



Waterford Institute of Technology

INSTITIÚID TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA PHORT LÁIRGE

**The Application of Social Media Marketing as a
Business Driver for Small to Medium Enterprises in
Ireland**

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Ethical Declaration

I declare that this proposal is wholly my own work except where I have made explicit reference to the work of others. I have read the relevant notes, guidelines and procedures on conducting academic writing and research and hereby declare that this proposal is in line with these requirements.

I have uploaded the entire proposal as one file to Turnitin in Moodle, examined my 'Originality Report' by viewing the detail behind the overall 'Similarity Index', and have addressed any matches that exceed 3%. I have made every effort to minimise my overall 'Similarity Index' score and the number of matches occurring.

*The author has used some of his own text from a document submitted to Dr. Séan Byrne for the module "Research Methods" in December 2015. Due to this, some percentages on Turnitin are above 3%.

Signed: _____

John Harney

Date: _____

August 22nd 2016

Dedication

This study is dedicated to two people who I lost in the past few months. These people were a huge part of my life in different ways but both were hugely important to me.

To my Grandad, Nicky, I always expected you to be around forever. Unfortunately you left us in March and in doing so you left a void that can never be filled by anyone or anything. Even though you were my Grandad, you were and always will be regarded as one of my best friends. You will stay with me forever and I will never forget you. This is for you.

To Michael, you were a big part of my life right from the beginning and you will never be forgotten. I know this is not a pint, a box of cigarettes or a tip for a horse, but this is for you nonetheless.

I miss you both so much.

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To those who participated in the research process, namely the five interview respondents – thank you all for your time and cooperation. To my classmates, I never expected the year to turn out like it did. I had a great year and made some great friends along the way. We had a tough year but we enjoyed ourselves as well. We had our few nights out and Da Blokhut will always be something I will remember fondly but for me, the best times we had were in the postgrad room in the afternoon and the evenings where the work was left on the long finger and the laugh was non stop. A particular highlight is scoring in the penalty shootout to decide the 5-a-side series....a great day!

To my girlfriend Laura, if it was not for you I would never have returned to education and I thank you for helping me out in so many different ways throughout the year. It has been a difficult few months but I feel it has all been worth it. We now look to the future. Thank you for everything.

Finally, to Mam and Dad. All I can say is thank you and I hope you eventually see a return on your investment. Anything I have ever needed it has never been questioned – it has just been done. You are the best and I am so grateful for everything. Thank you.

SEJ forever.

Abstract

This study investigates the use of social media marketing in small to medium enterprises (SMEs).

The use of social media has increased significantly in the last decade or so. The introduction of social media platforms has seen companies, big and small, establish themselves on social networks in order to create a strong online presence. Although it is obvious that these companies are present on social media, very little literature is available relating to SMEs. The literature currently available on social media marketing is related to larger corporations and little is known about SMEs and how social media applies to them. With so much focus being placed on social media in society today, the author wanted to investigate the topic of social media marketing in SMEs.

The objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the application of social media marketing as a business driver in SMEs. The author's research methodology generates qualitative data that was retrieved from interviews carried out with representatives of five SMEs based in Waterford. Each interviewee was carefully chosen by the author and was chosen due to their respective companies' presence on social media sites. The author felt these individuals were the most appropriate to interview for this study.

The key findings of the study identifies several similarities between each company and also the benefits of social media marketing. The main reason companies use social media is to market themselves to their target audience. There is an increased focus on social media use compared to traditional marketing and advertising outlets such as newspapers and radio due to the type of customer they are aiming to target. In the research process, it has become clear that SMEs place a huge emphasis on social media marketing and construct specially designed marketing plans based around social media.

It has been found that social media has become a vital tool for SMEs to get their brand noticed in the local areas. The companies the author focused on for this study are all based in Waterford and through the research process, the author has found that if used in the correct manner, social media marketing can be a hugely effective business driver for SMEs.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.0 Introduction to the study

The intention of this study is to explore the use of social media marketing in small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in Ireland. According to Kietzman *et al.* (2011) social media platforms are used by individuals from all walks of life. Due to the high degree in which social media is being used, companies now see it as a way of reaching the target market. Social media marketing differs from traditional methods such as television, radio and newspapers and the author is aiming to gain a better understanding of social media use in a marketing context from the perspective of an SME.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

The main reason the author chose to conduct research surrounding the use of social media as a business driver in SMEs in Ireland is due to the high number of small businesses in the country. Much of the current literature focuses on social media from the perspective of large companies, with limited focus on SMEs. SMEs account for 99.7 per cent of all registered companies in Ireland and employ 68 per cent of the total workforce (Burke-Kennedy, 2014). According to Wright *et al.* (2010) consumers have moved away from more traditional marketing communications and begun paying more attention to new possibilities as a result of the emergence of social media. Companies have recognised this and have established themselves on social media platforms in order to reach the consumer.

