



Social Networking Sites: A panacea for enhancing productivity in the organisation during Covid-19 crisis, the case of tourism SMEs in South Africa

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Abstract

Social networking sites are regarded as useful catalysts for enhancing organisational work productivity and creativity. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spin-offs associated with these particular platforms have become even more evident. Consequently, this study sought to explore the added benefits of using social networking sites to improve the work productivity and creativity of selected urban tourism-related Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the City of Tshwane, South Africa. The exploration of the research questions of the study suggests a theoretical framework that consists of key elements of diffusion and adoption of technology. As a result, Roger's Diffusion of Innovations Theory proved to be most applicable as it offers a relevant analytical framework for the dissemination and adoption of technology. The study adopted a qualitative approach by conducting interviews with a targeted population of SME service providers in the context of Pretoria (Tshwane) in the Gauteng province. The sample consisted of 50 such service providers that were selected using purposive sampling. Sampled SMEs included: 20 "bed and breakfasts", 20 guest houses, and 10 tour operators. Interviews were then conducted with their relevant managers. The data were analysed using open coding, where dominant themes from the discussions were identified and discussed in detail. Findings indicate that a variety of social networking sites have been adopted by the tourism sector to enhance work productivity. These sites have changed the way SMEs operate, especially with regard to communication and marketing techniques.

Keywords

Social networking sites; social media; Web 2.0; Information and Communication Technology; organisational communication; Small and Medium Enterprise

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Due to the coronavirus 2019, popularly known as the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses all over the world are currently suffering from unprecedented labour force disruption. According to Statistics South Africa (2020), this has severely affected the tourism sector on both a global and local level. This has had an unprecedented negative impact on the tourism industry that resulted from the mandatory lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed in most countries. For instance, on 16 March 2020, the President of the Republic of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced that measures were to be adopted to combat the spread of the virus in this country. Over and above its visible effects on public health, COVID-19 has undoubtedly caused a serious worldwide economic shock. Consequently, organisations have had to deal with overwhelming, competing challenges and uncharted waters as, even now, they continue to navigate their way through the impact of this pandemic. According to Bartik, Bertrand, Culle, Glaeser, Luca and

Stanton (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic started triggering colossal disruption among SMEs just several weeks after its onset, prior to the availability of government relief grants and solidarity funds. These unprecedented circumstances have been forcing organisations to accelerate digital transformation in order to survive.

The global COVID-19 crisis has compelled organisations to re-evaluate not only how employees perform their duties, but also how to adopt virtual channels for the survival of businesses during and beyond this crisis. It is worth pointing out that this acceleration will push businesses to revisit their particular digital strategies in order to effectively attract and absorb new marketplace opportunities and virtual customer segments. It must be said that even before the pandemic, many businesses had been faced with sizeable Information and Communication Technology (ICT) challenges (Bartik et al., 2020). Subsequently, COVID-19 has been forcing businesses to implement new methods, and, as a result, ICTs are being visibly evaluated like never before. A thorough search of the literature shows that many organisations have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways and to unpredictable degrees of severity. The latter can be attributed to the fact that certain industries have put in place stronger defensive mechanisms than others.

The problem investigated by this study results from the serious and negative impact that this pandemic has had, and is still having, on many organisations. Businesses are forced to navigate both financial and operational challenges related to COVID-19, while also having to address the needs of their employees, customers, and suppliers. Additionally, it is important to note that customers' demand patterns are clearly changing and the ways in which organisations operate have been visibly disrupted. Thus, businesses are being forced to unremittingly adapt to new and unreliable market conditions. While this pandemic has crippled the world economy, it continues to ravage many organisations and wreak havoc, resulting in many people having lost their jobs; worrying is that scientists have predicted that the worst is yet to come (Li, Huang, T., Wang, Y.Q., Wang, Z.P., Liang, Huang, T.B., & Wang, Y., 2020).

