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The adoption of social media platforms in tourism and hospitality marketing: The case of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Harare

Alick Mhizha *, Shepherd Nyaruwata, Takaruza Munyanyiwa, Golden Mandebvu

University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study which sought to establish the extent to which small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism and hospitality industry in Zimbabwe had embraced the use of social media platforms to enhance their marketing strategies. Using a structured questionnaire and interviews a survey was conducted among SMEs in Harare. The study revealed that SMEs surveyed had generally adopted social media platforms in their marketing communications systems though more still needed to be done for them to benefit effectively. From the interviews conducted and response rates in the questionnaire survey it was evident that businesses were not reaping maximum benefits from the use of the social media, given that they were not using the full range of platforms available as well as due to other circumstances beyond their control. The lack of resources and supporting infrastructure in the country made only those with access to connectivity capable of using Internet based platforms. The paper ends with recommendations that all stakeholders including Government join hands in support of SMEs in light of their incapacity to access financial and other resources necessary.

Keywords: Social media, Marketing, Strategies, Small and medium scale enterprises

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* Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* mhizhaa@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The advent of a wide range of social media platforms on which individuals and organisations can advertise and promote their products and services has indeed revolutionised the marketing communications function globally. Though these platforms first became popular with individuals seeking to reconnect with lost and current friends and acquaintances, they have of late become the darling of many organisations in light of the cheap and swift communication networks they come with. It is on the backdrop of such global developments that this research was conducted in Zimbabwe. The main goal was to establish the extent to which businesses in the country had moved with the times and followed international trends, which have seen the widespread adoption of social media platforms as vehicles for advertising and promotion. The research was carried out in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. The findings of the research and the relevant conclusions and recommendations are presented in this document.

2. Literature review

The development and adoption of information communication technologies (ICTs) in the tourism industry has dramatically transformed the way that tourism enterprises undertake their operations (Poon:1993,Buhalis and Soo:2009;Starkov and Safer;2011).The use of the internet by both the consumers and tourism organizations has had profound impact on the distribution channels of the product (Reino and Baggio :2013).The number of travellers using the internet to search for holiday information has been increasing in recent years. For example in 2010 the number was estimated at 2 billion (Poon: 2011) whilst estimates are that by 2016 the number will reach 3 billion (Buhalis: 2013).

When reviewing the literature on the adoption and use of Internet based marketing information systems in tourism Al-allack (2010) highlights a wide range of research findings that have shown how adoption of ICTs have helped to improve business decision making and business performance. Information Communication Technologies are widely being used for the on-line distribution of brochures, emailing messages to potential customers, sending out advertising messages, confirmation of bookings, distribution of product videos, distribution of newsletters and launching of new products (Karanasios:2007, Buhalis: 2013).

The growth of the use of the Internet in tourism marketing has further witnessed the use of the social media as a key communication tool with customers. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61)cited by Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012) define social media as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the World Wide Web (www) and that allow the creation and exchanges of user generated content” At present the major groups of social media are comprised of social networking websites Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, blogs, YouTube, Scrib, Flickr, micro blogs, Twitter, collaborative projects Wikipedia, Wikitravel and consumer review and rating sites such as Trip Advisor (Fotis et al).

Social media has become a major source of information for consumers globally with Facebook claiming a total of 750 million active users in 2011 and Twitter claiming a total of 175 million users in the same year (Fotis et al, 2012). In tourism, TripAdvisor indicates that it serves 50 million users per month who will be

searching for travel information as well as writing reviews about their holiday experiences (ibid). Social media have become a major source of information for consumers when planning holidays. Comments and reviews on the quality of services provided by different enterprises therefore influence the decisions of the potential tourists as to which destinations to travel to and which operators to use when purchasing holiday activities. For example in their study of Russian travellers Fotis et al (2012) found that 97% of the respondents had visited at least one social network site during the past twelve months and that 36% of the respondents had visited a social network site every day. The study concluded that social media are used throughout the holiday experience from the planning stage to the post-holiday period (ibid).

