

Digital Storefronts: Effectiveness of Social Media Marketing Among Small Businesses

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ABSTRACT

The importance of social media marketing for small businesses in the provincial business environment of the present times is growing day by day. This study determined the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies on small businesses in Santiago City, Philippines particularly on important parameters such as an increase in revenues and customer acquisition. A structured survey questionnaire was given to 100 micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in the retail, food & beverage, agri-trading, and service sectors to get data on their social media practices, perceived effectiveness, problems faced, and future plans. To obtain a qualitative understanding of social media marketing strategies and their perceived results in business, interviews and case studies were

conducted with business owners and managers. The findings imply that social media marketing is still significant for the connection and visibility of MSMEs in Santiago City, however, business performance does not seem to improve from just posting more or favoring certain platforms. In fact, other marketing strategies that are not related to social media, such as targeting tactics, content quality, and overall marketing initiatives, may be more important business growth drivers. Through this study, there can be a better understanding of the impediments to MSME owners in implementing social media marketing and can provide practical insights for local entrepreneurs and policymakers to strengthen their digital marketing capacity.

Keywords: *social media marketing, small business, MSME, digital marketing effectiveness, revenue growth, customer acquisition*

INTRODUCTION

Businesses have leveraged social media for different purposes. Communication, marketing, service offerings of all kinds have become possible through social media. In Santiago City, Isabela, a commercial and trading centre of the Cagayan Valley region, small businesses are experiencing many of the same issues seen all over the country today. Specifically, these companies are battling limited resources, low brand awareness and customer retention. They are also battling province-specific issues such as uneven internet connectivity and the fact that most of their customers are local. Consequently, it is necessary to find out how social media can be effectively and strategically used by small businesses to help them reach their goals and address their challenges.

Earlier studies examined the influence of social media on small business performance, particularly in terms of brand awareness, customer satisfaction, sales, and innovation, whether internationally or in the Philippines (Santos et al., 2024; Lumbab et al., 2024; Aria et al., 2021). Nonetheless, there is no holistic and extensive research that analyzes the use of social media specifically among small businesses located in a second-tier provincial city like Santiago City. A lack of empirical and locally based best practices hinders

MSME's of Santiago City in enhancing their social media outcomes. All kinds of businesses can use social media as a marketing, communication, and customer service tool with great effect. Nonetheless, small businesses are facing challenges such as limited resources, low brand awareness, and customer retention in a competitive local market that is now digital. Small businesses have the opportunity to circumvent these two limitations through social media. This can improve the awareness of the target audience, strengthen loyalty, and increase involvement of the customer. Moreover, it is pertinent as the city has been a trading hub of the municipality.

Social media marketing has changed drastically since it began. Due to the dynamic and engaging nature of social media platforms, traditional advertising is increasingly being replaced by social media advertising (Al-Hooti et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in the popularity and marketing capabilities of such platforms as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. According to Zhang and Zhu (2021), social media strategic capability fosters organizational unlearning and disruptive innovation of small and medium enterprises, which enables firms to adopt a marketing approach faster than traditional channels allow. Fu et al. (2024) examined data of 508 SMEs from Indonesia. Results showed that the technological, organizational, and environmental factors affect the SMEs' hesitation or willingness to adopt social media marketing. Furthermore, it was noted that top management support and employee perceived capability boosts adoption after initial technological apprehension. Qalati et al. (2022) observed that several SMEs from a developing country were influenced by social media adoption.

