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Bridging the Disability Inclusion Gap of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities through Social Media Marketing: Empirical Evidence from Kerala

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Abstract

Social Media Marketing (SMM) has an inevitable role in the digital transformation of business among entrepreneurs, especially the new bunch of entrepreneurs called entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWDs). They are being excluded and facing barriers mainly because of the inaccessible society. This study attempts to analyse the effectiveness of SMM among EWDs in the central region of Kerala in three dimensions: promotion, sales, and customer relationship management (CRM). It also examines how SMM facilitates bridging the disability inclusion gap in various marketing activities. The course of the present study unveils significant findings and makes relevant contributions to existing literature and academic disciplines. First, it focuses on and investigates a way to ensure disability inclusion, which can improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities. Secondly, unlike the earlier studies, this research paper connected social media usage in marketing activities among EWDs with their disability inclusion. Thirdly, the findings of the study provide recommendations for authorities and policymakers and a basis for future research. In this context, the present study makes use of structured interview schedule, to collect the data from 70 micro and small-level EWDs from central Kerala to try and analyse the effectiveness of SMM and ascertain the extent to which it facilitates bridging the disability inclusion gap. According to the results, SMM is highly effective among such entrepreneurs. The correlation analysis proved that SMM significantly bridges the disability inclusion gap in marketing-related activities. The study also underlined the urgent need for effective action plans to provide awareness and training on SMM methods, as these are crucial for the survival of the EWD business in the digitalised world.

Keywords: *Social Media Marketing, Entrepreneurs with disabilities, Disability inclusion, Disability inclusion gap, Social inclusion, Kerala*

Introduction

The era of digitalisation asks for digital excellence in every business domain for better performance and longer existence. When it comes to marketing, it highly demands changes from traditional marketing methods and keeping in line with the trends. In the last decades, social media platforms have become leading communication pathways and thus adapted them as effective marketing tools (Bashar et al., 2012). Hence, SMM accelerated the digital transformation of business and has an inevitable role in the growth and success of today's business (Eltayib & Bhimani, 2018). SMM can be defined as "the use of social media platforms to promote a product or service" (Felix et al., 2017). It has the potential to make marketing-related activities easier for entrepreneurs, create brand awareness and promotion, better customer relationships, and increase sales to remain competitive (Jones et al., 2015), especially for those who face accessibility problems in society. More specifically, persons with disabilities (PWDs) have to experience physical challenges, and society restricts their participation and puts them through many complications, mainly because of disabling barriers. In such a situation, social media can break down the barriers faced by PWDs (Ellis & Mike, 2017), and it facilitates social inclusion for them (Manzoor & Vimarlund, 2018).

The global prevalence rate of disability is approximately 15% (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011), and disability is the experience of any condition that makes it harder for a person to engage in specific activities or to have access reasonably within a given society (Francis & Silvers, 2016). Persons with disabilities often face social and physical barriers that make it difficult for them to move around, hear, understand others, speak, or communicate (Stough et al., 2015). They experience inequalities such as discrimination and unfair treatment from society. Additionally, they encounter difficulties in accessing different locations due to the inaccessibility and inability of society to fulfil their biological needs (Baffoe, 2013; Çaynak & Özer, 2021; Harris & Simon, 2010; Temple & Brandon, 2009). In this context, entrepreneurship is an excellent alternative for persons with disabilities because of its greater control, flexibility, freedom, and independence (Cooney, 2008; Pagán, 2009), and it attracts more persons with disabilities into the field of entrepreneurship. Here, EWDs are emerging bunch of entrepreneurs

with physical, visual, hearing, speech, intellectual, or multiple impairments who run businesses to make a profit. The earlier studies noted the problems and barriers EWDs still face today. Rajamohan et al., 2020 listed their health, financial, and marketing-related problems, and Yakiah & Sakriya, (2020) stressed the problem of advertisement of their products or services. Even though they start the business by combatting challenging physical conditions, they face too many constraints to sustain their business. Marketing is one of the challenging business operations and takes more effort (McCarthy & Perreault, 2004), it is challenging for EWDs to cope with the wide variety of activities in this non-disabled friendly society, leading to business failure.