User generated content provides credible recommendations for enterprises. The consumers are therefore more empowered now than in the past in terms of how they receive marketing communication from enterprises. They need to feel that they have some control of the marketing messages they are receiving. They are therefore constantly searching for a balance between what the organizations are saying about themselves with regards to their products and services and what other consumers who have sampled those products and services are saying (Starkov and Safer: 2011). The use of social media is a key tool to ensure that customers receive a balanced view of the quality and value for money for services and products offered by organizations in the tourism industry.

Small and medium sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs) make up a high proportion of tourism operators globally (Scott et al: 2010). In both the developed and developing countries SMTEs have experienced a number of challenges in adopting the internet and social media networks as tools for marketing their services and products (Reino and Baggio: 2013, Duff: 2010, Shanker: 2008, Wanjau: 2012, Scott et al 2010). For SMTEs in the developed countries the key barriers to the use of the internet and social media include the following: lack of training in ICT, lack of management awareness of the usefulness of social media as a marketing tool, peripheral location of products and hence inability to access the internet, (Duff: 2010). In the case of SMTEs in the developing countries barriers to adoption of the internet and social media as marketing tools include the following: fear of technology, inadequate and unreliable telecommunication infrastructure, high costs of ICT hardware and software, limited ICT knowledge and skills (Karansios: 2007, Al-allack: 2010, Wanjau et al: 2012).

Within Africa very limited research has been undertaken to assess the level of adoption of the internet and social media as tools for marketing tourism products and services (Boateng and Hinson: 2007, Wiig: 2002, Potgieter, de Jager and van Heerden: 2010 and Maswera, Edwards and Dowson: 2009). Besides experiencing the challenges that other developing country SMTEs are facing the majority of African SMTEs have to deal with issues of inconsistent power supply, high costs of internet services and lack of appropriate government policies.

3. Research methodology

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods researchers administered a questionnaire with ten questions and conducted interviews with selected respondents. Registered small and

medium scale tourism and hospitality organisations' names were placed in a hat and a sample of 110 respondents was drawn at random. A total of 104 questionnaires out of the 107 that were returned were selected for consideration after 3 were rejected due to either incompleteness or inappropriate completion. A further sample of 40 respondents was drawn from the 110 for the purposes of gathering qualitative data through the interviews. Researchers approached respondents at their premises and asked them to complete the questionnaire and in the case of selected respondents an interview was also conducted.

4. Data presentation and analysis

The quantitative and qualitative findings of the research are concurrently presented in this paper. The concurrent analysis of the qualitative and quantitative findings enabled the researchers to obtain more information on the logic of responses to the questionnaire.

4.1. Reliability analysis

The questionnaire used to collect primary data was subjected to the Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis and the score of 0.759 was obtained as indicated in Table 1. Such a score is quite positive with regards to the reliability of information obtained.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.759	12

4.2. Demographic Data

The distribution of respondents according to gender is presented in Table 2 below. From the full set of respondents 61% were male while 39% were female.

Table 2. Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	63	60.6	60.6	60.6
Valid Female	41	39.4	39.4	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The age group 31-40 years formed the majority of respondents. Those aged 20 years and below were the least as indicated Table 3.

Table 3. Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 20 Years and below	4	3.8	3.8	3.8
21-30 Years	29	27.9	27.9	31.7
31-40 Years	48	46.2	46.2	77.9
41-50 Years	17	16.3	16.3	94.2
51 Years and above	6	5.8	5.8	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The classification of respondents according to their positions in their respective companies is presented in Table 4. The objective of gathering this information was to ensure that data were obtained from either the entrepreneurs themselves or those that have decision making powers within the organisations surveyed.

Table 4. Position

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Non-Managerial	54	51.9	51.9	51.9
Junior Manager	30	28.8	28.8	80.8
Senior Manager	20	19.2	19.2	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The range and nature of businesses are presented in Table 5. From the findings 63% were from the hospitality sector, 32% from the tourism sector and 5% from the recreation and leisure sector.