In light of such challenges, numerous researchers have identified social networking sites as fundamental catalysts for enhancing organisational work productivity and creativity. In line with the views above, Beier and Wagner (2016) observe that social networking sites are currently playing a critical role in many organisations – a view that is supported by Ainin, Parveen, Moghavvemi, Jafaar and Shuib (2015), who argue that such sites enable employees to perform their duties regardless of location and time while practicing social distancing, since many organisations have allowed their staff members to work from home. Therefore, this study set out to explore of the manner in which social networking sites may develop work productivity and creativity in selected tourism SME service providers within the specific setting of the City of Tshwane. To effectively realise the above-mentioned aim, the study endeavoured to answer the following questions:

- Firstly, what types of social networking sites are being adopted by the tourism SME providers to enhance their work productivity and creativity during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Secondly, how do tourism SMEs benefit from using such sites in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A thorough exploration of the literature indicates that there is a variety of social media applications that can be used by SMEs to enhance their work productivity and creativity, both during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Social networking sites

Social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are being used by many people and organisations daily. The main purpose of these platforms is to help individuals to interact with families, friends, brands and customers (Thelwall & Vis, 2017). In line with above views, Rugova and

Prenaj (2016) observe that social networking sites foster knowledge-sharing and are mainly concerned with personal, human-to-human interaction. Furthermore, there are numerous benefits to using such platforms. For instance, they enable users to share thoughts, upload photos and videos, curate content, form interest-based groups and participate in lively and interactive discussions (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015). Subsequently, there are numerous ways in which these sites can add value to businesses, which are outlined below.

Advertising

One of the most obvious benefits of using social networking sites is the immediate reach organisations have of their target audiences through advertisements (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015). This can be attributed to the fact that social networking sites cultivate large and visibly diverse communities. In addition, social networking sites enable advertisers to rent permission to engage with people, based on specific targeting metrics (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). Jagongo and Kinyua (2013) support this by noting that certain social networking sites are used by users of certain age groups. For example, a business that seeks to reach predominantly young people could use an application such as Snapchat to advertise its products and services, while organisations that intend to reach or interact with professional audiences are more likely to use LinkedIn, since it is more suitable (McCann, & Barlow, 2015) to their needs. Another benefit for businesses utilising such sites is that the latter tools are exceptionally data-rich (Ainin et al., 2015). Through the use of social networking sites, organisations can reach numerous individuals without having to spend a great deal of money. Moreover, these sites play a crucial role in enabling organisations to potentially foster and facilitate networks with countless clients of their own (Ainin et al., 2015). In support of these views, Jagongo and Kinyua (2013) also note that these sites enable organisations to reach out to and engage with their followers, find and/or identify like-minded clients, customers or potential business partners through using hashtags and groups to build strong and long-lasting connections. The above views are also shared by Karimi and Naghibi (2015), who argue that social networking sites play a pivotal role in enabling businesses to conduct research on their customers and the kind of services they would like to receive from the relevant organisation.

Social review sites

The first (and most important) thing people do when planning a trip or buying a new product is to check relevant reviews posted by other travellers or buyers. According to Nicoli and Papadopoulou (2017), review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor have the capability to display reviews of their community members relating to a diverse variety of locations and experiences. These reviews eliminate the unnecessary guesswork likely to arise when booking a hotel or restaurant (O'Connor, 2008). It is, therefore, important to note that businesses may undoubtedly benefit from studying reviews, since they emphasise both the positive and negative. This is supported by Yoo, Sigala and Gretzel (2016), who argue that reviews posted by customers on an organisation's social networking sites enable the business to understand the perspective of its customers. Reviews are important because they allow the organisation to glean relevant information about customers' experiences and viewpoints. Likewise, Nicoli and Papadopoulou (2017) are of the opinion that reviews assist businesses to identify which areas are working and which need improvement. In line with this, O'Connor (2008) further argues that reviews provide the organisation with an opportunity to interact with their customers and resolve any problems before they can become a serious challenge.

