

Twitter and the Opportunity for Small Business Entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract *Twitter is extensively used by small business entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia especially by virtual shop owners. This preliminary study aimed to identify the reasons that make small business entrepreneurs use Twitter in their businesses; and to determine the level of effectiveness of the use of Twitter. We gather quantitative and qualitative data using survey questionnaire. We found that the employment of Twitter as a virtual shop is growing continuously in the last two years. Results of this study have shown that Twitter is perceived as a valuable tool in customer acquisition, advertising, and sales. The study also reveals that Twitter has many positives with major concern of the apprehension of dealing with unknown persons. Overall, Twitter is exploited as an effective tool among small business entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia.*

Keywords: *electronic commerce; social network; Twitter; small business; Saudi Arabia.*

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1. Introduction

Social commerce is an evolutionary type of commerce that is mediated by social media and mobility. Thus, the effective use of social media as marketing tools to boost sales volume has become on the top of businessmen agenda. Many studies in social commerce have showed that social media are useful and important in image building, strengthening relationship, and networking among business entrepreneurs and customers. The numbers of entrepreneurs who are adding a social layer (such as *Twitter* accounts) to their marketing activities are growing rapidly. Although *Twitter* users are mainly online consumers; big, medium and small enterprises benefit from *Twitter* capabilities. Researchers argue that entrepreneurs are highly creative individuals with a tendency to imagine new solutions by finding opportunities for profit or reward [7]. Therefore, many small business entrepreneurs already utilize *Twitter* accounts as virtual stores and as a communication channel with customers such as many Saudi e-commerce entrepreneurs. The observable growing numbers of this kind of businesses need more investigations; to study who, why, and how entrepreneurs use *Twitter* for e-commerce, to recognize the reasons and benefits that persuade their adoption, and to find the degree of effectiveness of the use of *Twitter* in this type of e-commerce.

The purpose of this research paper is to achieve a broader understanding of the use of *Twitter* as a virtual e-shop by running a preliminary survey that study using of small business entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce a literature review about e-commerce as well as marketing using social networks. Subsequently, we present our problem definition. Next, the results of our survey is detailed and discussed. Finally, conclusions and further work is presented.

2. Literature Review

Nowadays, new generations of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets have become very popular, and can be used for a variety of applications including mobile commerce which can be simply defined as the buying and selling of products and services through the use of wireless mobile devices. According to Business Intelligence most recent report (2013) [1], an estimation of 29% of mobile users have now made a purchase with their smartphones. Moreover, Bank of America predicts \$67.1 Billion in purchases will be made from mobile devices by European and U.S. shoppers in 2015[1]. Accordingly, m-commerce is very valuable because customers are able to conduct deals and acquire information from different locations. Privacy and security are the major concern for m-commerce; revealing a lack of trust in a variety of situations that directly influence users like fraud and hackers seeing that billions of mobile devices are accessing the Internet without any security mechanism. In addition, confidentiality and authenticity is a concern especially those involving payment.

2.1. The Evolution of Social Commerce

As a relatively new phenomenon, social commerce has evolved promptly in practice. However, social

commerce has achieved slight awareness from researchers in the IS discipline [14]. The trend of social commerce is brought about by the integration of Web 2.0 technologies, e-business opportunities, and online communities. Therefore, the involvement of the social media element is what differentiates a social commerce site from an ordinary e-commerce site. The theory of social commerce is wide-ranging such that, it can include exchange of opinions, ideas, sentiments or services; and it can integrate online and offline commerce activities by combining brick-and-mortar commerce, e-commerce, and mobile commerce [14]. Social commerce sites include features such as customer ratings and reviews, user recommendations, social shopping tools and online communities. These features create a trusted environment where friends and family contribute content to the recommendations using positive and negative feedback, reviews, ratings and testimonials regarding their past and present experiences.

2.2. Social Media and Marketing

People have consumed the internet applications and online social communities to a degree unimaginable in the last decade. Consequently, marketing has been highly affected by developments in social communication brought by social networks. Social networks have reversed the traditional vendor/customer relationship due to the ability of customers to consult each other instantaneously [9]. In addition, social media marketing offers a variety of sensible advantages in business activities such as boosting brand awareness by sending continuous positive images of the company on social media networks such as *Twitter*. Basically, social media marketing should not be regarded as simply an add-on to a search engine marketing, but it should be a form of powerful marketing tool that could potentially reach Millions of consumers and without doubt, social media provides companies huge savings in marketing costs [8].