Table 5. Nature of business

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Hospitality	66	63.5	63.5	63.5
Travel/Touring	33	31.7	31.7	95.2
Recreation	5	4.8	4.8	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The number of employees per organisation is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Number of employees

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Less than 5 Employees	10	9.6	9.6	9.6
5-10 Employees	31	29.8	29.8	39.4
11-15 Employees	42	40.4	40.4	79.8
16-20 Employees	13	12.5	12.5	92.3
21 Employees and above	8	7.7	7.7	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The years that the organisations had been operating are presented below.

Table 7. Number of years operating

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1-2 Years	17	16.3	16.3	16.3
3-5 Years	34	32.7	32.7	49.0
6-10 Years	41	39.4	39.4	88.5
11-15 Years	10	9.6	9.6	98.1
More than 15 Years	2	1.9	1.9	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

4.3. Research findings

Fig 1 below presents the response rates for the selected social media platforms. From the set used Facebook, Whatsapp, Skype and YouTube were the most commonly used, while the least used were blogs and Reddit. This is an indication that SMEs appreciate the effectiveness of these platforms in showcasing what they have on offer. In the interviews entrepreneurs expressed that lack of resources and efficient connectivity hindered them from fully exploiting other platforms. Some indicated that they only worked with those platforms they believed were accessed by their potential customers.

Figure 1 show the range of responses to the set of questions in the questionnaire.