Image sharing sites

Image sharing sites are another resource that continues to help organisations transform and enhance their work productivity and creativity. A recent study by Effendi, Sugandini and Istanto (2020) observes that visual content such as images, illustrations and infographics can be effectively, and easily, used to capture people's hearts, eyes, and imaginations. Similarly, Meske and Stieglitz (2013) argue that social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram are designed to amplify the power of image sharing

in a simple way. According to Wamba and Carter (2016), such sites enable users to curate, create and share exclusive images that trigger conversation. This is echoed by Dutot and Bergeron (2016), who argue that pictures are particularly important to businesses because they are “worth a thousand words” to the organisation. Consequently, organisations can use these particular sites to effectively encourage user-generated content (AlSharji, Ahmad & Bakar, 2018), which suggests that these sites play a significant role in photogenic businesses. An example of such a benefit is that almost any organisation can run campaigns encouraging users to snap and share a picture promoting its product. Moreover, these particular sites can further assist organisations to inspire their specific customers. Fraccastoro, Gabriellsson and Pullins (2021) share this view and argue that through image-sharing sites the organisation can engage and inspire its targeted customers.

Video hosting sites

There is no escaping the fact that YouTube continues to revolutionise the way people create, watch and think about videos. This platform has changed and upgraded the medium of video from being obscure to something being easily and conveniently accessible by most people (Alobaid, 2020). This accessibility can be seen in examples such as Vimeo and YouTube, which enable users to create or produce content and make it accessible on a platform that is optimised and designed for streaming (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016). As a result thereof, video has become an important medium. In the light of this, organisations can use video hosting sites to share phenomenal content (Djafarova & Kramer, 2020) and these sites further enable users to create communities and make their content available online, and – in so doing – reach millions of people. As such, video hosting sites are capable of fostering engagement between the community and the organisation (Djafarova & Kramer, 2020). For instance, YouTube’s comment section enables specific organisations to take note of the kind of people watching (consuming) their relevant products and services.

Community blogs

Community blogs, as social networking sites, have been buttressed by numerous scholars and social media experts as change agents when it comes to information sharing (Dame, 2016). According to Attu and Terras (2017), it is important to note that shared blogging platforms, such as Tumblr and Medium, provide users with a space to express their views and assist with linking them to their readers. Similar sentiments are expressed by Bury, Deller, Greenwood and Jones (2013), who argue that community blog platforms play a significant role in providing users with an audience, while, at the same time, fostering them and allowing them adequate room for self-expression and customisation. In support of these sentiments, Dame (2016) further observes that these sites enable organisations to develop their own unique voice. On the other hand, Attu and Terras (2017) argue that while starting a blog can be an overwhelming task, a variety of organisations are using this to enhance their work creativity. In addition, Bury et al. (2013) opine that sites such as Medium and Tumblr can be used by organisations to clearly share their vision with audiences. One of the most glaringly obvious benefits of using community blog sites is that they enable organisations to process and manage syndicate content. For instance, should an organisation not have a blog, it can simply make use of community blogging sites to re-purpose, share, and re-post older/previous content and draw a new audience (Attu & Terras, 2017; Bury et al., 2013; Dame, 2016).

Discussion sites

Discussion sites are yet another form of social media that may play a key role in organisations by triggering conversations (Latack, Adidharma, Moog, Satterwhite, Hadj-Moussa & Morrison, 2020). The most common discussion sites include Quora and Reddit, which are precisely and specifically designed to trigger conversation (Roundtree, 2018). While one of the benefits of these type of platforms is that anyone can pose a question or craft a statement to entice people with common curiosities and interests (Cho & Wash, 2021), Latack et al. (2020) argue that, in contrast to well-known social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, users tend to share extraordinarily little detectable information. According

to Roundtree (2018), discussion sites, such as Reddit, have played a crucial role in research. For instance, since the above-mentioned site consists of diverse sub-communities, organisations can use it to identify and interact with people interested in its products and services, with the aid of only minimal research (Cho & Wash, 2021). In addition, organisations can use these sites to establish what information customers require about their particular products and services. Roundtree (2018) further states that such critical information can be used by businesses as a base for relevant content marketing strategies since they are mainly used by organisations to answer questions posed by customers and potential clients. However, research by Cho and Wash (2021) indicate that Quora users tend to pose numerous questions regarding organisations' products and services; therefore, it can be assumed that that responding to these questions may assist individual organisations to establish themselves as thought leaders and, consequently, invite too much traffic to their organisational website.

