

Factors Affecting Saudi Customers' Attitude Towards Social Media Advertising

Dr. Khalid Alatawy

College of Administrative Sciences, Najran University, PO box 1988, 11001 Najran, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Throughout the world, internet usage has increased significantly. Technological developments have resulted in more corporations choosing to use the internet for marketing purposes. Statistics reveal that the number of social media users always increases in line with growth in technology and population increases. Although the population of Saudi Arabia has been steadily rising, there has been minimal awareness of how the internet can be used to advertise products. In light of this, the aim of this study is to explore how the existing Saudi Arabian culture shapes social media usage. The key factors mentioned relate to the various cultural and economic transitions that have been witnessed in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, the study aims to find out how the internet can be used to market products and acquire more customers. Lastly, the study wants to investigate the factors that affect social media use in Saudi Arabia. In this study, a qualitative approach was adopted because it enables people to analyse their daily experiences. Purposive sampling was chosen as the method of data collection; this involved interviewing both female and male participants with relevant knowledge. The findings revealed that socialization, leisure, opinions, information, and entertainment were some of the reasons for social media use, with socialization being the major reason. The study also found that people react to social media platforms differently. While some people might only be interested in reading other people's posts, others would comment and even share videos. The research has some limitations, as it does not explain the management of misinformation or how this can be dealt with exhaustively. Nevertheless, the study is significant because it could assist marketers wishing to ensure that their social media advertisements achieve the required outcome, namely attracting the attention of potential consumers.

Keywords: Internet, social media advertisement, customers' attention, technology adaptation, digital marketing, cultural influences.

1.0 Introduction

This paper focuses on the factors that influence consumers' attitude towards social media advertising in Saudi Arabia. This paper includes an introduction, a problem statement, description of methodology used for collecting the data, and a summary of findings and conclusions to be drawn. Advertising is described as the "nonpersonal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media" (Taflinger, 1996, pp.65), and is the channel organizations and manufacturers typically use to reach out to their target populations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001). A winning advertisement is one that captures consumers' attention. The value of an advertisement can be measured by the level of attention it creates (Bordalo, Gennaioli & Shleifer 2015). Consumer attention describes the degree to which an advertisement produces the desired outcomes or effects (Teixeira, 2014). Advancing technologies offer multiple benefits to corporations, such as cost savings, promotion of products, time savings, timely and consistent information, better customer service and relationships, and enhanced payment channels (Alotaibi & Bach, 2014).

The rapid growth of internet technologies is altering people's way of life worldwide (Shalhoub, 2006). People are enticed to use social media platforms by a desire for collaboration, communication, connection, and participation, among other factors (Cordeiro & Krempels, 2013, pp. 201-219). Social media has made it possible to interact with people from various parts of the globe, making the world a global village (Ater, Itai & Landsman, 2013). Social media offers different methods of interactions for users. Thus, engagement in social media generates potential benefits, but also raises concerns about how people use these platforms (Al-Sobhi, Weerakkody & Kamal, 2010). Similar to other communication channels, communication via social media is governed by certain rules (Vogel & Hayes, 2013). According to Watson, Leyland, Berthon and Zinkham (2013), marketers should strive to learn the trends that people use in social media in order to make a sale: "Since the invention of web technology in 1989, the internet has been widely used to provide useful technology services and has played a significant role in shaping the trends of developing societies" (Alotaibi & Bach, 2014, pp.104).