Figure1. Percentage of respondents per identified social media platform

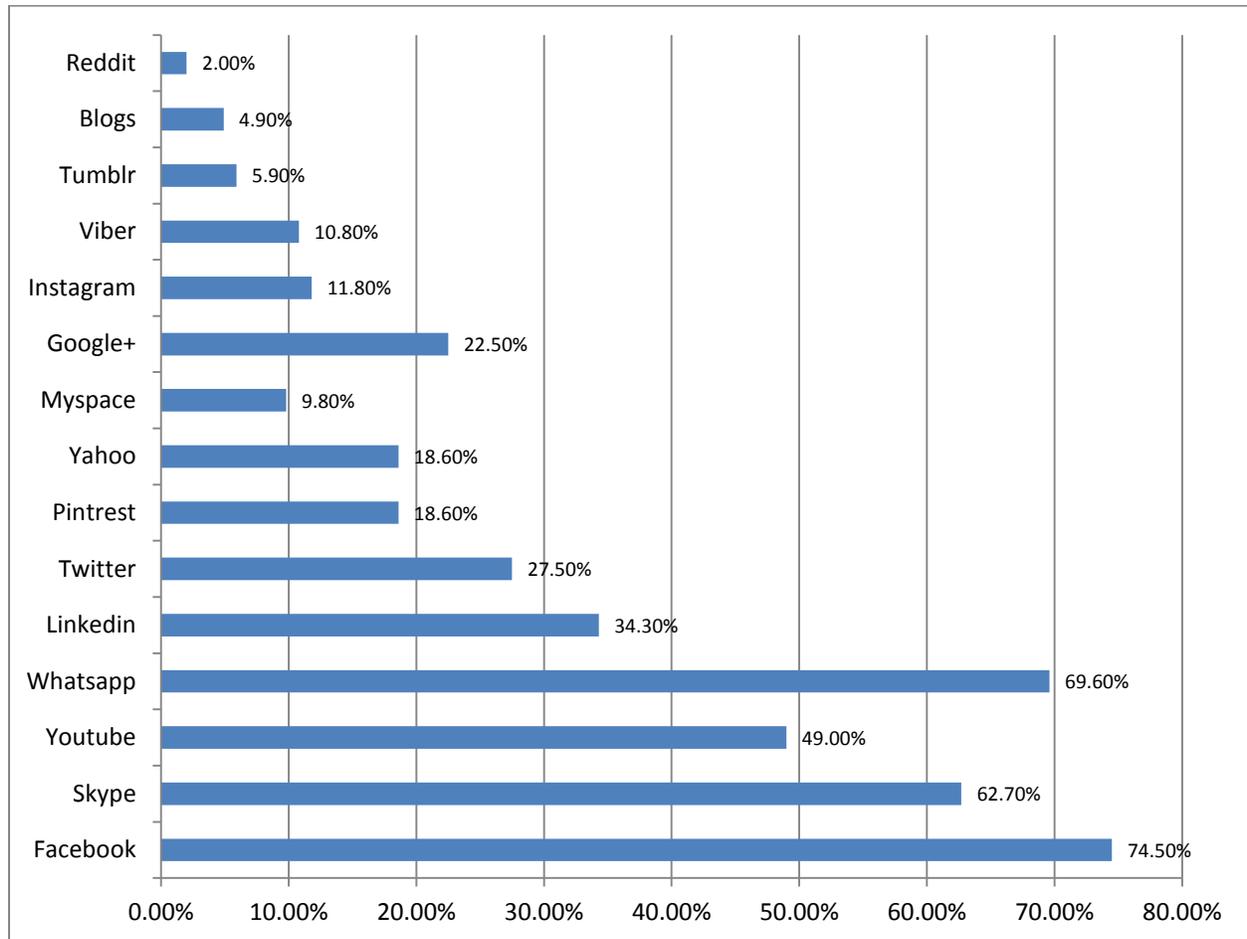


Table 8. "My organisation officially uses social media platforms to market its products and services"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	9	8.7	8.7	8.7
Disagree	11	10.6	10.6	19.2
Valid Neutral	8	7.7	7.7	26.9
Agree	34	32.7	32.7	59.6
Strongly Agree	42	40.4	40.4	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The response rate showed that more than 70% of respondents were from organisations that had embraced the use of the social media in their marketing efforts.

The data presented in Table 9 are based on the research questions in the questionnaire.

Table 9. "The using of social media platforms is helping my organisation connect with its clients and stakeholders"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	7	6.7	6.7	6.7
Disagree	12	11.5	11.5	18.3
Valid Neutral	21	20.2	20.2	38.5
Agree	29	27.9	27.9	66.3
Strongly Agree	35	33.7	33.7	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

More than 60% of respondents saw social media platforms helping their organisations connect with their clients. Those in the negative could be those businesses that target walk-in clients and that do not seek to establish relationships with their customers. From the information gathered in the interviews, such businesses tended not to have fixed premises nor specific line of business they specialised in. They were opportunistic in nature dealing in anything that was popular with people at the time.

Table 10. "Social media platforms help enhance a company's marketing communication strategies"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	4	3.8	3.8	3.8
Disagree	11	10.6	10.6	14.4
Valid Neutral	16	15.4	15.4	29.8
Disagree	33	31.7	31.7	61.5
Strongly Agree	40	38.5	38.5	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The majority of respondents agreed with the statement and this is not surprising given that in the interviews respondents expressed that social media platforms had transformed their marketing communication strategies significantly and for the better.

Table 11. "Marketing communications through social networks are faster and more efficient than traditional means"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	2	1.9	1.9	1.9
Disagree	15	14.4	14.4	16.3
Valid Neutral	18	17.3	17.3	33.7
Disagree	25	24.0	24.0	57.7
Strongly Agree	44	42.3	42.3	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

This is a known fact for those organisations that have effectively embraced this form of business communication and networking. It is however necessary to explain the 16.3% that was in the negative and the 17.3 that was neutral. Organisations that do not use social media platforms would naturally be in this category while those that view social media as informal and not serious enough for business also find it ineffective. In the interviews some respondents were of the opinion that lack of capacity to operate technological gadgets and lack of resources to acquire them made some entrepreneurs reluctant to entertain the use of social media platforms.