Woodall and Colby (2011) [15] described significant factors that make people adopt social media over traditional media. One of the most important factors is that users utilize social networks to get information from other users or for seeking advice that is inherent trust inside it. Social media users are typically perceived as unbiased and can be viewed as experts as their recommendations are seen as more trustworthy than recommendations from salesmen who are perceived to have profitable intentions [15].

Many studies that have been conducted on the use of social networks in businesses have stressed the importance of their use in marketing. For example, Neergard [6] studied social networking activities in technology-based entrepreneurial groups, and Sorenson and Schlovski [10] studied the role of

technology in business networking practices. These studies show that there is a rising movement in the use of social media for business purposes. However, small business entrepreneurs are users of this technology and are not excluded from utilizing social media for image building, strengthening relationship, and networking with customers.

2.3. The Use of Twitter for E-commerce

Launched on July 13, 2006, *Twitter* is very popular online microblogging service. It has a very large user base with more than 500 million users[12]. We can imagine the power of *Twitter* while judging *Twitter* against Facebook, *Twitter* has similar conception as Facebook; but, Facebook posts are seen only by those on Facebook friends list, while *Twitter* is crawled by all the search engines and any *Twitter* user can see tweets.

Many businesses and organizations are using *Twitter* to advertise products and broadcast information to consumers. *Twitter* obviously boosts the level of interactivity in communication between businesses and customers because of its potential in the adapted and personalized communication with consumers who follow particular business *Twitter* account [2]. Researches interested in websites have found that increased interactivity is correlated with higher understanding and a more positive response from recipient to the website's subject [2]. According to the most recent report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, *Twitter* usage is highly correlated with the use of mobile technologies, especially smartphones [13]. In actual fact, many entrepreneurs have discovered that *Twitter* is very effective for the communication with their customers. A recent study by Compete Inc. found that consumers who exposed to tweets from retail companies are more likelihood to visit and purchase [11].

2.4. Building Trustworthiness

One of the high barriers that prevent the use of e-commerce among consumers is the lack of trust towards Web providers when exchanging money and personal information with them [4]. One essential question about e-commerce is how trust is achieved between unfamiliar entrepreneurs and customers. The absence of physical contact while shopping online makes the issue of trust more crucial on the web than in the real world. Trust is important in an e-commerce environment because it decreases perceived risk, perceptions of uncertainty, and positively affects purchase intention. Trust is naturally constructed steadily through continuing social interactions. Thus, the lack of social contact with e-vendors considered to be one of the main barriers making online customers hesitate to perform purchase decisions. However, social presence can be carried out in online interactions

through the web interface forming a medium that go beyond normal relationships in which social interactions can facilitates a sense of connection, understanding, interaction, and involvement among contributors in motivating online shoppers' internal sentimental and cognitive states [5]. Accordingly, the web interface can communicate social presence by means of sensitive human contact that can directly or indirectly trigger customers' trust beliefs in order to influence their purchase intentions positively[3]. Consequently, increased trust leads to raising positive attitude to online shopping in addition to positively influences individuals' purchase intentions.

3. Problem Definition

Considering that *Twitter* are extensively used in Saudi Arabia and are popular among Saudi people in addition to the increasing numbers of virtual e-shops on *Twitter*, we wanted to investigate the adoption of *Twitter* by small business entrepreneurs, to find out if *Twitter* is an effective mechanism for generating growth and value, and to investigate factors that influence the entrepreneurs in using *Twitter*.

3.1. Research Questions

Specifically, the following research questions are to be answered:

- Q1. How do small business entrepreneurs adopt and use *Twitter* in their businesses?
- Q2. What are the reasons and benefits of using *Twitter* by small business entrepreneurs?
- Q3. What are the potential problems with the purchasing process?
- Q4. To what degree is the effectiveness of the use of *Twitter* by the small business entrepreneurs?
- Q5. What respondents believe about customers' degree of trust in purchasing through *Twitter*?
- Q6. What are positive and negative aspects of using *Twitter* by small business entrepreneurs?

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Data Collection

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were collected using a questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed using *Twitter* direct message service by sending the questionnaire to 250 active virtual shop accounts who already agree to follow our account for this purpose (from 615 account that we ask for follow back). The questionnaire was answered by 112 entrepreneurs. The duration of data gathering was 4 weeks.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

In quantitative data, data collected from the respondents were computed and analyzed using descriptive statistics namely, percentage, frequency counts and mean. Qualitative data are obtained from two optional open-ended questions about factors that influenced their perceptions of *Twitter* usage in e-commerce, both negatively and positively. Answers will be analyzed to determine which factors are most important to the respondents. All questionnaire items have been pre-tested and pilot tested with good results.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Respondents' Demographic Profile

Based on the survey, female respondents represented about 90 percent of the total respondents while male respondents represented 10 percent. This finding is due to some factors that make ladies more involved in small businesses. One possible factor is the unemployment amongst women in Saudi Arabia; however, this possible assumption needs further investigation as our questionnaire did not ask about whether respondents are employed or not.