The above points narrate the presence of disability inclusion gaps in society. There is a gap between the inclusion of persons with disabilities and non-disabled people, and they have to put extra effort and assistance into reaching potential customers and delivering their products or services. So, they struggle to market their products efficiently and compete with other entrepreneurs. Fortunately, technological advancements and increased internet penetration have allowed the company to market its products efficiently online. It facilitated them to confront the dominant discourse and made their communication and visibility easier to promote social inclusion (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022). Hence, this study highlighted the usage of SMM among EWDs.

The social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and numerous others have begun to revolutionise the state of marketing and advertising (Hanna et al., 2011), by promoting products or services by sharing content, attracting potential customers, maintaining them through proper and diverse communication options, and prompting them to buy those products or services. The application of technological advancements opens a means to get over the challenges of PWDs (Kitching & Cowling, 2019), and such mobile social networking applications and digital platforms integrate them into society and influence their social connectedness and well-being (Kim & Zhu, 2020). Considering the above points, this research paper tries to answer the research question: What effect does SMM have on bridging the disability inclusion gap of EWDs in marketing-related activities?

So, it is significant to know to what extent it works to eliminate the barriers in various marketing activities like limited reach to customers, geographical areas and time boundaries, massive budget for direct selling, face-to-face communication and travelling problems, over-dependence on relatives or friends, etc. Thus, this study attempts to analyse the effectiveness of SMM among EWDs in the central region of Kerala in three dimensions: promotion, sales, and customer relationship management (CRM). It also examines how SMM facilitates bridging the disability inclusion gap in various marketing activities. The course of the present study unveils significant findings and makes relevant contributions to existing literature and academic disciplines. First, it focuses on and investigates a way to ensure disability inclusion, which can improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities. Secondly, unlike the earlier studies, this research paper connected social media usage in marketing activities among EWDs with their disability inclusion. Thirdly, the findings of the study provide recommendations for authorities and policymakers and a basis for future research.

Review of Literature

Social Media Marketing

Venkatraman (2017) discussed the evolution of social media and marketing platforms and their metrics and effectiveness. Jamil et al. (2022) pointed out the importance and benefits of SMM. SMM is cost-effective, and companies can increase brand loyalty by reducing customer communication gaps. Bhosale (2020) analysed the usage of SMM for small businesses and suggested that small business enterprises should introduce new technologies for marketing activities to survive such enterprises. Another study by Asrath (2018) examined the advantages and disadvantages of SMM. The advantages pointed out by the researchers are cost-related, interactivity, targeted market, customer service, etc. The disadvantages include time-consuming, trademark and copyright issues, trust, privacy and security issues, negative feedback, etc. On the other hand, Kariapper (2020) was attempted to find the answer to how SMM affects the purchasing decision from the customer's viewpoint and a significant influence between the variables was found. The study was conducted in Sri Lanka and advised entrepreneurs to use better marketing techniques to succeed. While coming into the effectiveness of social media as a tool for marketing, Oyza & M. Edwin (2015) in their study proved that it is more effective than traditional marketing. It makes interactions with customers beyond distances easy and creates awareness about the products and services. Shabbir et al. (2016) concludes that social media has completely transformed the way businesses are and has become the most efficient and effective tool for sustaining the success of entrepreneurs. Small business entrepreneurs use SMM to advertise and build publicity for their products and services.

Disability Inclusion and Gap

Grönvik (2007) examines the definitions of disability by various researchers. The study classifies the definitions into five categories: functional, relative, social model of disability, administrative, and subjective. Among these relative definitions, the social model of disability points out that the disability appears when an impairment has the presence of barriers which restrict them from fully and equally getting involved in society.