Table 12. "My clients appreciate my organisation's use of social networks in marketing"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	4	3.8	3.8	3.8
Disagree	12	11.5	11.5	15.4
Valid Neutral	23	22.1	22.1	37.5
Disagree	38	36.5	36.5	74.0
Strongly Agree	27	26.0	26.0	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The outcome here is consistent with the general trend of responses showing that those that use social media are reaping benefits and their clients like it.

Table 13. "The use of social networks by our organisation has positive effects on its image"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	3	2.9	2.9	2.9
Disagree	11	10.6	10.6	13.5
Neutral	29	27.9	27.9	41.3
Valid Disagree	47	45.2	45.2	86.5
Strongly Agree	14	13.5	13.5	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The response rate here is quite interesting given the general belief that social media platforms are associated with jokes, lack of seriousness and informal activities. The outcome shows that SMEs surveyed had accepted social media platforms as a way of communicating with their clients and doing business.

Table 14. "Social media platforms should remain social, they have no place in business marketing"

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	39	37.5	37.5	37.5
Disagree	27	26.0	26.0	63.5
Valid Neutral	25	24.0	24.0	87.5
Disagree	9	8.7	8.7	96.2
Strongly Agree	4	3.8	3.8	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The response rate here emphasises the fact that businesses in Zimbabwe have indeed accepted social media platforms as a vehicle for the enhancement of their marketing communications strategies.

Table 15. The ICT Network infrastructure in Zimbabwe supports the use of social networks in businesses

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	2	1.9	1.9	1.9
Disagree	5	4.8	4.8	6.7
Valid Neutral	10	9.6	9.6	16.3
Disagree	31	29.8	29.8	46.2
Strongly Agree	56	53.8	53.8	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

Table 16. Entrepreneurs and their staff need training for them to make full use of social media platforms

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	17	16.3	16.3	16.3
Disagree	23	22.1	22.1	38.5
Valid Neutral	30	28.8	28.8	67.3
Disagree	20	19.2	19.2	86.5
Strongly Agree	14	13.5	13.5	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

The almost balanced nature of the response rate in this statement means that although some training is going on there is still need for training of entrepreneurs for them to take full advantage of social media platforms. In light of the nature of technology one can never say that training is no longer necessary if we consider the rate at which new technologies are developed.

Though respondents feel organisations are taking full advantage of social media platforms interviews with experts in social media communications revealed otherwise. According to them small businesses in Zimbabwe were only benefiting marginally if one considered the amount of opportunities that exist in the use of social media platforms. Experts recommended the establishment of IT empowerment programmes for SMEs during which training on the application of IT resources would be done. In their view this would ensure the meaningful and profitable application of wide ranging ICT resources in SMEs.

Table 17. Entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe do not take full advantage of social networks to market their businesses

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	7	6.7	6.7	6.7
Disagree	14	13.5	13.5	20.2
Neutral	15	14.4	14.4	34.6
Disagree	39	37.5	37.5	72.1
Strongly Agree	29	27.9	27.9	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