In the case of age distribution, the majority of the respondents was between the ages of 18 to 25 (44.64 %) and of 26 to 35 (43.75 %), that means nearly 89% are between 18 and 35 which emphasize the popularity of *Twitter* in youths more than older ages. Moreover, a majority of the respondents was well educated seeing 66.96% are holding Bachelor degree in addition to nearly 7% are holding post graduate degree. The last characteristic implies that our respondents are highly skilled and choose *Twitter* for sufficient reasons (See Table 1 for detailed characteristics of the survey respondents).

4.2. Adoption of *Twitter* in Small Businesses

As could be predictable, we found that the employment of *Twitter* as a virtual shop by respondents is growing continuously in the last 6 months seeing that a total of 41 % of respondents have started using *Twitter* as a virtual shop in the last six months at the time of the survey; in addition to, 27% started from more than 6 months and less than one year. 25% have been using *Twitter* from more than one year and less than two years. Fewer respondents are early adopters and started from 3 or 4 years (7%). This rapid growing indicates that *Twitter* is becoming more and more popular and continuously attracts more small business entrepreneurs to employ *Twitter* capabilities for their emergent businesses.

Regarding respondent's kind of businesses, we asked our respondents about the type of products or services they are selling. The majority of our sample (59%) is selling apparels and accessories (including

leather goods) following by hospitality and food (21%). Perfume and beauty products represent 14% while brokers who provide services of buying over the Internet sites are representing 10%, in addition to electronic devices and accessories which represent about 8%. Moreover, a number of respondents (18%) are offering more than one type of products or services. Besides, some respondents (11.6%) mention other businesses such as gifts and gift wrapping, party and event planning, party supplies, and party themes and decorations, as well as, one female respondent mention that she sells her own paintings.

Regarding the number of followers, the majority of respondents (48%) were having between 1001 and 5000 followers while 21% have less than 1000 followers. Fewer respondents (15%) have between 5001 and 10000 followers and 11% have between 10001 and 20000 followers. Four respondents (4%) have between 20001 and 50000 followers. Only one respondent has more than 50000 followers. From the data, it is obviously that, number of followers is directly proportional to the age of the account which emphasizes *Twitter* capability in customer acquisition. Regarding payment method, the majority of our respondents (nearly 83%) require a transfer to their bank accounts. About 61% allow Cash on Delivery (COD) method and nearly 45% accept both methods (COD and bank transfer). Only one respondent is requiring Visa or MasterCard.

The contact with customers is mainly carried out through WhatsApp (82%) and/or Twitter (70.54%) combined with other methods such as phone calls (36.6%), emails (16%), text messages (15%), and BlackBerry Messenger (9%). Most respondents use a combination of two or more contact methods.

Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics.

	N	%*
Gender		
Male	11	10%
Female	101	90%
Age		
Less than 18	0	0%
18-25	50	44%
26-35	49	43%
36-45	13	12%
46-55	0	0%
56 and over	0	0%
Education		
Less than secondary education	1	1%
Secondary education	18	16%
Post-secondary diploma	10	9%
Bachelor degree	75	66%
Post graduate	8	8%

*Percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

4.3. How to use *Twitter* for e-Commerce

The respondents' adoption of *Twitter* and how they benefit from *Twitter* in their businesses is very important to understand the emergence of this new trend of e-commerce. To find out, we asked if respondents were using *Twitter* capabilities for 6 activates. Respondents indicated their answers on five-point Likert scales (1= Never; 5= Frequently). We then present the result in percentage to represent how frequently they do these activates.

Overall, we found that large majorities of respondents are using *Twitter* frequently or very often for most activates we have asked about; mainly for advertising and responding to customers' queries (see Table 2).

Table 1. Respondents Activities by Frequency of Use.