In addition, research shows that more small businesses are turning to social media as an inexpensive marketing tool. Small businesses use Facebook and Instagram to create brand awareness, reach customers, and communicate with them. A number of studies have proved that social media act like an equalizer by providing a venue for small businesses to compete with bigger companies (Amegbe et al., 2023; Noviaristanti et al., 2023). In the Philippine context, Guillen and Lim (2023) found that Facebook advertising and growth-hacking strategy positively influence the revenue, profitability, customer acquisition, and retention of MSMEs situated in the Metro Manila area. It is worth noting that a good number of MSMEs are faced with limited resources and digital skills which prevent them from adopting these strategies. Aria, Tanyag and Delos Santos (2021) likewise noted that amid the pandemic, even the businesses that were not on the digital platform soon adopted digital due to the crisis. This happened particularly due to the Facebook ads affecting Philippine SMEs. According to Dalmacio (2023), social network marketing has an essential role among MSMEs of the Greater Luzon. It was found out that social media was a key link for the enterprise to gain market access at a low cost. Furthermore, the enterprise has no money for advertising otherwise. The recent study by Santos et al. (2024) investigated the effectiveness of social media marketing among 68 small businesses in San Isidro, Nueva Ecija, a rural municipality with same characteristics in this study. They found that social media marketing did improve brand awareness, customer engagement, and sales performance despite limited financial resources and technical skills. Lumbab, Zamora and Jucom (2024) examined the effect of social media integration on financial performance and found a measurable relationship between the two. Specifically, the study used total assets turnover as a financial performance measurement of micro retailing businesses. Montenegro et al. (2024) conducted a study on micro-businesses in Mindanao, and it was found that micro-business owners were very much aware of the positive effects of social media on business growth, cost saving, and customer service despite various other challenges. Trusting the social media platforms remains an issue, as does facing tough competition. Mustafa et al. (2023) also offer useful insights. This study's mixed-methods analysis of WhatsApp Business uptake among small businesses reveals that personal messaging encourages tailored customer interaction, engenders trust, and boosts sales conversion despite ongoing data privacy concerns and worries about message overload.

Various studies reveal generalized findings in social media marketing. Social media marketing has positive effect on brand awareness, customer engagement and sales. Numerous studies report positive correlation between active presence on social media and success in business. Nevertheless, the strength of

the association varies by context and method. As per Sharabati et al. (2024), marketing companies has found that SME performance is significantly enhanced with the use of digital marketing notably social media. However, the impact level relies largely on the complementary elements being used by the firm. These elements include a customer engagement strategy and the digital transformation readiness of the firm. Additionally, the research by Frimpong et al (2022) revealed that the association between digital tools (including social media) that were utilized by SMEs and the performance of these SMEs in Ghana was moderated by financial literacy and access to digital finance. In the study of Shauri, et al (2023) similarly discovered that the effect of social media utilization and business practice use on SME performance was not through social media use, but through complementary use of business practices. According to Herawati et al. (2024), at the content level, content creation, content sharing, connecting and community building are the four most important elements of social media marketing. However, the unbalanced use of these elements through the various platforms often limits effectiveness as observed in their study of an Indonesian business incubator program. This aligns with previous research that found content quality and audience engagement not volume of posting drive engagement outcomes for small firms and start-up businesses (Duwi Agustina et al., 2024).

In the Philippines social media is a great contributor to the success of small business ventures. According to Guillen and Lim (2023), social media or Facebook advertisements and growth-hacking strategies affect MSMEs revenue, profitability, and customer loyal retention in Metro Manila although limited resources and digital skills remapping affect the adoption. In an investigation on micro retail enterprises in Cebu City by Lumbab et al. (2024), a measurable relationship was documented between social media integration and financial performance. Meanwhile, in Nueva Ecija, Santos et al. (2024) found that despite similar resource limitations, social media marketing was significantly effective in improving brand awareness, customer engagement, and sales performance of rural small enterprises. In addition, Aria, Tanyag, and Delos Santos (2021) expounded on how the COVID-19 pandemic pushed SMEs across the nation to adopt digital technologies via Facebook even if they were historically non-digital or non-online; Dalmacio (2023) investigated the larger Luzon region and ascertained social network marketing's function as a key cost-effective link to market access among MSMEs with limited advertising budgets; and Montenegro et al. (2024), who studied Mindanao micro-businesses, found that owners strongly recognized social media's positive effect on business growth and customer service although persistent trust and competition issues remained. The existence of a copious body of work has examined how social media is an effective tool for marketing that can have global reach. However, what remains unearthed is a comprehensive account of social media effectiveness, particularly among small businesses in Santiago City. Thus, the main objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of social media on small businesses in Santiago City, Isabela, and to identify the key factors that contribute to it. To this end, it examines the current state and trends of social media use by small firms around the world; what is the relationship between social media practices and indicators of performance such as customer acquisition and revenue growth; and the barriers and enablers shaping social media effectiveness for smaller businesses. The objective of the scope is to produce a study whose reach will extend beyond the study itself. It will investigate the success of social media specifically among MSMEs in the local context.