The author is interested in exploring the extent to which such companies use social media as a marketing tool, given its national popularity. The author is also determined to explore why SMEs place an emphasis on social media marketing and what it can offer the company in terms of exposure to the target market. Published studies, such as Conley (2014) and Berthon *et al.* (2012), have shown that there are advantages of social media marketing but the author wishes to establish what advantages SMEs can gain through its adaption and use. On social media platforms, SMEs have thousands of followers but it remains to be seen if these followers are actually customers and whether companies have turned these followers into a source of revenue.

1.2 Research Objective and Research Questions

After reviewing the existing literature on the topic of social media marketing the author established his research objective. The research objective of this study is to discover the effectiveness of “*The Application of Social Media Marketing as a Business Driver in Small to Medium Enterprises in Ireland*”.

The author’s research questions are as follows:

- How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?
- How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?
- What benefits have Irish SMEs realised from the application of social media marketing and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?
- What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

1.3 Methodology of the Study

The author conducted secondary research in the form of a literature review to analyse existing research findings. This allowed the author to identify research questions that helped to formulate the objective of the study.

Primary research was conducted to help satisfy the author’s overall objective. This research was conducted in the form of case studies based on five SMEs based in Ireland. The author analysed company documents and social media platforms of the SMEs, then created a set of interview questions based on the objectives of the study. The results of the research were analysed and the author outlined the answers in the findings chapter. The findings chapter precedes the discussion chapter, in which the author compares the research findings and literature review. To conclude this study, the author presents a recommendations chapter to aid future research that may be carried out on the topic of social media marketing in small to medium enterprises.

1.4 Structure of the Study

This dissertation is based on the research objective that are shown in section 1.2 of this chapter. In total, the report consists of six chapters outlined as follows:

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The first chapter will introduce the reader to the subject this dissertation aims to explore. The author will provide a rationale for the study and will also highlight the research questions and objective. An outline of the research methodology as well as a summary of the structure of the study is also provided.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Chapter two provides an extensive review of the existing literature relating to the chosen area of research for the author. The author explores the research available on social media and small to medium enterprises (SME). The literature surrounding the linkage of social media and SMEs is then examined.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

Chapter three highlights the research methodology undertaken for the study. The reader will be familiarised with the research question and objectives as first seen in chapter 1. The author justifies the choice of this research area. Potential ethical implications are also discussed

Chapter 4 – Research Findings

Chapter four presents the research findings in relation to the objective set by the author at the beginning of the study. The data collected from both the document and social media analyses in addition to the interviews carried out for this study will be discussed in the form of mini-case studies.

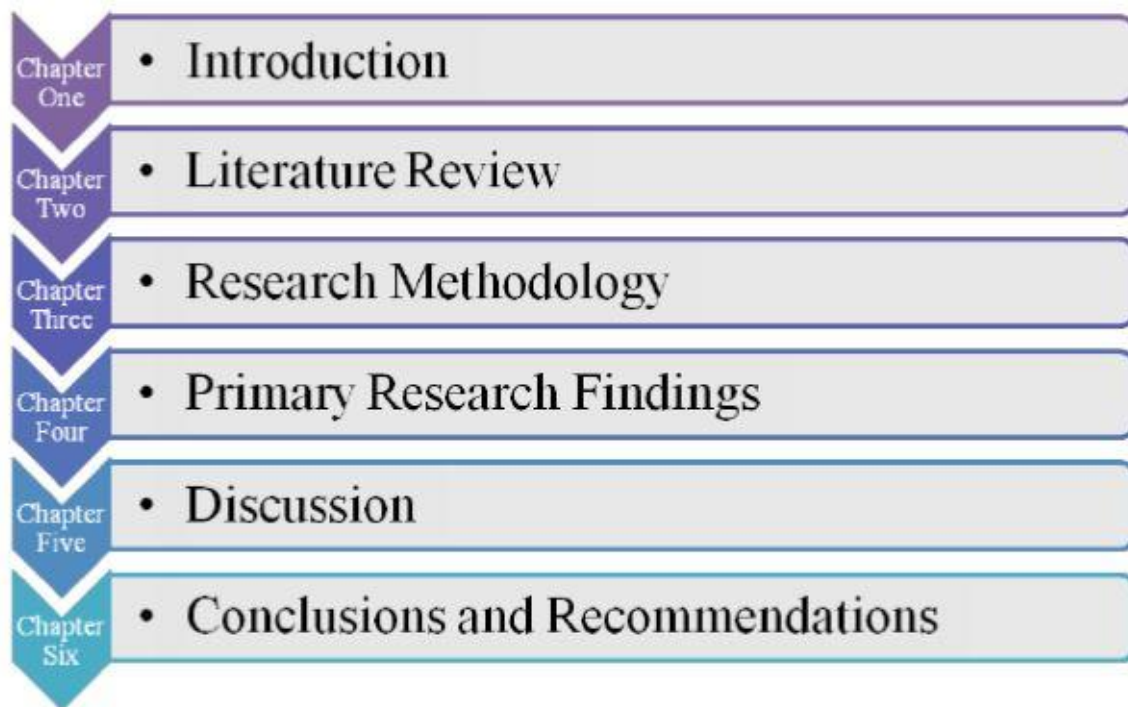
Chapter 5 - Discussion

Chapter five will compare the literature from chapter two with the data collected, analysed and presented in chapter four. The author will ultimately identify any contrasting areas between the literature review and results of data collection.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions & Recommendations

Chapter six concludes the research project. The author will provide a summary of the research findings, and also provide suggestions and recommendations for further marketing research that may be explored.

