns affects SMEs to use social media.

Table 5. The cost of internet is high for SMEs to adopt social media

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	28	57.1%
Neutral	4	8.2%
Disagree	17	34.7%
Total	49	100.0%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Table 5 shows that twenty-eight (28) respondents which constitute 57.1% agreed that the cost of internet is high for social media usage by SMEs, 17 respondents constituting 34.7% did not agree that the cost of internet is high for social media usage by SMEs and four (4) respondents which constitute 8.2% were indifferent. This means that the cost of internet is high for social media usage by SMEs.

II. In what ways does the use of social media and internet influence SMEs market accessibility?

The results obtained to provide answers to questions that investigated the influence of the use of social media on SMEs market accessibility are given in the tables below.

Table 6. The internet and social media enhances SMEs market reach

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	49	100%
Total	49	100%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Information in table 6 shows that the internet and social media enhances the market reach of SMEs. All the respondents, representing 100% of those who have adopted social media, either for advertising, brand building or marketing, agreed that social media and internet enhances their market reach.

Table 7. Social media has helped SMEs to reach out to customers beyond their immediate business places

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	43	91.5%
Somehow	4	8.5%
Total	47	100.0%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Based on the data presented in table 7, forty-three (43) respondents, representing 91.5% of the respondents who answered this question agreed that social media has helped them to reach out to customers beyond their immediate business place and four (4) respondents which constitute 8.5% agreed to a certain degree. This therefore means that the adoption of social media has helped SMEs to reach out to customers beyond their immediate business places.

Table 8. Social media tool has made more people to know about product or service of SMEs

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	43	89.6%
Agree	5	10.4%
Total	48	100.0%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Table 8 shows that forty-three (43) respondents which constitute 89.6% of those who responded to this statement strongly agreed that social media tool has made more people to know about their products or services and five (5) respondents which constitute 10.4% agreed to this statement. However, two

(1) respondents did not answer, so it was presented as missing system. From the analysis, it implies that social media tool has made more people to know about the products or services of SMEs.

Table 9. Social media tool has helped SMEs to reach out to their customers frequently

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	36	75.0%
Agree	12	25.0%
Total	48	100.0%

Field Data (2022) processed by SPSS v26

Table 9 shows that social media tool has helped respondents to reach out to their customers frequently. This is because thirty-six (36) respondents, representing 75.0% of those who responded to this statement strongly agreed and twelve (12) respondents, representing 25.0% agreed that social media tool has helped them to reach out to their customers frequently. Thus it is assumed that social media can help SMEs to reach out to their customers frequently.

4.2 Discussions

Factors affecting the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone

The study sought to determine the factors that affect the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone. The majority of the respondents agreed that inadequate staff trainings, limited financial resource, inaccessibility of internet in most towns and high cost of internet are the factors affecting the adoption of social media and internet among SMEs in Sierra Leone.

The various ways social media influence SMEs market accessibility

To establish the various ways social media and internet influence SMEs market accessibility, the study probed into the opinions of respondents based on four questions. All the questions have positive turnouts, implying that the internet and social media enhances SMEs market reach; social media has helped SMEs to reach out to customers beyond your immediate business place; social media tool has made more people to know about product or service of SMEs; and Table 8 Social media tool has helped SMEs to reach out to their customers frequently.

V. CONCLUSION

The study found evidence that the adoption of social media and internet as a tool can improve the performance of SMEs in Sierra Leone. The various ways social media can improve SMEs performance is by influencing SMEs market accessibility. Through social media SMEs can increase their market accessibility, which can increase the possibility of attaining higher sales. The finding that SMEs that adopt social media and internet enhance their market accessibility is in line with what Razali et al. (2018) found out when they conducted

a study that aimed at investigating the influences of effectiveness, competitive advantage and market accessibility on SME performance in Malaysia.

However, the adoption of social media among SMEs is low because of high costs of internet, inaccessibility of internet in some towns, inadequate staff trainings and limited financial resource. These were some of the factors that Amoah & Jibril (2020) identified as the inhibitors characterized in the application of social media channels as an innovative tool for advertising and communication among SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in Ghana.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion arrived at, the study therefore recommends that:

- SMEs conduct a cost-benefit analysis to compare the costs involved in using social media and the benefits they can get when they adopt social media. This can motivate them to fully accept this new way of doing business.
- Technologies can play significant role on SME development only when the SME owners have some basic education needed for the operation of the technologies. So, basic education is a must. This is because most of the SME owners possess little or no educational background, modern and complex technologies can be of no use to them.
- Training programs are required for getting the best out of the use of IT since it was found out that inadequate training warrants the decision of SMEs to use social media in their business activities.

Recommendation for Future Study

- This study is not closed. A future study can be done on the same topic but using a large sample size and/or different sampling techniques.
- A study can also be conducted to investigate the link between market accessibility and SMEs growth.

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