Activity	FREQUENCY OF USE * (N = 112)				
	Frequently	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Completion of the purchase process for customers.	30%	19%	19%	17%	15%
Advertising	82%	11%	4%	2%	1%
Dissemination of promotional offers for goods.	65%	13%	9%	6%	6%
Identify the needs of customers.	49%	19%	22%	5%	4%
Respond to customers' queries.	80%	13%	5%	1%	1%
Monitoring competitive electronic stores.	25%	20%	25%	23%	7%

*Percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

4.4. How *Twitter* Benefits Small Virtual Businesses

The major benefits of *Twitter* can be expressed in four aspects: customer attraction, increase sales, build customer relationship, and the expansion by selling new products and services. In the survey, we provide these suggested benefits and ask respondents to specify their level of agreement to each of them. Respondents indicated their answers to statements on five-point Likert scales (1=Strongly disagree; 5=Strongly agree).

From the results, large majorities of respondents have recorded positive agreement (agreed or strongly agreed) with every one of the 4 potential benefits about which they were asked. The highest levels of agreement were for the statement that *Twitter* can attract customers (96% agreed or strongly agreed), and *Twitter* helps in increase sales volume (92% agreed or strongly agreed). Also, they feel more connected to customers (92% agreed or strongly agreed). *Twitter* also help our respondents in introducing new products and service as 91% agreed or strongly agreed. Thus, *Twitter* is very helpful in generating growth and value (see Figure 1).

4.5. Potential Problems with The Purchase Process

In our survey, we wanted to know the potential problems that can lead customers to non-completion of the purchasing process. We asked respondents by offering 6 reasons that they can select one or more as well as they can suggest other reasons. The uppermost answer selected by respondents was the apprehension of dealing with unknown person (about 59%). The second main reason is that customers do not wish to transfer the purchase amount until the receipt of the goods (about 54%). Another major reason is concerning delivery and shipping charges if it is higher than the price of the goods in some cases (about 30%). The lack of after sales services (such as return or replacement of the item) and guarantees prevent customers from purchasing (25%). Other reasons like the duration of delivery (17%) and the fear of data theft over the Internet (about 4%) also selected as possible reasons. Some respondents mentioned other reasons such as product being different from the displayed image, and price comparison with others resulting in canceling of orders.

4.6. Effectiveness and Trust of *Twitter*

In our survey, we wanted to know if respondents believed that *Twitter* is effective and helping their businesses. To find out, we asked respondents about what the degree of effectiveness of *Twitter* in their running businesses. Respondents indicated their answers to statements on five-point Likert scales (1=very low; 5=very high). Overall, about 40% of the respondents believe that *Twitter* is very highly effective and 40% believe it is highly effective. Nearly 19% believe that the effectiveness of *Twitter* is moderate while only two respondents choose very low for this question.

Moreover, we asked respondents about what they believe about customers' degree of trust in purchasing through *Twitter*. Respondents indicated their answers to statements on five-point Likert scales (1=very low; 5= very high). About 48% believe that *Twitter* is moderate trusted by customers while 35% of them believe that it is highly trusted and 13% believe that it is very highly trusted. Only 4% of respondents believe that trust in *Twitter* entrepreneur is low.

4.7. Pros and Cons of Using *Twitter*

In our survey, the respondents were having two optional open-ended questions about factors that influenced their perceptions of *Twitter*, both negatively and positively. Answers were analyzed to determine which factors are most important to the respondents. The findings have brought many implications and provide interesting insights into the factors that influence entrepreneurs trust in using *Twitter*. We

identify a variety of positive and negative aspects that emerge from respondents' answers that will be written in double quotes.

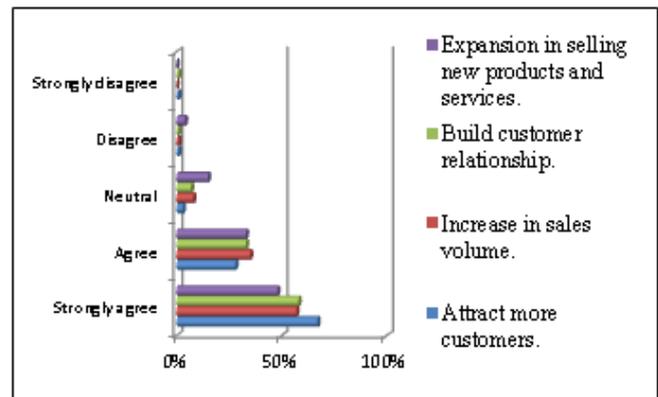


Figure 1. Respondents agreement as related to *Twitter* benefits.