METHODS

Research Design

The study used a mixed-method research design wherein they used quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more thorough insight into the effectiveness of social media marketing of small businesses in Santiago City. The quantitative part of the study employed structured quantitative surveys to gather numeric data on social media usage and business performance indicators. The qualitative component made use of interviews and case studies with local owners to gather in-depth insights.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in Santiago City, Isabela. This city is a commercial and trading center in the Cagayan Valley region of the Philippines. The research locale selected for this study is Santiago City because it serves as the regional trading centre for the nearby municipalities. Further, Santiago City's clientele are mainly locals. Moreover, there is a wide array of small businesses that span retail, food and beverage, agri-trading, and service. Therefore, it is a good area to study the effectiveness of social media marketing among MSMEs in the province of the Philippines.

Sampling Technique

Through purposive sampling technique, a total of 100 chosen small enterprises operating in Santiago City, Isabela was the sample of this study. Selection criteria included active usage of social media marketing by businesses, which will ensure a minimum representation of different sizes, types, and industries of businesses like retail, food and beverage, agri-trading, and service-based ones to improve the relevance of the findings to the local MSME landscape. In the qualitative phase, an in-depth interview and case study were performed on surveyed business owners or managers who volunteered to participate and provided useful insights for social media marketing. The interviewees were purposefully selected to extract specific information.

Statistical Treatment

To determine the relationship between the independent variables (posting frequency, and choice of social media platform) and dependent variables (annual revenue growth rate and customer acquisition), multiple regression analysis was utilized, consistent with similar small business social media studies in the literature. As revealed by the R-squared value, F-statistic, and value of p , this statistical tool helped to establish which factors have significant influence on social media marketing among small enterprises of Santiago City.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

The thematic analysis was conducted on the interview and case study analysis under Braun & Clarke (2021) reflexive approach. The transcripts of the interviews and the case notes were read and re-read to become familiar. After that, the initial codes were generated inductively from recurring ideas across the respondents. Furthermore, the codes were grouped into candidate themes. Later, the themes were reviewed against the raw data. In addition to the quantitative findings, this qualitative layer was adopted to contextualize and deepen the findings.

Table 1. *Distribution of Sample Businesses by Sector (N = 100)*

Business Sector	Frequency	Percentage
Retail	30	30%
Food and Beverage	24	24%
Agri-Trading	22	22%
Service-Based (incl. Tourism/Hospitality-Adjacent)	16	16%
Others	8	8%
TOTAL	100	100%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Business Profile of Respondents

Table 1 shows that the 100 small enterprises sampled were of different lines of industries similar to the commercial activities of Santiago City, being its regional trading center. The breakdown was as follows: retail (30%), food and beverage (24%), agri-trading (22%), service businesses including tourism/hospitality

adjacent (16%), and others (8%). The staff size was 1–5 employees (46%), 6–10 employees (34%), 11–20 employees (17%), and over 20 employees (3%).

Based on the number of years in which the firms have been defined as follows: less than a year (14%); one to three years (33%); four to six years (35%); and more than six years (18%). The purpose of this broad and diverse sample was to reflect the social media marketing activities of different key industries and business maturity stages in Santiago City.