Sharing economy networks

Sharing economy networks is another type of social media platform regarded by numerous scholars and enthusiasts as fundamental to the tourism sector (Kirchner & Schüssler, 2019). The benefits of networks such as Rover and AirBnB not only include finding low-cost holiday rentals, but also connect individuals wanting to share information with people with similar interests (Crommelin, Troy, Martin & Pettit, 2018). Cheng and Foley (2019) support this by arguing that one of the added values of such sites is that they provide opportunities that would not otherwise exist, by pooling resources on a scale inconceivable without technology.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The exploration of the research questions of the study suggests a theoretical framework that consists of key elements of diffusion and adoption of technology. As a result, Roger's Diffusion of Innovations Theory proved to be most applicable, as it offers a relevant analytical framework for the dissemination and adoption of technology. According to Rogers (1995:22), "innovations are more readily adopted when they provide a relative advantage to older ideas, and even more so if they are compatible with the existing value system of the adopter". This implies that SMEs are more likely to use social networking sites if they are made aware of the associated benefits. Research by Roger (1995) notes that "There are certain characteristics that determine the rate at which an idea is adopted by a social system", while Clarke (1999:01) states that "the theory attempts to explain the patterns of adoption of innovations, explain their mechanisms, and assist in predicting whether or not a new invention will be successful". The former (1995:25) further defines diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system". According to Rogers' research (1995:05), "This theory is crucially a social process in which subjectively perceived information about a new idea is communicated and rests on the premise that a new idea, practice, or object has perceivable channels, time, and a mode of being adopted by individuals or organisations".

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

A qualitative approach was adopted to conduct interviews with a targeted population of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), namely urban tourism service providers located in Pretoria, in the Gauteng province of South Africa. This city, also known as the City of Tshwane, was targeted for its diverse tourism-related businesses including bed and breakfast establishments, hotels, travel agencies and easily accessible transport, to name but a few. This was done to engage and encapsulate different viewpoints of the study's target population pertaining to the impact of social networking sites on tourism, as well as the extent to which such sites have been adopted by this said sector. The sampling frame consisted of 100 tourism SMEs registered with the Gauteng Tourism Authority. The sample consisted of 50 tourism SME service providers that were selected using purposive sampling. Sampled SMEs included: 20 "bed

and breakfasts", 20 guest houses and 10 tour operators. Interviews were conducted with managers of the relevant organisations/establishments and provided participants with an opportunity to share and reflect on their experiences concerning the diffusion and adoption of social networking sites by their respective SMEs. Interviews lasted between ninety minutes and one hour and were held virtually through MS Teams and Zoom platforms. The data were analysed using open coding, which identified and discussed the dominant themes in detail. Data analysis was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the researcher engaged "open coding" to generate thematic categories in order to reduce large passages of text to principal concepts. During the second phase, the researcher engaged "axial coding" focused on relating concepts to subcategories, and finally, to each other to form more concrete codes for analysis.

In terms of ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from each participant involved in the study to ensure that they understood the scope of their participation and verified their willingness to participate. The participants were assured of their rights, including the right of consent, protection from disclosure of information, and respect for their privacy. All participants participated voluntarily and were not forced to take part in the study. The researcher was committed to ensuring participants were protected from harm and thus made sure that they were not exposed to any risk or embarrassment, unusual stress, or any demeaning treatment. Anonymity and confidentiality were promised and maintained throughout the study. In order to ensure the confidentiality of participants, their provided information was protected from all persons not directly involved in the study. Furthermore, no information can be traced to or used to identify any participants. In terms of professional standards, the researcher ensured that the findings were gathered professionally without misrepresenting it to anyone or intentionally misleading participants about the nature of the study. The researcher ensured that the findings were presented honestly without fabricating data to support any particular finding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The themes that emerged during the interviews with tourism SMEs include types of social networking sites adopted to enhance work productivity, and the value of social networking sites in the business.

Types of adopted social networking sites

The first theme that emerged during the interviews relates to the type of social networking sites adopted by the SMEs to enhance their work productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that numerous social networking sites were utilised and played a significant role in ensuring good levels of work productivity and creativity in the participating SMEs, particularly during the pandemic. When asked to comment on the types of social networking sites used in the business, participants gave various examples. One manager said: "Well for us, although we have been using social networking sites ever since we started the business, we have decided to use these tools more than before. For instance, we are using social networking sites such as Instagram, and Facebook". This statement supports the view of Karimi and Naghibi (2015) who observe that social media applications such as Instagram and Facebook play a significant role in the tourism sector, because they are, and can be, used by many people regardless of location and time.