Figure 1.1: Structure of the Study



1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the author provided an introduction to the study. The author also provided a rationale for choosing the topic of social media marketing in SMEs. This helped the author form the research objective and the research questions of the study. Furthermore, the methodology of the study and an overall structure has been outlined.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will review the literature relating to social media and its use in marketing. The author will introduce and define social media, outline the different types of social media site (also known as platforms) and then highlight the characteristics of these platforms. The author will discuss SMEs and a section outlining marketing strategies and how these are applied in SMEs is provided. Social media marketing and how it can be advantageous to SMEs is discussed. Benefits and challenges of social media marketing for SMEs are then outlined and finally, a conclusion to the chapter is provided.

2.1 Introduction to Social Media

According to Kaeplein and Heinlein (2010) “social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. Web 2.0 is a term that has been given to various grouped internet applications such as sharing of information, interaction and collaboration in a way that is user friendly. Social Media refers to web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organisations to create, engage and share new or existing content in digitalised environments through multi-way communications (Davis III *et al.*, 2012).

There currently exists a rich and diverse ecology of social media sites, which differ in terms of their scope and functionality (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are used by individuals from all walks of life, while others such as LinkedIn are professional networks used by companies and job seekers as a recruitment tool. Instagram, YouTube and Flickr concentrate on the sharing of videos and photos (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

Social media has become a means of connecting organisations and individuals by way of online communication and interaction. According to Constantinides (2006), social media

has become a platform for breaking down the barriers of other forms of interaction such as time and cost through an online medium. Warr (2008) states that social media differs from traditional websites in that it offers users the chance to interact with the website and organisation as well as provide information. Social media enables customers to offer their opinion and make recommendations direct to the company they are connecting with.

2.1.1 Types of Social Media

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) there are approximately six types of social media. There are Social Networking Websites (i.e. Facebook), Content Communities (i.e. Youtube), Blogs, Collaborative Projects (i.e. Wikipedia), Virtual Game Worlds (i.e. World of Warcraft) and Virtual Social Worlds (i.e. Second Life).

New sites appear in cyberspace every day, so it is important that any classification scheme takes into account applications which may be forthcoming (Kaplaen and Haenlein, 2010). To better classify social media use, Kaplaen and Haenlein formulated a table, shown in figure 2.1, of classification using what they regard to be the two key elements of social media – media research and social process.

Figure 2.1: Types of Social Media

		Social presence/ media richness			Comments
		Low	Medium	High	
Self presentation / Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second life)	Focus on the person behind the content.
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g. YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)	Focus on specific content (virtual game worlds have more strict rules than virtual social worlds)
Comments		Just text	Text, videos and pictures	Replicates face-to-face interaction	

Source: Kaplaen and Haenlein 2010

2.1.2 Facebook

Launched in the United States in 2004, Facebook has become the biggest social media website in the world (Ellison *et al.* , 2014). Originally started as a networking service

exclusively available to Harvard University students, by late 2005 Facebook's popularity spread to other USA universities and eventually became accessible to general public use (Philips, 2007). At the end of 2015, Facebook had 1.44 billion users (Patterson, 2015).

Facebook was launched with the intention of users connecting with their peers on a social basis, but over time it has progressed to become useful as a business and marketing tool. Facebook and indeed social media as a whole has evolved from its start as just another communication platform to becoming a core channel for driving customer engagement (Minsker, 2014). According to Shearman and McCormick (2011) Facebook is no longer a social network, it is now used for defining identities online, and brands now have the opportunity to tap into emotional connections with users. The challenge for brands, and their agencies, is to blend the needs of consumers through search, social and behavioural data.

The evolution of social media and in particular Facebook has changed how companies conduct business. Today, with social media platforms such as Facebook so popular, it allows consumers and businesses to talk to ten million people instead of ten (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Companies using Facebook as a business driver have an opportunity to get noticed by people searching for products or services. The company can connect and engage with both current and potential customers. Facebook can create an online community for a company and promote content including webinars, blog articles, or other available resources. With an estimated 30 million SME pages on Facebook (Ha, 2014) it gives these smaller businesses a better chance to communicate with existing and potential customers.

2.1.3 Twitter

When established in 2006, Twitter was seen as just another social media website that had a range of features that allow users to share and exchange messages, fitting into the broader terrain of social network theory (Merchant, 2011). With the growing availability of easily accessible and low cost mobile technology, a niche area has developed known generically as 'microblogging'. The use of microblogs has become a means of real time commenting on, responding to, and amplifying the impact of current events (Williams *et al.*, 2013).