The world has experienced major shifts from traditional methods of marketing, causing agencies to turn towards the internet for marketing. Social media, as a platform that is accessible to most consumers, is one of the major forms of advertising relied on by organizations (El-Gohary & Eid, 2013). Internet use and access to the internet are more prevalent in the developed world than in the developing world; this is due to factors such as the expenses involved in accessing the internet, and differing levels of access to the internet. In developed nations, access to the internet is relatively cheap and many people regularly use this technology. Consequently, social

media advertising is more widespread in developed nations than in developing countries. Developed countries, such as the USA, Japan, and France have systems in place governing marketing. They have freedom of information legislation, which enhances opportunities in digital and e-marketing. In developing countries, a number of obstacles to digital marketing exist. For instance, education on digital marketing is lacking in developing countries, the internet connection is often slow, and overregulation of businesses by the government causes further difficulties. In addition, in countries such as India, for example, where there are high rates of illiteracy and limited access to the internet and computers use is comparatively low (Kaur & Sandhu, 2017).

There is generally low awareness of social media in Saudi Arabia, although internet use is high. However, a number of factors could affect the professional use of social media by the Saudi Arabian population. Most people use social media without responding to the advertisements that stream in. Nevertheless, marketers should be aware of the factors that trigger consumer attention. For that reason, this study seeks to investigate consumers' attitude towards social media advertising (Silk et al., 2002). The study will investigate the popular social media platforms used by Saudi Arabian citizens, in order to ascertain how individuals are utilizing these platforms and their behaviours and attitudes towards this type of communication tool (Nielsen, 2013).

The objectives of this research are:

- To investigate the manner norms and cultures that govern social media usage in Saudi Arabia.
- To establish the factors that influence consumers' attitude towards brands that are advertised on social media platforms.
- To identify the barriers to effective marketing via social media.

2.0 Literature Review

Social media marketing has expedited the dissemination of information about brands from corporations to target markets (Wang, 2015). A significant advantage of digital marketing is that it enables interaction among consumers and the manufactures in two ways: the consumer can relate to other consumers who have used the product and, at the same time, the consumer can interact with the manufacturer (Chakrabarti, 2017). Consumers are able to rate the products; in essence, this is marketing at no extra cost. When a consumer leaves a positive review about a product, others can see this review and may be persuaded to buy that product. Advertisers are able to save huge sums of money on advertising, whilst also reaching a larger audience. Social media also makes it possible for consumers to give marketers greater insights into how they can improve their products and services, and this advice can lead to a major boost in product quality (Gupta, 2017). This helps companies to formulate marketing strategies.

Some social networking sites promote effective marketing by building interest among those followers that are most responsive to the advertisements. LinkedIn and Twitter, for example, categorize their followers according to their interests, determined on the basis of what they post or like on the sites, the information they share, and the people with whom they work, among others. This type of categorization allows social media platforms to reach out to an audience that might prefer particular brands more quickly, thereby helping marketers to increase their sales. Affordability is another advantage that social networking sites present to marketers. Managing a social media page is cost effective and does not incur any costs: all that is required is internet access and content to post on the page.

In Saudi Arabia, only a handful of studies have been conducted in the area of social media marketing. This does not give marketers a clear picture of the way forward. Saudi Arabia has undergone a major cultural, economic, and social transformation (Global Media Insights, 2016). With regard to technology, life in Saudi Arabia has changed drastically, with the number of internet users growing day by day. The total population of Saudi Arabia stood at 32,275,687 at the end of 2016, representing an increase of 1% since the end of 2015 (Country Economy). The total number of internet users in the country is 29.29 million people: which represents approximately 63% of the population (Global Media Insights, 2016). The most popular social media platform in the country is Facebook, which has 7.96 million Saudi users and accounted for approximately 25% of the total internet usage in the country by May 2016 (Global Media Insights, 2016). The percentage of internet users in Saudi Arabia has been continuously rising since 2010. Whereas 38.1% of the population were using the internet in 2010, statistics for 2014 indicate that 49.0% of the population were using the internet (Internet World Stats, 2016). As noted above, the percentage of internet users in 2016 was 63%, meaning that internet penetration is steadily growing. These statistics show that the population of Saudi Arabia is rapidly growing, and the number of social media users has also grown in line with the population growth and technological advances (Devi & Anita, 2013).