Likewise, another participant shared the following: "In this company, we adopted Twitter because it is the quickest way of reaching out to many people at once". This concurs with research by Rugova and Prenaj (2016), who maintain that Twitter continuously plays a pivotal role in helping the organisation to interact with customers and brands. This suggests that social networking sites foster knowledge-sharing and are mainly concerned with personal, human-to-human interaction, and so forth. When interpreted according to the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, it can be assumed that the main reason participating SMEs decided to make use of Instagram and Facebook is because the owners are of the view that these tools could add value to their business operations. In addition, the theory purports that those innovations that are not complex to operate tend to be adopted more rapidly compared to those that are (Rogers, 1995). Therefore, it is safe to mention that one of the key factors contributing to SMEs adopting the

above-mentioned social media platforms is the user-friendly nature of these tools.

It also emerged during the interviews that certain sites adopted by SMEs are regarded as social review sites. For instance, one of the participants stated: "To be honest, we have adopted numerous social networking sites and some of these include social review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor". He added, "You see, the main reason we have decided to use these specific platforms is that they have a capability to display reviews from community members with regard to all kinds of locations and experiences". This statement supports Jagongo and Kinyua (2013), who indicate that social media applications such as Yelp and TripAdvisor have revolutionised the tourism industry, because they are used by millions of travellers across the globe.

Over and above the previously mentioned social networking sites being used by the SMEs, image sharing sites such as Snapchat and Instagram were also mentioned. As one of the SME owners stated: "I mostly prefer to use image sharing sites such as Snapchat, because in our business we constantly deal with visual content such as images, illustrations, and infographics". According to McCann and Barlow (2015), these particular kind of sites have transformed the tourism sector since they are capable of easily and efficiently capturing people's hearts, eyes, and imaginations. These findings imply that social networking platforms, such as the above-mentioned, are designed to amplify the power of image sharing. In addition to image sharing sites, some SMEs were also using video hosting sites such as Vimeo and YouTube. As revealed by one of the SME service providers: "In this company we are mainly using video-hosting sites such as Vimeo and YouTube". This statement supports the research of Ainin et al. (2015), indicating that such video-hosting sites are playing a critical role in the tourism sector because they enable the organisation to create or produce content and make it accessible to a platform optimised and designed for streaming.

In addition, the study found that some SMEs were using community blogs. For instance, one of the SME owners mentioned that: "Community blogs such as Tumblr and Medium were adopted in the organisation as part of [their] communication and marketing strategy". Research by Beier and Wagner (2016) supports this and proposes that shared, such blogging platforms provide users with a space to express their views and assist them by connecting them with readers. Another category of social networking sites that emerged during the interviews relates to discussion sites. According to Ainin et al. (2015), the most common discussion sites include Quora and Reddit; and, these platforms are precisely designed to facilitate conversation. Moreover, sharing economy networks such as Rover and AirBnB were also mentioned as key catalysts in enhancing organisational work productivity and creativity in the current pandemic.

The value of social networking sites in the business

The second major theme that emerged during the interviews relates to the benefits that social networking sites posed to SMEs. The study found that SMEs enjoy numerous benefits by using social networking sites. For example, when asked to comment on the value of social networking sites in terms of SMEs, one of the business owners revealed the following: "Well, I would say the added value of social networking sites in the business is that they help us to interact with our customers". In line with these findings, Effendi, Sugandini and Istanto (2020) observe that since such sites foster knowledge-sharing, they are important to the tourism sector. Similarly, Meske and Stieglitz (2013) note that these sites have proven to be catalysts in as far as human-to-human interaction is concerned. Another participant said: "Social networking platforms enable the business, and our customers, to share thoughts, upload photos and videos, curate content, form groups based on interests, and participate in lively and interactive discussions". In their 2016 study, Wamba and Carter (2016) found that there are numerous ways in which social networking sites can add value to businesses. Based on the findings above, it seems as though participants' statement verify the numerous benefits to adopting social networking in organisations.