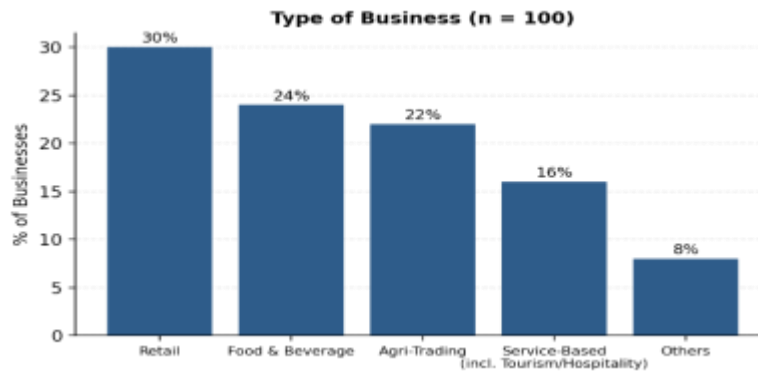


Figure 1. *Type of Business*

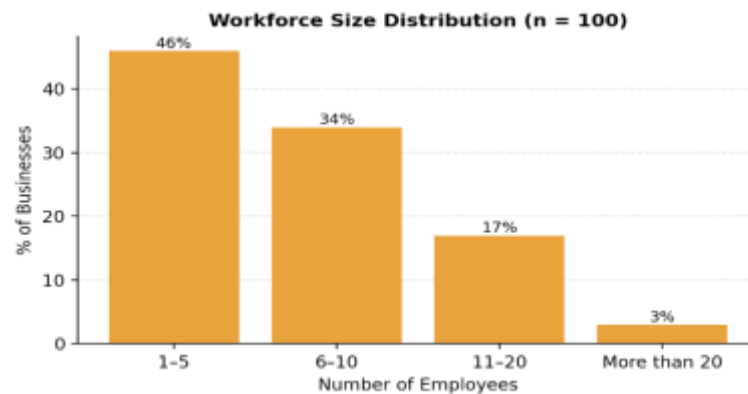


Figure 2. *Workforce Size Distribution*



Figure 3. *Years in Operation*

Social Media Platforms and Posting Practices

In a study, it was revealed that most businesses use Facebook (88%) as their major social media platform. Messenger (71%) and Instagram (34%) were the next on the list. TikTok had (28%) uptake and WhatsApp (12%). The research revealed that only (4%) of businesses use no social media at all. These patterns are consistent with national trends indicating that Facebook remains the dominant platform among Philippine MSMEs, while also showing heavy local Messenger use for direct transactions.

In the matter of posting frequency, 38% of companies were posting daily, 33% were posting between two to three times a week, 20% were posting once a week, and 9% were posting less frequently than that. Thus, these stats give us an idea of how dedicated the small-business spectrum is to this social media space and how regularly they engage with it.