Oliver (2013) addressed the social model of disability and stated that society's incapacity causes the difficulties faced by an individual with disabilities to rebuild society by his/her conditions. It emphasises that society should include PWDs equally by removing barriers that hinder their full participation. Scheer et al. (2003) examined the access barriers for persons with disabilities, which mainly highlighted environmental and structural barriers. Transportation is a significant environmental barrier that highly affects those who use wheeled mobility devices. Fitzgerald (2018) discusses the barriers disabled people face when participating in sports. In the study, barriers are listed on impairment wise. That is, deaf people, lack adaptations, communication barriers, lack of interpreters, etc. In the case of people with physical disabilities, they lack transportation facilities and limited physical accessibility, and visually impaired people also face barriers to inclusion. Rimmerman (2013) defines disability inclusion as "being accepted and recognised as an individual beyond the disability by having personal relationships with family, friends and acquaintances and having involved in recreation and social activities with appropriate living accommodation, employment and appropriate formal and informal support."

Objectives

- To analyse the effectiveness of social media marketing among EWDs in Kerala.
- To study the extent to which social media marketing facilitates bridging the disability inclusion gap in marketing-related activities of EWDs in Kerala.

Hypothesis

H1: SMM bridges the disability inclusion gap in marketing-related activities of EWDs.

Research Methodology

The present study is a cross-sectional study that tends to examine the relationship between SMM and disability inclusion based on both primary and secondary data. The study was conducted among micro and small-level EWDs in the central districts of Kerala, including Palakkad, Thrissur, and Ernakulam. The secondary data was collected from journals, magazines, reports, and websites, and the primary data was from 70 samples through interviews through online means using a structured interview schedule, which is obtained by snowball sampling. Four statements were included in each dimension of the independent variable SMM, such as promotion, sales, and CRM, to measure the effectiveness of SMM and a self-administered scale including 12 statements was used to understand how much SMM facilitates in bridging the disability inclusion gap (dependent variable) in marketing activities among EWDs by using five-point Likert scale from very little extend to a very large extent. To ensure the reliability of the scales developed, a reliability analysis was made for each item. In the case of the 12 items used to measure the effectiveness of SMM and disability inclusion, the Cronbach's Alpha values were .906 and .942, respectively. So, it is clear that all items used here are reliable and acceptable according to the criteria given by (Lombard et al., 2002), a value of .90 or greater is always acceptable. Finally, the collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Socio-demographic		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	33	47.1
	Female	37	52.9
	Total	70	100
Age	Below 25	8	11.4
	26-35	24	34.3
	36-45	29	41.4
	Above 45	9	12.9
	Total	70	100
Educational Qualification	Up to Primary/ equivalent	11	15.7
	Upper Primary/ equivalent	9	12.9
	10th level/ equivalent	16	22.9
	Higher Secondary/ equivalent	16	22.9
	Under Graduate	13	18.6
	Post Graduate& above	5	7.1
	Total	70	100

Type of Disability	Physical	48	68.6
	Visual	10	14.3
	Hearing and Speech	12	17.1
	Total	70	100

Percentage of Disability	Up to 40	2	2.9
	41-60	16	22.9
	61-80	29	41.4
	Above 80	23	32.9
	Total	70	100

Source: Table created by Authors

The table presents the socio-demographic characteristics of entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWDs) among the respondents. Notably, a majority of the participants were female (52.9%), with the largest age groups being 36-45 years (41.4%) and 26-35 years (34.3%). In terms of educational qualifications, most respondents had completed 10th level or equivalent and higher secondary education, each accounting for 22.9%, while those holding postgraduate degrees were relatively fewer, comprising only 7.1% of the sample. The predominant type of disability among the respondents was physical (68.6%), followed by hearing and speech impairments (17.1%) and visual impairments (14.3%). Additionally, a significant portion of the respondents reported a severe disability level, with 60% or more classified as having a percentage of disability above 60. This demographic profile highlights the diverse backgrounds and challenges faced by EWDs in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Table 2: Profile of Business and SMM