In addition to the above, further views on the benefits of using social networking sites were shared. Some of these relate to the advertisement of goods and services through social networking platforms.

This view was shared by one participant who indicated the following: "Honestly speaking, the glaring benefits of adopting social networking sites in the business is that they enable us to immediately reach to the target audience through adverts." Research by Dutot and Bergeron (2016) supports this with the argument that such sites have the capability to cultivate large and visibly diverse communities. Similar sentiments are shared by AlSharji, Ahmad and Bakar (2018), who believe the sites enable the businesses to get permission to engage with people, based on specific targeting metrics. In a recent study, Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson and Pullins (2021) note that one of the associated benefits is that these tools produce exceptionally rich data. Therefore, based on the findings, it should be safe to mention that organisations can reach many relevant people without spending a lot of money, simply by making use of social networking sites. Furthermore, it is important to note that findings suggest that social networking sites are playing a crucial role in enabling SMEs to foster networks with clients.

Some of previously mentioned benefits that were highlighted by the interviews arise from the adoption of social review sites by SMEs. According to Cheng and Foley (2019), social review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor can display community members' reviews of all kinds of locations and experiences. This view was shared by one participant who stated: "The benefits of using Yelp and TripAdvisor sites is that they help us to check the reviews as they eliminate unnecessary guesswork that is most likely to arise when one is booking a hotel or restaurant". Based on these findings, SMEs can benefit from studying reviews, as they can see both the positive and negative of the goods and services they offer. Similarly, Crommelin et al. (2018), argue that reviews posted by customers on the organisation's social networking sites enable the business to understand the customer's perspective. Furthermore, the importance of such sites is supported by research that indicates the first thing people do when planning a trip or buying a new product is to check the reviews posted by other travellers or buyers.

The study found that other benefits of using social networking sites in the business relate to image-sharing sites. According to Van House (200711), these sites continue to assist organisations to transform and enhance work productivity and creativity. This view was expressed by one of the participants who said the following: "In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, we have decided to improve our use of visual content such as images, illustrations, and infographics to easily capture our customers' eyes". This approach is supported by Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson and Pullins (2021), who argue that social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram are designed to enhance the power of image sharing. This, in turn, paints a bright picture that image-sharing sites are indeed playing a crucial role in photogenic businesses, by helping organisations create inspiration among their customers.

It was found that SMEs have improved and intensified their usage of video-hosting sites, in response to the pandemic and its associated challenges. This can be attributed to the fact that a social networking site such as YouTube can be used to create videos about products and services and distribute them to customers. One SME provider stated the following: "COVID-19 has shown us the value of social media in the business, as we are using it more than before". She added, "We are using YouTube to create content and make it accessible to a platform optimised for streaming". Consequently, it is clear that accessibility makes video a very important medium for businesses. The findings suggest that SMEs can use video hosting sites to share phenomenal content. This is supported by AlSharji, Ahmad and Bakar (2018) who argue that a site such as YouTube enable users to create communities and make their content available online so that it reaches many people. Therefore, it is worth noting that video hosting sites foster engagement between the community and organisations. For instance, YouTube's comment section enables organisations to be aware of people who are watching its products and services.

It further emerged during the interviews that another added value of using social networking sites in the business is that they enable community blogs. According to Effendi, Sugandini and Istanto (2020), through community blogs, social networking sites have become "change agents" when it comes to information sharing. This view was expressed by one of the participants who said: "Well, a shared blogging platform such as Tumblr is helping the business to provide a space for the customers to express their views about the services we offer". This is supported by research done by Dutot and Bergeron