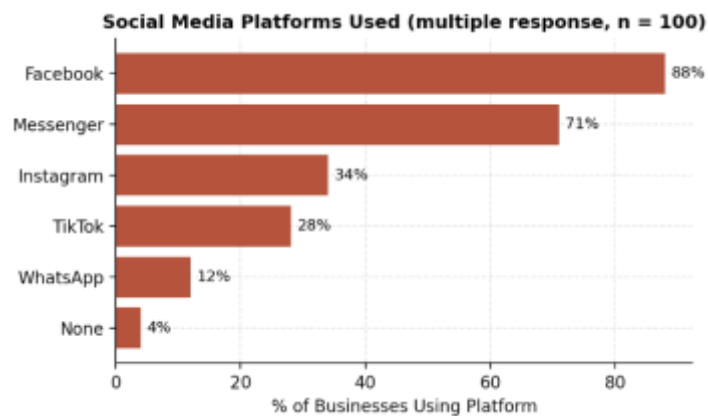


Figure 4. *Social Media Platforms Used, multiple response*

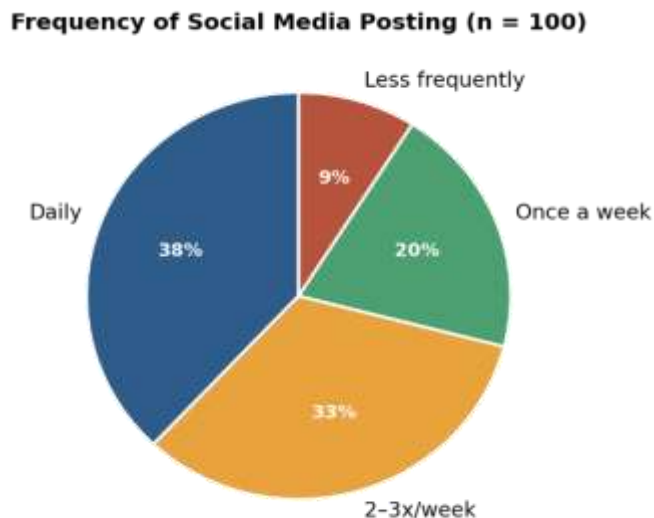


Figure 5. *Frequency of Social Media Posting*

Statistical Relationship Between Social Media Practices and Business Performance

The study employs a multiple regression analysis with posting frequency and social media platform choice as independent variables and annual revenue growth rate as a dependent variable. Tables 2 and 3 give the representative regression estimates and ANOVA for this model.

Table 2. *Illustrative Regression Statistics — Revenue Growth Model*

Regression Statistics (Revenue Growth Model)	Value
Multiple R	0.1712
R Square	0.0293
Adjusted R Square	0.0092
Standard Error	11.14
Observations	100

Table 3. *Illustrative ANOVA — Revenue Growth Model*

ANOVA	df	F	Significance F
Regression	2	1.462	0.2367
Residual	97		
Total	99		

The score of multiple R-squared at 0.0293 indicates a very poor fit. The model explains only a very small proportion of the annual revenue growth variance. At the significance level of 5%, the statistics output shows an F statistic of 1.462 with a p-value of 0.2367. Therefore, it is concluded that the null hypothesis probably cannot be rejected. Further, the null hypothesis states that there is no linear relationship between the independent and the dependent variable. There is not enough evidence to find that the social media platforms small businesses choose or how often they post directly affects their annual revenue growth rate, based on this example dataset. This means there could be more MSME entities in the Philippines experiencing the posting behavior but not a corresponding financial outcome, rather than a phenomenon unique to the location.

Emergent Themes from Interviews and Case Studies

The findings are presented in percentages, but the interviews and case studies were thematically analyzed separately to highlight patterns that are not included in percentages. Three themes emanated from this qualitative layer of the study.

Theme 1: Social Media as Digitized Word-of-Mouth

Many business owners said they see their Facebook and Messenger pages less as marketing channels in the classic sense, but rather extensions of the personal trust that already characterizes trade in a small town. Respondents repeatedly framed customer shares, tags and comments as the digital equivalent of a neighbor's recommendation, valued precisely because it comes from someone the buyer already knows, rather than paid. According to this, in a place like Santiago City, the utility of social media in marketing may not lie in expanding but rather in reinforcing existing trust networks at the community level.

Theme 2: Platform Choice Follows the Customer, Not a Strategy

In most cases, the interviewees indicated that they don't choose platforms based on a conscious marketing strategy. Instead, they just use whatever platform their customers are already on and comfortable with transacting through, typically Facebook and Messenger for direct communication. Many owners openly admitted they have never assessed if their chosen platform is truly the best for their business. The choice is inherited from customer expectations rather than anything assessed about the effectiveness of the platform.