		Percent
Period of running the business	Less than one year	28.6
	1-3 years	38.6
	Above 3 years	32.8
	Total	100
Nature of business activity	Manufacturing	57.1
	Service	21.4
	Trading	21.5
	Total	100
Business operations	Home-based	77.1
	Enterprise-based	22.9
	Total	100
Form of business ownership	Sole proprietorship	85.7
	Partnership	14.3
	Total	100
Monthly turnover from business	Less than Rs 20000	62.9
	Rs 20001-40000	31.4
	Rs 40001-60000	2.9
	Above Rs 60000	2.9
	Total	100
Period of starting SMM	Less than 6 Months	10.0
	6-12 Months	28.6
	13-18 Months	21.4
	Above 18 Months	40.0
	Total	100
Social media platforms used for marketing	Facebook	28.1
	Instagram	21.9
	Twitter	5.4
	WhatsApp	27.7
	YouTube	8.7
	Snapchat	5.4
	LinkedIn	2.8
	Total	100

Method of content sharing	Writeup	35.5
	Photo sharing	39.5
	Video sharing	20.9
	Live streaming	4.1
	Total	100

Source: Table created by Authors

The table presents a comprehensive overview of the business and social media marketing (SMM) profiles of entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWDs). Most respondents have been operating their businesses for 1 to 3 years, primarily in the manufacturing sector (57.1%), with a significant majority (77.1%) running home-based operations as sole proprietors (85.7%). Financially, many report a monthly turnover of less than Rs 20,000, indicating a need for growth in revenue. The adoption of social media marketing has seen considerable engagement, with 40% starting their SMM activities over 18 months ago. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram emerge as the preferred platforms for marketing, while photo sharing and written content are the most common methods of content sharing. These findings highlight the evolving landscape of business operations among EWDs and emphasize the importance of social media in enhancing their marketing efforts.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Effectiveness of SMM Dimension Wise

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Promotion	70	1.00	5.00	4.61	.610
Sales	70	2.00	5.00	4.26	.72786
CRM	70	1.75	5.00	4.38	.66993
Overall mean				4.4164	

Source: Table created by Authors

The above table shows descriptive statistics for three dimensions of SMM, such as promotion, sales, and CRM, as well as an overall mean. The data indicate that respondents view SMM positively across all measured dimensions. The mean score for all three is above 4, indicating a strong effectiveness of SMM. Regarding promotion, the mean score of 4.61 shows that the respondents perceive SMM as highly effective for promoting their products and services. CRM and sales show a mean score of 4.38 and 4.26, respectively, illustrating that SMM effectively manages customer relationships and boosts sales. The std. deviation is slightly higher in the sales dimension, indicating differences in the sales outcomes among the respondents.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Effectiveness of SMM

Dimension	Statements	Mean
Promotion	SMM is a very cost-effective method for promoting products/services	4.71
	I feel very flexible on content sharing related to products/services	4.59
	SMM is an easy way to increase awareness about my products/services among customers	4.60
	My products/services are also promoted through sharing the content by friends and customers	4.53
Sales	I can sell my products/services in a very easy and convenient manner	4.29
	SMM prompts customers to buy my products/services	4.20
	SMM increases the sales volume of my products/services	4.30
	I can generate profits through SMM	4.26
CRM	I can reach and attract a large number of audiences through SMM	4.60
	I can communicate and interact very frequently and efficiently with customers	4.56
	I feel more connected to customers by reacting to their queries and feedback instantly	4.33
	I can build long-term relationships with customers through SMM	4.03

Source: Table created by Authors

The above table shows descriptive statistics of the statements regarding understanding the effectiveness of SMM in three dimensions such as promotion, sales, and CRM, measured through a five-point Likert scale. Here, it is clear that all statements under each dimension have a mean score of above four, which means high effectiveness

among the respondents. “SMM is a very cost-effective method for promoting products/services” is the statement that obtained the highest mean value (4.71), and “I can build a long-term relationship with customers through SMM” has the lowest mean value (4.03).

Table 5: Correlation between SMM and Disability Inclusion

		Disability inclusion	SMM
Disability inclusion	Pearson Correlation	1	.752**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	70	70
SMM	Pearson Correlation	.752**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	70	70

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Source: Table created by Authors

Here, the table shows the correlation between SMM and disability inclusion, which indicates the Pearson correlation coefficient as .752 and p-value as .000 ($p < .01$). It exhibits a positive linear relationship between the variables and accepts the hypothesis. H1, i.e., SMM bridges the disability inclusion gap in marketing-related activities of EWDs. Thus, it has been proved that SMM positively correlates with bridging the disability inclusion gap significantly.