Despite all these statistics on internet and social media usage in Saudi Arabia, very little research has been conducted to establish how advertisers can make use of the internet to sell products. Research is needed in various dimensions to ensure that social media can be used effectively to reduce the cost of advertising, while at the same time reaching out to the largest possible audience. It is also important to establish how consumers' attitude towards advertisements can be enhanced and rendered more responsive. Describing the perceptions of

Arab users of social media is a vital field of study in Saudi Arabia. The impact of social media on the Arab community is essential to understand how to structure advertisements. Peoples' perspectives are, in a number of ways, important for the government, consumers, and firms.

Research shows that, in Saudi Arabia, social media is used in a number of positive ways that can be profitable to the government and business owners. The public, however, mistrusts social media and believes that it negatively affects the traditions and cultures of the people. The main reason for using social media in the Arab world is to take advantage of its social functions, such as connecting with others. Over half the social media population uses it for these social functions (Ahmed, Zairi, & Alwabel 2012). The other major uses of social media in the Arab world are to find information, listen to music, and exchange videos and photos. The major function of advertisements is to create brand awareness by passing on information (Bernheim, Douglas & Antonio, 2009). This means that marketers will succeed if they rely on social media to sell their brands. The activities that users most commonly engage in are reading posts by other users and chatting. Marketers should include chat as a major part of the marketing design for their brands (Goldman, 2013).

According to the Arab Social Media Influencers Summit (2015), On average, one-third of users spend less than 30 minutes per session when using social media, and 5% spend more than 4 hours per session. More than half the users are most active on social media during evening hours. This indicates that marketers should ensure that they always have agents online during prime time, so that they can interact with the maximum possible number of users and address their queries. Most studies in the public domain do not directly specify how marketers should conduct their business on social media. This research will identify the social media habits of Saudi citizens and provide relevant advice to marketers on real-time issues.

3.0 Methodology

Scholars researching issues that relate to culture typically employ qualitative research methods (Fletcher, 2002). One of Albert Einstein's famous quotes is "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted". This means that, in many instances, quantitative research can be replaced with qualitative research and the data found is essential (Conger, 1998; Podsakoff, 1994). Quantitative data and experiments are singularly insufficient when conducting research. Consequently, qualitative research has increased in popularity as a research method (Hunt, 1999). According to Shank (2002), qualitative research is "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" (p.5). According to the same author, 'systematic' means "planned, ordered and public", ensuring that the guidelines for the research are adhered to. 'Empirical', on the other hand, describes an inquiry that is based on real-life experience (Ospina et al., 2004). This means that an empirical study is one based on people's experiences. This study will be qualitative in that it focuses on the experiences that people have with regard to social media marketing. It analyzes how people make sense of their day-to-day experiences. Qualitative research uses naturalistic and imperative approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000); "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p.3).

This study will use semi-structured interviews for data collection. Semi-structured interviews involve a set of open questions to initiate discussion. They give the researcher the opportunity to interrogate any responses given. Semi-structured interviews usually follow a period of observation. Semi-structured interviews are preferred for qualitative studies (Adams et al., 2005). They allow the interviewer to understand the topic further, by affording them an opportunity to formulate questions that they feel to be relevant for the study during the interview process (Adams et al., 2008). Kvale (1996) states that: the qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task of interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say.

The researcher can form meaningful and relevant semi-structured research interview questions. This kind of interview allows the researcher to stray from any interview guide, making it possible to identify new ways of understanding problems. The researcher feels competent during an interview because he or she is given leeway to develop new insights into the topic (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). This research will rely on a total of 40 semi-structured interviews, for which the participants will be selected purposively.