Twitter has become one of the most popular microblogging platforms available. It allows users to rapidly communicate information in up to 140 characters on a one-to-one, specified group or global basis (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2011). The personal nature of Twitter posts range from the mundane, through emerging information about politics (e.g. the 2016 United States Presidential elections) to helping dealing with emergencies (e.g. Twitter was used to spread word of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015). Twitter has exciting business potential when used strategically (Beckwith, 2009) and SMEs can use Twitter to enagage with customers, as well as promote special offers or competitions. Twitter allows companies to develop and promote their brand, interact with both existing and potentially new customer base and most importantly track what people are saying about a company and brand. As of the end of 2015, Twitter has over 320 million active users (Patterson, 2015).

2.1.4 Instagram

Launched in 2010, Instagram is fast becoming one of the most popular social media platforms with over 400 million active accounts (Ueland, 2015). Instagram is a social media website that users can link to their Facebook, Twitter and other social media accounts, and also upload photographs simultaneously to linked accounts. According to the Instagram website (2015) there are over 80 million photographs uploaded every day. The website is now being used by companies as a business and marketing tool to promote and grow their brand. According to Ueland (2015), Instagram is a place for businesses to develop and post engaging content, monitor posts and campaigns, and analyse their engagement with an expanding audience.

Instagram engagement is largely carried out on mobile devices. The evolution of mobile technology now means that users have better access to social media, email and many other digitalised applications. According to Kemp (2015) there are over 2 billion social media accounts worldwide, with more than half of these accounts active on mobile devices. Use of PCs to access the internet in Ireland has fallen from 77 per cent to 56 per cent in the last two years (Weckler, 2015). Weckler also states that the proportion of web traffic on phones in Ireland is almost a third higher than the European average and 10 per cent higher than the USA.

2.2 Characteristics of Social Media Sites

There are characteristics specific to social media that set them apart from more traditional forms of media or online content (Inkling Media, 2015). According to Saxena (2013), there are several characteristics to a successful social media presence. Saxena lists web-space, web address, the building of profiles, connecting with friends, uploading content in real time, enabling of conversations and the time stamping of posts as the necessary characteristics of social media. Siebert (2014) identifies different characteristics necessary for successful business social media usage. Siebert states that a company's social media should present everywhere the customers are, that it should be disciplined, provoke engagement, be fun to use and be visually driven. The ideal social media savvy brand also has to be trend-focused. Social media is a fun and easy way to gather demographic information and feedback from an audience and whatever the goal is, a campaign can be built to match it (Belosic, 2014). Social media platforms are increasingly being viewed as an additional marketing channel through which businesses can communicate or interact with their customers and prospective future customers (Gummerus *et al*, 2012).

2.3 Characteristics of SMEs

Enterprise-Ireland (2007) provide a definition for SMEs as: “an enterprise that has fewer than 50 employees and has either an annual turnover and/or an annual Balance Sheet total not exceeding €10 million”. In a report published for the European Commission, ECORYS (2012) classify a medium enterprise as an enterprise that employs less than 250 people and has a yearly income less than or equal to €50 million and a balance sheet total of less than or equal to €43 million. Figure 2.2 provides a definition of an SME.

Figure 2.2: Definition of an SME

SME definition

SME: Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

Type	Nb of employees	Turnover	or	Balance sheet total
Medium-Sized	< 250	≤ € 50M		≤ € 43M
Small	< 50	≤ € 10M		≤ € 10M
Micro	< 10	≤ € 2M		≤ € 2M

Annual report on Small and Medium-sized Enterprise in the EU, 2011 – 2012, published by ECORYS, September 2012

10

Source: ECORYS – European Commission Report 2012

SMEs account for 99.7 per cent of all active business enterprises in the Republic of Ireland; they employ 68 per cent of the workforce and generate just over half the Irish state's annual turnover (Burke-Kennedy, 2014).

SMEs differ from larger organisations in various ways such as; differences in organisational structure, different corporate objectives, management style, methods of decision making, resource availability and bargaining power (Beheshti and Lollar, 2003). Such differences ultimately determine how a small organisation must compete with their larger counterparts. Brezinova (2013) states that “in small companies, due to the small number of employees and managers, many functions are accumulated within the competence of only a few workers”. Marketing is quite often carried out on a small scale by SMEs due to budgetary constraints and as a result may not be effective. SMEs

typically lack the capabilities, marketing power, and other resources of larger organisations (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). Business strategies put in place by SMEs can often differ greatly from those of larger organisations, small and large organisations will face different business challenges, and smaller firms should not be classified as miniature versions of larger firms (Pansiri and Temtime, 2010). Hitt and Hoskinson (1996) consider SMEs to be weak at choosing correct organisational structures. Structural fit and decision making in SMEs is often determined by the owner or manager, and they are often found to be concerned with the short term future and less inclined to plan for the long-term future of the organisation.