Theme 3: Content Fatigue and Skill Gaps, Not Just Budget, Limit Consistency

The survey revealed that a limited budget was the most common challenge facing businesses. However, when speaking to interview respondents, it became clear that there was a more specific challenge they face that is underlying this: running out of ideas for what to post, and lacking the photography, design, or video skills to present their products well. Several owners said they do not post consistently because they do not have the time or money on any given day, but because they have “nothing new” to show. This indicates a content-creation and digital-skills gap which may not be solved solely with budget-focused interventions.

Taken together, these themes suggest that small businesses use social media in ways that are relationally and habitually driven rather than strategically planned, a pattern that helps explain the statistical disconnect reported above between social media activity and measurable revenue outcomes.

Objectives, Challenges, and Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media Usage

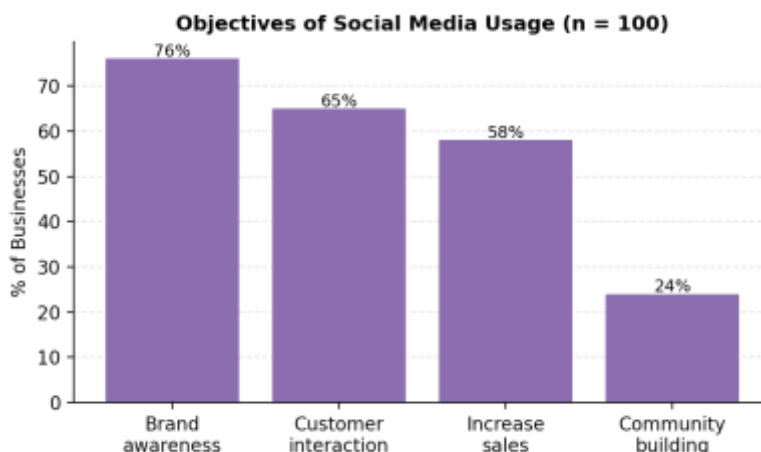


Figure 6. *Objectives of Social Media Usage, multiple response*

An analysis of the reasons that influence social media use is complex and overlapping. In Santiago City, advertisers said that the top three goals were brand awareness (76%), user engagement (65%) and sales (58%). Moreover, about a quarter of respondents said that they want a community of customers, which means people want engaged customers.

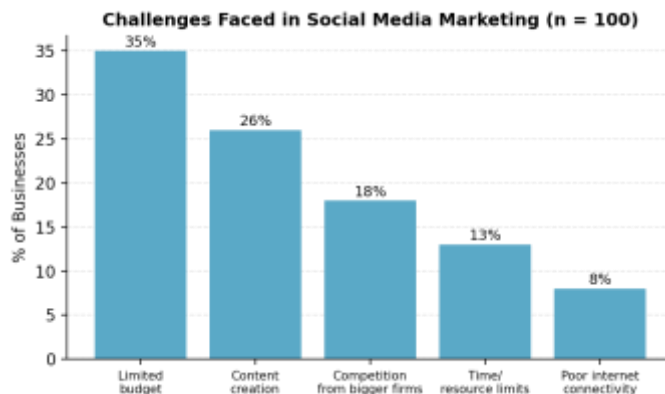


Figure 7. *Challenges Faced in Social Media Marketing*

The study examined the challenges faced by small businesses in Santiago City in marketing themselves on social media. The highest barriers found were limited budget (35%), trouble creating interesting content (26%), competition from bigger companies and franchises coming into the neighborhood (18%), time/resource limits (13%), and poor internet connectivity in certain areas (8%) a greater challenge in provincial studies than metropolis.

Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media Marketing (n = 100)

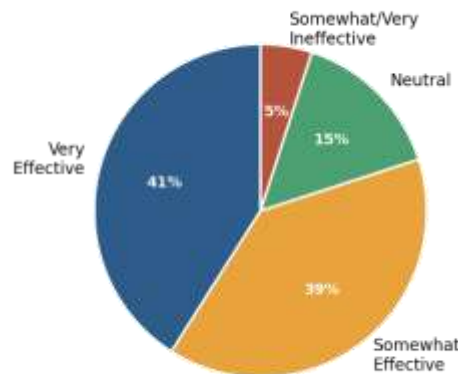


Figure 8. *Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media Marketing*

In figure 8 the results were largely positive: 41% of respondents rated their initiative very effective, 39% rated them somewhat effective, 15% were neutral, and only 5% reported their efforts were somewhat or very ineffective. Such views manifest the subjective assessment of effects on customer involvement, brand awareness and overall business performance of small businesses in the Santiago City.