Bernard (2002) highlights the fact that data collection is the most vital part of any research process, as it contributes to ensuring research objectives are achieved. Data collection facilitates the proper understanding of the theoretical framework developed for the study. Tongco illustrates that it is, therefore, imperative that proper judgement be used during the process of choosing the method of data collection and selecting respondents. No volume of analysis would cater for data that is collected in an inappropriate manner. Another name for purposive sampling is judgment sampling, and participants are chosen deliberately. The choice of participants depends on the qualities that they possess that are relevant for the study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This kind of technique is non-random and does not require any set or number of participants or any underlying theories for the sampling process. The researcher simply needs to decide what they need to know, and then look for people who have the capacity and are willing to give information on a given research topic (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). It relies on the

competence of the selected participants. Purposive sampling is mainly used in qualitative studies to select people who have the requisite information, so as to properly use all the resources available (Patton, 2002). The process, therefore, involves identifying persons or groups of people who have a high degree of proficiency and information in the area under investigation (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). The researcher should consider the willingness of the participants to give information in the study. “Unlike random studies, which deliberately include a diverse cross-section of ages, backgrounds, and cultures, the idea behind purposive sampling is to concentrate on people with particular characteristics who will better be able to assist with the relevant research” (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). The researcher will purposively seek information from social media users and from professional and scholars who have conducted research in the field of digital marketing.

4.0 Findings

This section provides the findings derived from the interviews. The findings have been evaluate from the perspective of each objective. The objectives of this study were:

- To investigate the manner norms and cultures that govern social media usage in Saudi Arabia.
- To establish the factors that influence consumers’ attitude towards brands that are advertised on social media platforms.
- To identify the barriers to effective marketing via social media

4.1 Response rate

There was a very high response rate from among the target population. The response rate stood at 100%, as all 40 of the selected respondents participated in the study. The high response rate was attributed to the fact that the researcher conducted interviews in a manner comfortable for the respondents. The first step when conducting the interviews, after identifying the researcher, was to ask from which location the respondent would feel most comfortable taking the survey. In addition, the researcher ensured that the full consent of the respondents was obtained before embarking on the study and any target respondents who were not willing to take part were replaced.

4.2 Gender and Age of Respondents

The researcher purposively recruited participants between 18 and 40 years because the literature review showed younger people are more prolific users of social media. The distribution of ages was as follows: 10 respondents in the 18-23 years age group, 21 respondents in the 24-31 years age group, and 9 respondents in the 32-40 years age group. The gender of respondents was also a factor in the interviews. The total number of female respondents was 16, while 24 respondents were male. This ensured full representation of both genders in the study.

4.3 Cultures that govern social media usage in Saudi Arabia

Certain unspoken norms influence the ways in which people use social media, and this is also true in Saudi Arabia. The Arab world accounts for a very high percentage of social media users and so understanding their culture is important.

“Saudi Arabia accounts for a very high percentage of the total number of social media users in the Arab world. The situation is the same throughout the entire world. Saudi Arabia has gained momentum in the use of social media for various activities and has overtaken many countries in matters regarding social media.” (Male, research analyst, 32 years old)

The main reason that people use social media is for socializing. A total of 29 respondents agreed that socializing was the main reason for visiting social media sites. Others stated that they use social media for obtaining information, leisure, reading reviews and opinions, accessing entertainment, and sharing information and articles. People react to social media in various ways. The interviews demonstrated that some visit the sites just to read the posts of others, some share videos, and others comment on everything they find in social media. Some people even use social media in order to find a life partner.

“People visit social media for a host of reasons, some go in order to socialize, others post and share articles, and there is another group that does not actively participate, but just uses social media to read the posts of others.” (Male, Masters student, 28 years old)

“Some people visit social media to find life partners, I have heard of cases where guys knew each other from social media and ended up being lifelong partners.” (Female, Saudi Arabia resident, 21 years old)

4.4 How people treat information from social media

There was a general consensus that people do not trust information from social media, particularly information from bloggers, non-verified media houses, and the mushrooming media sites. However, people do trust information that comes from mainstream media houses and popular and trusted companies. With regard to the

marketing of brands, the interviews demonstrated that the way in which messages are framed has a major impact on their ability to sell. Moreover, a company that is advertising its products has a major impact on the audience. Some companies are better accepted than others. Furthermore, how companies respond to comments and the reviews that come after their advertisement has a major impact on people. The factors that companies need to take into consideration are their promptness in responding to queries and how effective they are at resolving the highlighted queries.