Although they are often less inclined to plan ahead, SME business practitioners are beginning to recognise that business opportunities exist in effective social media adoption: to build and maintain issues of trust and commitment with key stakeholders in their network, such as customers, and to enhance and maintain quality in those networked relationships (Harris and Rae, 2010).

2.4 Marketing Strategies

Murphy (1996) defined marketing as satisfying the customers' needs and wants but doing so in a profitable manner. Murphy also states that there is a large discourse in determining how to identify these needs and wants and how to satisfy them. Marketing is a process that creates and delivers desired goods and services to customers, and involves activities associated with winning and retaining a loyal customer base (Zimmerer and Scarborough, 2008).

The establishment of a business mission is a process known as strategic planning. Strategic planning is essentially a process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between an organisation's goals, capabilities and its marketing opportunities (Kotler and Armstrong, 2001). In any business, it is essential for a marketing strategy or plan to be established as it gives the organisation a long term vision. This is more applicable to smaller organisations as funding is generally quite small. A company, be it large or small, must have a mission or a vision. A firm's mission must ask questions, such as; what should we do? What products or services do we offer? Who are we offering it to? Where

are we offering it? Answers to all of these questions will give the firm a purpose and a mission (Chee and Harris, 1998).

In order for a company to establish a mission they must first identify the best way of communicating with potential consumers. Digitalisation, and especially social media, have been claimed to transform consumer behaviour (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Consumers are spending an increased amount of time online using social media, so it is important for companies to realise this is the best way of reaching potential customers (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). In terms of developing and implementing a marketing strategy, appealing to the consumer's interests is vital. With the popularity of internet and social media use, it is important for a company to maximise its opportunity to reach consumers. It is important to appeal to consumers, and a company's website can be described as the home of the brand in the online environment (Christodoulides, 2009).

Using online or social media marketing strategies can be difficult for SMEs. Reijonen (2010) states that researchers widely agree that the marketing practiced in SMEs is different from that of large organizations. SMEs typically do not have a large marketing budget compared to larger firms, therefore smaller firms are at a disadvantage compared to their larger counterparts in the business world. SME marketing techniques are informal, reactive and spontaneous, meaning that a gap exists between larger and smaller organisations (Gilmore *et al.*, 2004).

2.4.1 Marketing Strategies in SMEs

It is widely recognised that the management style, operations, and the functions of SMEs differ greatly from that of larger organisations (Knight, 2000). According to Culkin and Smith (2000) "the SME owner or manager is often the key decision maker and is responsible for managing and carrying out many of the functions performed within the organisation such as banking, advertising, and recruitment. The use of specialists, such as advertising or recruitment agencies, is rare". SMEs often face resource constraints, both in terms of time and money. This results in many owners or managers adopting what could be described as a "survival mentality" (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). Due to budget and skill constraints, SME owners or managers must be creative and innovative, as the budget for the enterprise may not allow the business to invest in marketing techniques and

strategies that larger organisations will be able to spend money on (Analoui and Karami, 2003). Zimmerer and Scarborough (2002) highlighted five core principles for developing an effective marketing strategy for SMEs:

- Find a niche and fill it
- Don't just sell, entertain
- Strive to be unique
- Create an identity for the business
- Connect with customers on an emotional level

Zimmerer and Scarborough (2002) recommend that a small business find a niche and then focus on it, allowing the small firm to establish themselves in a way that will allow them to differ from larger firms in the same industry.

2.4.2 Marketing an SME as a Brand

Brand management is an area where studies surrounding SMEs have received little attention from researchers (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Krake, 2005; Wong and Merrilees, 2005; Mowle and Merrilees, 2005; Inskip, 2004, as cited by Spence and Essoussi, 2010). Studies have found that SMEs face problems in marketing their brand to customers (Huang and Brown, 1999). The characteristics of an SME will ultimately determine how the organisation market themselves as a brand and how they market the products or services on offer to customers (Beheshti and Loller, 2003). According to Berthon *et al.* (2008) SMEs lack the spending power that is afforded by larger organisations so it is important that SMEs use their available resources to maximum effect. Berthon *et al.* (2008) state that although SMEs face many limitations, none more-so than budgetary constraints, a successful brand can be built on a modest budget. SMEs often limit spending on developing their brand yet fail to realise that a brand can be established and sustained on a relatively modest budget. According to Calabro (2005) if SMEs brand themselves in the correct way, using suitable methods, their costs will decrease and the organisation will grow. A positive brand image will help develop a strong brand name for the company, and a positive brand image can be attained by appealing to prospective customers (de Courtnatony, 1999). One way an SME can build a build a brand name is by establishing themselves as an attractive organisation in the eyes

of customers. Creating a social media presence will allow a social community to be founded between a brand and its customers. Social media marketing gives companies better communication grounds with consumers to build brand loyalty beyond traditional methods (Jackson, 2011; cited by Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012).