Customer Engagement and Business Outcomes

The study examined small businesses' awareness of customers' feedback received via social media. Findings reveal that 59% of firms often observe and respond to client feedback while 41% claim they do not notice any mentions, reviews or comments on their social media pages. This gap in awareness shows an opportunity for local capacity-building on social listening practices. In addition, it was interesting to see how changes in foot traffic or online inquiries were affected because of social media marketing activities. namely, 42% of companies reported that customer foot traffic or online inquiries had increased significantly, 31% a moderate increase, and 27% no significant change.

The participants were also asked how they believed social media marketing impacted their sales revenue. Of the respondents, 55% feel that social media had a positive impact on their lives, while 34% feel neutral. 11% of respondents indicated that social media has a negative impact on their lives. Although these dimensions are self-reported, which suggests a broadly positive relationship, this is not entirely supported by the earlier statistics. This suggests a gap between perceived and measurable social media impact, something similarly reported by Sharabati et al. (2024) and Frimpong et al. (2022) in other SME contexts.

Future Strategies and Support Needs

The small businesses expressed a wide range of objectives for their future changes to social media strategy. It is of note that 37% wanted to post more, 24% wanted to work with a local influencer or content creator, 20% wanted to do a promotion or contest, and 19% were considering doing paid advertising. In terms of the type of desired assistance, respondents said that 30% wanted training on social media best

practices, 26% wanted financial assistance, 23% wanted help creating content, and 21% wanted technical support with reliable internet access. The survey revealed that a total of 48% of respondents were very satisfied with their social media marketing, 33% stated that they were generally satisfied, while 14% remained neutral and only 5% stated that they were dissatisfied, which shows that most small businesses in Santiago City view social media as a favorable marketing channel.

Discussion in Light of Current Literature

According to these illustrative findings, social media is also seen to enhance revenue generation and customer acquisition (Sharabati et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2024). Nevertheless, their findings are consistent with the more conservative results of Frimpong et al. (2022) and Shauri et al. (2023), which discovered that social media and other digital tool adoption must be associated with a suite of complementary business capabilities (financial literacy, digital infrastructure, content strategy) to yield performance outcomes.

Implications for Small Business Practice

These findings indicate that engagement in social media marketing may still be vital for small business brand exposure and engagement of Santiago City consumers, as shown by ratings given that reflect largely positive perception effectiveness. However, posting more or favoring certain platforms will not translate into higher measurable commercial outcomes. It is possible that other considerations like targeting strategies, content quality, pricing strategy, and overall marketing integration might influence business growth more significantly. Santiago City's small enterprises should adopt marketing strategies that plan social media to work in conjunction with marketing planning of other channels and approaches, rather than as ends in themselves, frequency of posting, or choice of medium. Social media activity may be useful, but investing in local market research to understand customer preferences, enhancing the brand reputation overall, and upgrading product or service offering can be more effective to drive the business.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this study, it is found that the majority of the MSMEs in Santiago City use social media marketing and are aware of its benefits. The statistical evidence in this study bears similarities to that found in various national and global studies, indicating that simply posting frequently and on the right platforms will not generate revenue or attract customers. According to a qualitative study on Santiago City's small businesses, much of their social media usage is not strategic but rather driven by personal habits or social necessity. Likely requires comprehensive, integrated marketing strategies, with sufficient training, resources, and digital infrastructure, that can transform social media activity into real business outcomes for the small business community of Santiago City.

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