Findings of the Study

The study revealed that SMM is highly effective for micro- and small-level EWDs in the central region of Kerala, particularly in the areas of promotion, sales, and CRM. In the case of promotion, SMM allows EWDs to promote their products and services at a significantly lower cost compared to traditional marketing channels. The study highlights that EWDs find SMM to be highly flexible for sharing content and generating awareness, with user-generated content (e.g., sharing by friends or customers) playing a crucial role in expanding their market reach. This aspect of SMM helps to overcome the challenges of physical mobility and enables EWDs to reach a wider audience from the comfort of their homes or accessible workplaces. In respect to sales, the findings show that SMM is effective in facilitating sales activities among EWDs, with many respondents noting that it simplifies the sales process and enhances profitability. By offering a direct and convenient sales channel, SMM reduces the dependence on physical outlets, making it easier for EWDs to operate businesses without the need for extensive physical infrastructure. This is especially beneficial in reducing travel-related challenges and costs associated with traditional sales methods. Furthermore, SMM has proven to be an invaluable tool for fostering meaningful customer relationships, with respondents indicating a high level of satisfaction in their ability to connect, communicate, and engage with customers through social media platforms. Instant feedback mechanisms, such as comments and messages, allow EWDs to respond quickly to customer inquiries and feedback, helping them build long-term relationships. This real-time interaction enhances customer trust and loyalty, which are critical for sustaining small businesses.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings of this study is the strong positive correlation between SMM and the reduction of the disability inclusion gap in marketing-related activities. The Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.752 ($p < 0.001$) indicates a strong relationship between the use of SMM and the inclusion of EWDs in the broader business community. Thus, SMM helps mitigate various barriers such as travel difficulties, over-dependence on others, physical accessibility issues, and communication challenges. It empowers EWDs to engage more confidently in marketing activities, enhancing their sense of independence and competence in a competitive marketplace.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In the age of rapid changes and digitalisation of the whole range of marketing activities, this research paper provided insight into the effectiveness of SMM among micro and small-level EWDs in the central region of Kerala. While EWDs face significant challenges in marketing activities ranging from mobility restrictions to communication barriers, a lack of accessibility in traditional marketing platforms, and an absence of a disabled-friendly business environment, the digitalisation of businesses offers an unprecedented opportunity to overcome these barriers. The results of this study clearly demonstrate that SMM is highly effective for EWDs, particularly in the dimensions of promotion, sales, and CRM. These findings suggest that digital marketing tools not only enhance visibility and awareness for micro and small businesses but also enable EWDs to efficiently manage customer interactions and relationships, which were traditionally difficult due to physical and societal barriers.

Thus, the study concludes that SMM is not merely a marketing tool but a critical enabler for bridging the disability inclusion gap and enhancing the confidence and self-sufficiency of EWDs.

To further amplify the positive effects of SMM, the study suggests several key measures. Comprehensive training and action plans be developed to enhance the digital marketing skills of EWDs, focusing on the full potential of SMM. These training programs should be customized to address the specific needs of EWDs, providing them with practical tools to manage their businesses independently. In addition, creating awareness about the advantages of SMM for EWDs can further empower them to embrace digital marketing. Governments and institutions should also consider incentivizing the adoption of digital marketing among EWDs through grants, subsidies, or tax benefits, ensuring they have the necessary resources to invest in technology and infrastructure.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

The present study specifically examined micro- and small-level entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWDs) in the central districts of Kerala. To enhance the findings and applicability of the research, future studies could explore this relationship across different geographical regions and expand the sample size for more generalizable results. Additionally, further investigations could assess the effectiveness of social media marketing (SMM) beyond the dimensions of promotion, sales, and customer relationship management (CRM). Understanding how SMM contributes to enhancing the competencies of EWDs in various contexts would provide a more comprehensive view of its impact on their entrepreneurial success.

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