2.5 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is a process that empowers individuals to promote websites, products or services through online social channels, and to communicate with and tap into a much wider community perhaps unavailable via traditional advertising channels (Weinberg, 2009). According to the 2013 Social Media Industry Report (Stelzner, 2013; cited by Ashley and Tuten 2014), 86 per cent of marketers believe social media channels are important components of their marketing initiatives.

Social media marketing techniques often exist to increase brand awareness, increase sales, improve customer service, and implement marketing campaigns. Social media marketing and social media platforms are becoming increasingly important in consumer purchasing decisions, mainly because of the growth of “word of mouth” marketing (Karimi and Naghibi, 2015). For SMEs particularly, word of mouth is hugely important as it negates the disadvantages of a small marketing and advertising budget. Word of mouth is very important to SMEs as it influences two thirds of all consumer sales (Tuten and Solomon, 2014).

When using social media as a marketing tool, marketers should focus on objectives that explicitly recognise the value of operating in the social media environment (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). This value can come from reaching the significantly large numbers of social media users by appealing to their needs and wants, as previously mentioned by Patterson (2015). According to Ashley and Tuten (2014) marketers have embraced social media marketing for a variety of marketing objectives including branding, research, customer relationship management, service, and sales promotions. When choosing a marketing strategy, if an organisation chooses the medium of social media to market a brand product or service it is vital to remember that regardless of the goal, information

about the brand must be relevant to the consumer if the organisation wants the consumer to engage with a brand in self-relevant ways (Schmitt, 2012).

Social media campaigns can help deepen consumer–brand relationships, help marketers uncover common themes in consumer feedback, and persuade consumers to engage with online content (Murdough, 2009; cited by Ashley and Tuten, 2014). By offering engaging content on social media sites, it becomes easier for an organisation to influence a crowd, or in the case of social media influence followers. As social media offers consumers a voice and an opinion, it's important for brands to remember not to tell customers what to do. Instead, it is important to listen to what the customers or followers are telling the brand to do. In doing so a brand can modify and improve what they are offering, thereby influencing the customer (Evans, 2012).

2.5.1 Measuring Social Media Marketing

According to Mulready (2013) it is important for companies to know if their social media activities are worthwhile. For any business, it is important to recognise their objectives and to know why they are using social media marketing. The establishment of a social media strategy will allow a company to set out its objectives.

Return on investment (ROI) is proof that marketing efforts are either working or performing poorly (Eckerling, 2014). Effective social media measurement should start by turning the traditional ROI approach on its head. Instead of emphasising their own marketing investments and calculating the returns in terms of customer response, organisations should begin by considering consumer motivations to use social media and then measure the social media investments customers make as they engage with the companies via social media. These investments can come in the form of follows, likes and shares on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). Hoffman and Fodor (2010) state that customer investments can also be the social media marketing objectives for a company. Many social media marketing objectives exist, but the most important are perhaps creating brand awareness and customer engagement.

2.5.1.1 Brand Awareness

According to Aaker *et al.* (1998) companies operating outside traditional media channels have a greater chance of reaching potential customers and increasing brand awareness. Social media does not take much time to reach customers and has unlimited possibilities. A company can grab the attention of potential customers in a cost-effective manner by being active on social media platforms and increasing their brand exposure (Barnes and Mattson, 2008). Brand awareness is created by anything that can cause a customer to experience a brand and can be achieved by activities such as advertising and promotion. Social media represents one way to expose a consumer to a brand and therefore create brand awareness (Hutter *et al.*, 2013).

2.5.1.2 Customer Engagement

The evolution of the internet and in particular the interactive features of social media in recent years have led to an explosion of interest in customer engagement (Sashi, 2012). According to Wirtz *et al.* (2010) with the interactive nature of social media, its ability to establish two-way conversations among individuals and firms in communities of sellers and customers, and also involve customers in content generation and value creation, has excited practitioners with its potential to better serve customers and satisfy their needs. Baird and Parasnis (2011) state that social media holds enormous potential for companies to get closer to customers by engaging with them in a personalised manner, and that by doing this the company increases the likelihood of customer retention.

2.6 Benefits of Social Media Marketing to an SME

Rickard (2015) states that 60 per cent of Irish SMEs believe social media has contributed to their business growth. Since the emergence of social media, organisations have begun relying on social media as a marketing tool as customers are being given a better opportunity to voice their opinion. According to Roberts and Kraynak (2008) social media is changing the role of the customers into advertisers and marketers of the company. Customers can create positive or negative pressure according to their experience of company products and services. Traditional marketing activities can be a drain on funds; social media marketing on the other hand is low cost and provides a direct line to current and prospective customers (Conley, 2014).

Creative consumers are one of the main elements of value gained by organisations from social media. With regards to social media, it is customers rather than firms who produce much of the value-added content in social media, and sharing this content with their network of followers and friends is a major benefit for organisations (Berthon *et al.*, 2012). Creative content is vital in terms of appealing to the creative nature of social media users and customers of a brand. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are essentially vehicles for carrying creative content. This content - in the form of words, text, pictures, and videos - is generated and shared by consumers around the world, and from a marketer's perspective can indeed be inspired to create value (Muniz and Schau, 2011; cited by Berthon *et al.*., 2012). In terms of SMEs, shared creative content and engagement with creative consumers gives SMEs a chance to promote their brand in ways that they would be unable to do if social media did not exist (Patterson, 2015).