“Companies that use social media for advertising have gone the extra mile in ensuring they make a sale. Social media advertising is the way to go for corporations. However, how they frame their adverts can give their sales a major boost.” (Female, teacher, 38 years old)

“Organizations need to ensure that they respond to people’s queries promptly and handle them effectively.” (Male, Salesman, 27 years old)

Attention is drawn to advertisements by headlines and slogans. According to the respondents, some the headlines do not appear to be genuine.

“I have even seen an advertisement with the title ‘Ultimate cure for Aids.’ Such an advertisement is already false, a person cannot even open such an advertisement. Advertisers should use persuasive and palatable language when addressing their target audience.” (Female, nurse, 34 years old)

Another aspect that advertisers ought to check is that the headline of any advertisements is in line with the information that is present in the body of the advertisement.

“I have encountered situations where the advertisement headline does not tally with the information about the product being advertised. In such a case, it is clear that the advertisement is false.” (Male, 26 years old)

Social media users have changed over time. Previously, there were very few subscribers, whereas now, almost the entire population of the country is active on social media in some form. The reasons for using social media have also changed significantly. Rather than only being used for social purposes, it is now also used for informative purposes, breaking news, and marketing, among other secondary functions.

“Social media has gone beyond its traditional use for socializing to include educative, informative, and marketing uses, to mention but a few.” (Male, Online marketing agent, 28 years old).

5.0 Discussion

Social media marketing has rendered the delivery of information about brands from organizations to clients very easy, as it makes it possible to communicate to a wide audience with a single message. The message reaches the target audience at the same time, and can be seen all around the world. The number of internet subscribers has substantially increased over time. The increase is gradual and continuous, as can be seen in the data collected during the literature review. The interviews conducted vividly revealed the challenges faced by marketers, and most of the respondents agreed that these include the fact that the number of internet subscribers and social media is continuously growing. Since the inception of the internet, there has been a major shift in how people get along and how they retrieve information about various factors that affect their well-being.

Many factors affect consumer attention towards advertised brands. These factors include how the advertisement is worded, the title of the advertisement, and the colours used in the advertisement. These factors work together to enhance the selling capacity of an advertisement that is posted on social media. Advertisers are advised to use non-exaggerated titles for their advertisements. They should use real, yet catchy, titles for their advertisements in order to maximize the attention that their advertisements create. How information is presented is also a significant aspect of internet marketing. An organization should use communally acceptable language to persuade their customers. Some words are not palatable to some societies, so the language used should be language that is acceptable to their marketing region. Companies should choose skilled and professional personnel to create their advertisements in order to avoid the possibility of the message being wrongly presented or misunderstood.

The cultural influences that affect social media usage are yet another aspect to consider when developing advertisements. For example, it is the culture that defines the uses of social media to a particular group of people. It is evident that the majority of the social media population in Saudi Arabia uses social media for social purposes, such as catching up with friends and chatting. To be able to capture their full attention, marketers should use a communicative approach in their advertisement. For example, they should engage their clients in online chat and make a sale in the process. This will make it very easy for them to capture the attention of their target audience.

Prompt response to queries is vital in marketing. Firstly, a prompt response helps to encourage other consumers and helps in the betterment of products. Feedback is important in ensuring that customers' needs are addressed. Feedback should always be prompt and effective. Promptness allows customers to create a level of trust with the brand. The clients will also familiarize themselves with the brand and be able to market it to their colleagues and friends, thereby further marketing the brand. A review section should also be provided so that customers can review the product. Positive reviews will encourage more customers to purchase the product,

whereas negative feedback will provide constructive criticism of the brand, and will help the company know what they need to do in order to improve their brand. This means that reviews bring about more sales and lead to product improvement.