4.7.1. Positive Aspects

The positive aspects are as follows:

- **Ease of use:** One respondent said “I can easily present my products to customers using photos and explanations; actually, the use of phones' cameras make our customer trust us more because there are no effects on photos”.
- **Customer acquisition:** Finding new customers is the most important challenge for small businesses. The qualitative data confirm that *Twitter* is becoming effective customer acquisition tool. Many respondents reported that *Twitter* really help them targeting and acquiring new customers.
- **Marketing:** Small businesses entrepreneurs typically find themselves have to work on marketing their businesses every day. Our sample's answers reveal that our respondents try reaching customers by gaining followers and asking them to retweet about their goods and promotions; and by the time, they acquire more loyal customers who won't mind constantly retweet for them. Furthermore, our respondents' answers show that *Twitter* is a great place for execute a viral marketing campaign by spreading tweets and repetitive retweets by followers. One respondent talk about his marketing strategy, he said: “reaching people through *Twitter* can attract almost all age groups; *Twitter* incorporates all age groups and then we can focus on the appropriate customers for certain commodity; this smart idea is working and has many advantages”.
- **Free advertising:** *Twitter* is a very cost-effective way for small businesses to reach targeted audience. Respondents mentioned that *Twitter* offer free advertising such that “retweets makes advertising reaches more people”.
- **Increase sales:** Respondents stated that *Twitter* helpful in “increasing sales” that is “with no

overhead costs and no labor, minimizes the cost, which makes the merchandise more attractive and you sell more”.

- **Supplement income:** some respondents mention that this kind of business has supplement their income considering there is no rent, no licenses expenses, no overhead costs and no labor.
 - **Job opportunity:** One lady finally found a solution for her problem. She said “I am unemployed lady who seek job for more than five years; and I like business and business administration but I do not have any resources; for that reason, I work in marketing with a merchant; after two weeks of tweeting, I get many retweets and achieve something”. Other lady said, “using *Twitter*, I can balance between my family and my business; and because it is free, it reduce cost resulting in competitive prices”.

4.7.2. Negative Aspects

On the other hand, respondents mention a number of negatives. However the negative responses were less than positives as about half of respondents said there are no negatives at all. Yet, there is always an “apprehensive about the person in the other side whether he is a buyer or seller”; therefore, fraud is a major concern. One responded reported, “some customers worried about buying via the internet and *Twitter* in particular; because they were a victim of fraud or because it is first time for them”.

Many respondents mention that negative or harmful comments from people can annoy them such as “bad comments” or “too many comparisons that used as detraction”; and as a result, “some negative responses may influence the opinion of the customer about us”. Furthermore, the negative comments may affect potential customers since “some *Twitter* followers, and without prior knowledge, they unjustly spreading false information about our products for provocation purposes”. However, “there are no problems when choosing the people you follow and followers carefully”.

Another problem is regarding the credibility of the customers such as disappearing after ordering especially when using cash on receipt method. Furthermore, customers sometimes don’t trust goods whether it is genuine or fake due to the lack of guarantee, as well some customers think the shipping cost is too expensive. Stealing ideas is another drawback of the open community of *Twitter* “especially if new and innovative idea”.

Regarding advertising, there is a difficulty in reaching many tweeps and some are not willing to retweet. Another difficulty is in persuading the customer in the product quality “because the image sometimes is not enough, and there is no sufficient evidence on the quality of the products”.

5. Conclusion and Future Work

This preliminary study has provided an overview of how Saudi small business entrepreneurs use *Twitter* as a virtual e-shop for selling many kinds of goods and services. Most of the respondents to our study fall into what is frequently described as the Digital Generation or Net Generation. The study concludes that there are many reasons and benefits that make small business entrepreneurs use *Twitter* such as customer attraction and acquisition. However, the apprehension of dealing with unknown person may prevent customers from completing the purchasing process. In terms of level of effectiveness, *Twitter* was being highly effective for most respondents. Most respondents believe that customers’ degree of trust in purchasing through *Twitter* is moderate. From qualitative data, respondents are more willing to mention positive aspects of their experience with *Twitter* such as free advertising and marketing as well as the reach of customers. Negative comments from some people on *Twitter* are the main negative aspect since this may affect potential customers and merchant’s reputation as well. Another negative is the credibility of the some customers in opposition to customer’s fear of fraud. Overall, it can be concluded that *Twitter* is effective tool among small business entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia.

Since this study is a preliminary study and focused on a limited sample size, therefore, a larger study should be carried out in order to be more conclusive. It is recommended for future research to conduct additional studies to more accurately reveal further dimensions of *Twitter* usage. Future studies could also consider the usage of other social networks besides *Twitter*. Factors that emerged from qualitative data should also be included and studied among focus groups of small business entrepreneurs to provide more understanding of the positive and negative aspect of *Twitter* usage.

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