In Ireland 72 per cent of Facebook users log in every day, 46 per cent of users log in to Instagram on a daily basis and 35 per cent of users log in to Twitter (Ipsos Mrbi, 2015). As SMEs account for 99.7 per cent of all active business in Ireland (Burke-Kennedy, 2014), there is a great opportunity to target existing and potential customers via social media. According to Jackson (2011) social media is rapidly transforming the way organisations communicate with customers as it gives a brand a voice to reach customers on a more personal level. Social media gives companies a broader reach beyond traditional communication methods like email. With a simple Facebook or Instagram post or a short message on Twitter, businesses can promote products and services and provide instant feedback or support to customers. Weinberg and Pelivan (2011) found that social media platforms such as Facebook had a positive effect in influencing customers in terms of buying goods and services in comparison to microblogs such as Twitter which are very effective at creating awareness surrounding products and services.

2.7 Challenges of Social Media Marketing to an SME

According to Nanji (2015) developing a social media strategy, measuring return on investment and tying social activities to business outcomes are significant challenges for

small to medium enterprises. It may be difficult for some SMEs to afford to pay someone skilled enough to carry out the necessary social media marketing activities for the firm.

In social media marketing, there may be ethical issues regarding material posted on social media platforms. Social media is by nature more interactive than more traditional forms of media. Users can comment on and edit published material making it difficult to control content (Institute of Business Ethics, 2011). Another challenge facing SMEs lies in a perceived skills gap in Ireland. Small companies may not be able to hire specialised social media or digital staff and may not have the necessary skills available in the existing workforce (Digital Marketing Institute, 2014). Negativity surrounding an organisation, brand or product can be detrimental to an SME's image. In order for a social media marketing campaign to be successful, an organisation will need to establish a strong brand image – this is based on trust. Consumer trust in a brand will not exist if there is negativity surrounding an organisation (Laroche *et al.*, 2013).

Many customers now turn to social media to vent frustrations and seek retribution after being slighted or ignored by a company (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011; cited by Grégoire *et al.*, 2015). Social media has empowered consumers to complain online due to the ease in connection with brands. Given the importance of this new outlet, customers value how companies react to their complaints. Various studies have shown that consumers are less likely to buy from a company that ignores online customer complaints. Once negative word of mouth is spread via social media, users build on the comments of friends and followers and the company involved may lose control over the conversation (Grégoire *et al.*, 2015). According to Chebat *et al.* (2005) before social media existed, the vast majority of unhappy customers failed to complain after a bad experience as the cost to complain outweighed the perceived benefits. Social media has made it easier for dissatisfied customers' opinions to be made known as they can now complain quickly and more importantly cost free via social media. An unhappy customer can spread negativity about an organisation online and this can be very damaging to a company. Table 2.1 highlights the benefits and challenges of social media marketing.

Table 2.1: The benefits and challenges of Social Media Marketing

<p><i>Benefits of Social Media</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes to business growth • Allows for customer engagement • Increases brand awareness • Low cost 	<p><i>Challenges of Social Media</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can often be difficult to measure the effects • Harmful content could damage a company's reputation • Specialist knowledge required to use social media effectively
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Source: Author's own

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has identified and examined the literature on what social media is, what types of social media exist, and how social media can be used in a business context in terms of marketing. The author examined the characteristics of an SME and identified marketing strategies implemented by companies both large and small. The author identified how an SME can be marketed as a brand and a discussion of social media marketing followed. Benefits and challenges of social media marketing were identified and the literature was examined regarding these opportunities and drawbacks. From the literature reviewed, the author has identified several areas requiring further examination. Although the author has found that social media is being used by SMEs, there is no research into why SMEs are heavily active on social media in terms of their marketing efforts. The author examined literature surrounding social media's impact on brand awareness and customer interaction however this is not focused on SMEs and the author is eager to explore this topic. In the concluding sections of the literature review chapters, the author discussed the benefits of social media marketing. These are rather generalised and not focused on companies with different social media marketing strategies. The author plans to explore benefits in greater detail to gain a greater understanding of the popularity of social media marketing for SMEs. As SMEs are competing against larger companies with limited resources, it is important that they maximise their efforts. The author is eager to establish whether or not SMEs who use social media to market their company or products consider it to be an effective business driver.

The author is satisfied that there are a number of key areas in the literature that can be further explored in the context of an SME. There is little or no focused literature on social media marketing in SMEs and this has helped the author to formulate practical and relevant research objectives and research questions for this study.

Chapter 3 - Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will outline the research methods used to collect and analyse the primary data. The objective and research questions are outlined and the research paradigms are highlighted. The type of research along with the research design are discussed. A justification for the research approach is provided and the data analysis method is discussed. The author will outline the limitations of the research and a conclusion to this chapter will be provided.