(2016), who argue that the community blog platforms play a fundamental role in providing an audience, while, at the same time, fostering and allowing adequate room for self-expression and customisation. In short, this implies that community blog sites are actually designed to enable an SME to develop its voice to benefit its customers. Moreover, it was mentioned that discussion sites play a significant role in the SMEs. It has been observed that discussion sites are playing a vital role in the organisation to trigger a conversation. This view was shared by one participant: "Well, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced [us] to adopt numerous social media tools to enhance work productivity to ensure the sustainability of the business". She added, "for instance, we have decided to make use of Quora more than before just to trigger conversations pertaining to our products and services". In line with this statement, Wamba and Carter (2016) observe that the most common discussion sites include Quora and Reddit and are designed to effectively facilitate conversation. Likewise, Meske and Stieglitz (2013) argue that using discussion platforms is beneficial, since they enable anyone to pose a question or craft a statement to entice people with common curiosities and interests. The study also found that many SME owners named sharing economy networks as advantageous to improve work productivity and creativity in the SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research by Beier and Wagner (2016) supports this, further noting that such networks are key platforms regarded by numerous scholars and enthusiasts as fundamental to the tourism sector. This view was expressed by one of the participants: "Sharing economy networks such as Rover and AirBnB is not only helpful when it comes to finding low-cost holiday rentals; they actually bring together the individuals who have something they need to share with those who have similar interest". A study by Rugova and Prenaj (2016) supports this, maintaining that an added value of such sites is that they provide opportunities that would not otherwise exist by pooling resources on a bigger scale that would not be conceivable without technology.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This current study sought to explore the role of social networking sites in enhancing work productivity and creativity in selected tourism SME service providers within the context of the City of Tshwane following the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two major themes that emerged during participant interviews include the following: Firstly, the various types of social networking sites adopted to enhance work productivity; and secondly, the value of such sites to organisations. Numerous social networking sites have been adopted by SMEs to enhance work productivity and creativity both during and in the wake of the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to note that tourism SMEs had adopted social networking sites long before the outbreak of COVID-19. Furthermore, the only current difference is that their usage of these digital platforms has intensified, due to the restrictions associated with the pandemic. Consequently, it seems sound to conclude that social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook play a significant role in the particular setting of tourism, because they are used by a diversity of people, regardless of location and time.

In addition, the study concludes that Twitter continues to play a pivotal role in helping organisations to interact with their relevant customers and brands. This is also the case with Yelp and TripAdvisor, because of their affiliated travellers across the globe. Moreover, it can be concluded that Snapchat is significant to SMEs in that it amplifies the power of image-sharing. Additionally, a significant number of SMEs are using video hosting sites such as Vimeo and YouTube to create content and make it accessible to platforms designed for streaming. Furthermore, SMEs have also adopted community blogs, such as Tumblr and Medium, as part of their communication and marketing strategies. Moreover, this study indicates that SMEs make use of applications such as Quora and Reddit to facilitate conversation, while using Rover and AirBnB to enhance work productivity and creativity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the findings of the study, it is clear that there are numerous benefits to SMEs in terms of using social networking sites, either pre- or post-pandemic. These include fostering, knowledge-sharing, sharing photos and videos, curating content, forming groups based on interests, and participating in lively and interactive discussions. In addition, social networking sites play a pivotal role in the advertising

of goods and services since they enable SMEs to almost instantaneously reach their target audience through advertisements. For example, social review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor display reviews by community members regarding all kinds of locations and experiences. It is important to note that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs have intensified their usage of video-hosting sites. This increase is attributed to the fact that a social networking site such as YouTube can be used to create videos about certain products and services as well as distribute them to customers. Another point worth noting is that community blogs help SMEs to provide a space for the customers to express their views about the services on offer.

In conclusion, it cannot be denied that social networking sites have changed the way SMEs operate, particularly with regard to communication and marketing techniques. The major advantages that they offer organisations include improved awareness and inquiries, stronger customer relationships, more new customers and the improved ability to identify customers from all over the world. Therefore, because of the proliferation of prevalent access to the internet, social networking sites have transformed how SMEs do business. For instance, the growing adoption of social networking sites such as Facebook, Blog, Twitter and YouTube – along with the embeddedness of external knowledge – aids the entrepreneurial journey through the COVID-19 crisis. Since numerous social networking sites have been adopted by SMEs to enhance work productivity, it is important to understand the security risks associated with the adoption of these sites in the business. It is widely accepted that the security risks emanating from the adoption of these sites pose a devastating impact on the business, such as compromising the business and personal accounts, leading to loss of reputation and revenue. Therefore, the study recommends that SMEs should tighten their security systems to ensure that they completely enjoy the benefits of adopting social networking sites. In addition, future studies should look at the security strategies and tools of social networking sites to mitigate risks.

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