One barrier to online marketing is an excessive number of negative reviews. At each point, marketers should ensure that the positive feedback exceeds negative feedback. They should conduct research into the reasons for negative feedback and should strive to end negative reviews. Another barrier, as demonstrated by this study, is that people do not trust most information from social media. This is because a great deal of gutter press information and untrustworthy blogs dominate social media platforms. Thus, people may end up not trusting information about products either. It is also possible for competitors to create false social media pages in order to tarnish the image of products from other companies. Some companies use negative publicity about their competitors to out sell them.

The time that most Saudi people are online is during the evening. This is when companies need to have representatives online in order to address the concerns of people talking about their product. Prime social media time is the time when products may get positive or negative feedback and, in most cases, would be the time that people with concerns will be able to express them. Organizations should always ensure they have representatives online to address customer concerns. One way of marketing is addressing some concerns of customers using CSR (corporate social responsibility) strategies. Advertisements should ensure they widely publish the CSR activities being carried out by the organization. CSR makes customers trust products more than advertisements that are just about selling, so this could be another way of bringing about a huge increase in sales.

Due to its continued expansion in social media usage, Saudi Arabia presents opportunities that marketing agencies can use to make major sales. The opportunity could be seized by many organizations to ensure this development is used to help them to sell more products. In summary, we can say that, although social media gives rise to various challenges, it is still a viable way of making a quick sale of products. Marketers have realized this, and the marketing departments of organizations have seized this opportunity. Hence, there has been a major advancement in marketing methods.

Research has highlighted a gap in the field of social media marketing. More research is still needed into how consumer trust can be created using social media advertisements. This study has highlighted that people have a tendency to mistrust information from social media. However, some bits of information do trigger the direct trust of people interacting with it. This presents an uncultivated ground to marketing researchers, who need to find out the reasons behind information mistrust and the ways in which it can be avoided.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident from the study that technology has developed globally. In this regard, it makes sense that companies should use social media sites as a platform for marketing their products. It is indisputable that advertising through media would ensure that a large population is targeted. Advertising on social media platforms also saves money. In addition to the media platform being easier, the scope of the market target is also increased, thereby increasing profitability. It vital that corporations adopt this line of technology when advertising their products, rather than sticking rigidly with the traditional methods. This is because technological developments have meant that the growing population has shifted its focus from the traditional methods to e-marketing.

In the same vein, attention should be focused on audiences that may not have embraced e-marketing, perhaps due to the cultural norms that may have shaped the targeted population. Other people have always viewed social media sites as existing only for the purpose of socializing and entertainment. Thus, audiences need to be educated that they can also buy the products of their choice from online sites and that those sites are not only for entertainment. Corporations ought to ensure also that they package their adverts well, so that they are appealing to the targeted audiences. Understanding the limitations of an effective advertisement is important to avoid market disappointments. The effectiveness of an advertisement depends on its ability to appeal to a consumer. The increase in technology has created great avenues for companies to maximize their marketing through the internet. The creation of advertisement sites should be a priority for firms. If the limiting factors are handled well, embracing social media sites for marketing purposes could yield great sales.

One conspicuous finding of this study is mistrust in information. The rampant circulation of fake news has set a bad precedent, causing people to ignore information for fear that it is fake. The issue of mistrust of information is fundamental, so more research is needed into this issue. Some people have a tendency to ignore sites or alerts from sites that are unknown to them, even though their content may be useful, because they view the information as fake news. Conducting research into this area will ensure that corporations adopt relevant strategies for handling their customers' fears and ensuring the flow of authentic information. Addressing the root causes of not trusting information will lead to a buildup of trust, as customers' fears will be addressed and, as a result, they would not then ignore advertisements from verified sites. Companies should take advantage of the most trusted social media sites and use them as avenues for communicating their message to their desired

market, as most people trust verified sites.

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