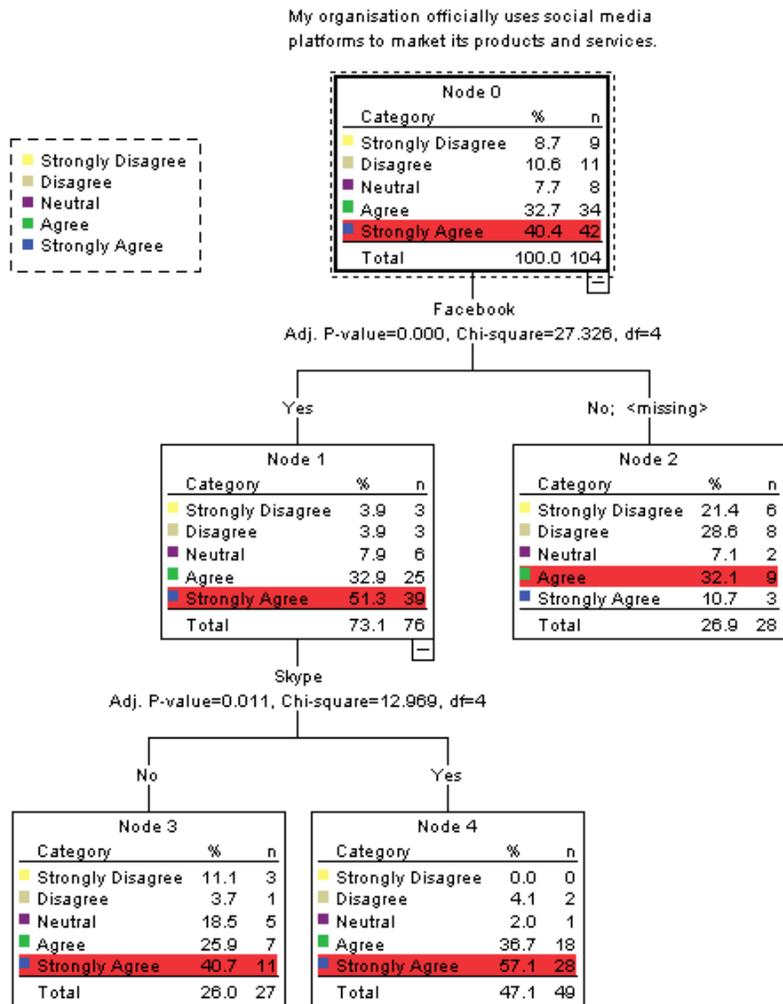


Figure 2. Decision Tree Analysis

Decision tree analysis revealed that Facebook remains the most popular platform among SMEs in Zimbabwe and that those using it were likely to use other platforms. As revealed in the interviews, those who did not use Facebook were either not using another platform or were just occasionally using the identified platform. Figure 2 above presents the outcome of the decision tree analysis.

5. Conclusions

- SMEs in Zimbabwe have generally embraced the use social media platforms to market their products and services though more needs to be done to ensure that they reap maximum benefits from this move.
- Facebook is the most popular platform used by businesses in the sample.
- SMEs still need to appreciate the potential benefits from use of other platforms other than Facebook
- Lack of resources hinders SMEs from fully adopting social media platforms as a means of marketing their products and services.
- Facebook, Whatsapp, Skype and YouTube are more popular than other platforms.
- SMEs use platforms they know are popular and commonly used by their target markets.
- The unavailability of connectivity across the country makes internet based marketing platforms the preserve of the few that have access.
- Lack of knowledge and capacity impedes entrepreneurs from taking full advantage of social media platforms in their marketing efforts.

6. Recommendations

- Stakeholders that support SMEs need to develop training and capacity development programmes to enhance the Internet skills of entrepreneurs.
- Seminars and workshops need to be organised to ensure that entrepreneurs appreciate the potential benefits of marketing through social media platforms.
- Government and other supportive stakeholders need to provide empowerment and support programmes to SMEs to encourage the use of Internet based platforms in the marketing of products and services.
- A coordinated approach focusing on capacity enhancement and sustainable support systems could be developed through the joining of hands by stakeholders at different levels as illustrated in the Table 18.

Table 18. Stakeholder Cooperation in Support of SMEs

Stakeholder	Possible support for SMEs
Government	Infrastructure, policies and enablement: ensuring a conducive environment for the use of social media platforms in SMEs.
Non-governmental organisations	Capacity development: Running training workshops for the benefit of small businesses.
Media	Sensitisation and promotion of the concept and popularisation of the benefits of using such media.
Private sector	Infrastructure and resources: Provision of gadgets and products that support the use of social media at affordable prices.
Representative Associations and bodies	Encouragement: Lobbying and advocacy initiatives and provision of information to enhance knowledge.
Local authorities	Enablement: Provision of space for SMEs to operate freely and be accessible to their customers.

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