3.1 Research Objective

The research objective for this study is to investigate:

“The Application of Social Media Marketing as a Business Driver for Small to Medium Enterprises in Ireland”.

The justification for this research objective was that during the course of the literature review in chapter two, the author found that there was little existing literature that extensively examined social media marketing from an SME perspective. Several studies, such as those published by Weinberg (2009), Saxena (2013) and Siebert (2014), have been conducted into social media marketing from the perspective of large organisations but very little has been done in the context of SMEs, either in Ireland or internationally. In order to gain a perspective on SMEs, the author has formulated four research questions that operationalise the research objective.

3.2 Research Questions

According to Bryman and Bell (2007), clearly defined research questions provide a clear statement of the issues to be investigated in the research process. Formulating research questions is therefore one of the most important steps taken in the research process.

The author's research questions for this study are:

Research Question 1 – How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

Kaeplein and Heinlein (2010) identify social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as tools that can be used as a business driver by SMEs. The author wants to investigate how these platforms can be used in a marketing context for the purpose of this study.

Research Question 2 – How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Huang and Brown (1999) state that studies have found that SMEs face problems in marketing their brand to customers. The author aims to investigate if social media platforms have now become more prominent in the marketing efforts of SMEs when trying to improve a company or brand image and create brand awareness.

Research Question 3 – What benefits have Irish SMEs realised from the application of social media marketing, and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?

Studies by Robert and Kraynak (2008) and Rickard (2015) have shown that there are many different benefits for companies using social media in a business context. The author aims to discover what these benefits are. Mulready (2013) states how important it is for companies to measure their social media performance. The author will also investigate how SMEs measure these benefits.

Research Question 4 – What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

Evans (2012) states that by offering engaging content on social media sites, it becomes easier for an organisation to influence a crowd, or, in the case of social media influence followers. The author wishes to investigate, through research, whether SMEs have seen an increase in their customer base through the use of social media.

3.3 Research Paradigms

According to Kuhn (1962), a paradigm is a set of unique practices that define a discipline over a set period of time. For this study, it is important to understand the research paradigms in order to identify a suitable research method. In this section, the author examines the difference between positivist and interpretivist approaches to research.

3.3.1 Positivism

Bilton *et al.* (1996) describe positivism as a set of ideas about a reality that underpins most scientific work in an area. Positivists aim to discover frequent occurrences in the social world through the use of scientific methods. Positivists place a focus on quantitative research to analyse a sample population, usually in the form of surveys, while keeping a relative distance from the population in order to maintain objectivity in a research study (Bilton *et al.*, 1996). Cohen *et al.* (2000) argue that this research paradigm is a complex process owing to the fact that all individuals within a social phenomenon vary in how they think and act. Studying human nature using the positivist approach differs from the interpretivist paradigm, which goes beyond the scope that the positivist paradigm presents when analysing a sample population.

3.3.2 Interpretivist

According to Bilton *et al.* (1996) interpretivism relies on an in depth understanding of cultural meanings, subjective perceptions and intersubjective dynamics of social behaviour in an area while also helping researchers to make sense of these social behaviours. The interpretivist paradigm is based upon a qualitative research methodology. This involves conducting interviews, focus groups and case studies. This approach allows researchers to analyse the sample population while carrying out the research as opposed to positivism which involves the researcher keeping a distance from the sample. Cohen *et al.* (2000) state that this paradigm has its roots in social and human sciences and is concerned with how humans understand and interpret their subject description reality.

The interpretivist paradigm is best suited to this study as it can aid the researcher in discovering information relating to the research objective and research questions directly obtained from interviews and case studies.

3.4 Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Bryman and Bell (2007) define research methods as “the techniques for collecting data through the use of research instruments”. In this section, the author discusses both qualitative and quantitative research and provides a rationale for the method of research chosen.

3.4.1 Quantitative Research

Proctor (1997) describes quantitative research as that which produces figures and numerical data. This form of research is useful when the researcher is seeking to quantify information or data with facts and figures through statistical analysis (Churchill, 1999). Typically, this form of research is associated with the positivist research paradigm and is often used when it is known what information or data needs to be collected.

3.4.2 Qualitative Research

According to Malhotra and Birks (1999) qualitative research is carried out using small groups that provide in-depth, quality insights to the problem in question. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with how and why certain behaviours occur. This type of research can uncover understanding of human behaviour and the reasons for this behaviour. Qualitative research helps understand the how and why of behaviour. The aim of qualitative research is “to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they engage and live through situations” (Elliot *et al.*, 1999, p. 216). The research objective of the author is to investigate “the application of social media marketing in SMEs in Ireland”. The research questions of the study are focused on the actions of SMEs and their employees. The author is aiming to discover how and why SMEs use social media marketing and also to gain an understanding of the impact of social media marketing in terms of brand awareness and brand image.

The author has identified the interpretive qualitative research method as being the most appropriate form of research for this study. This paradigm is concerned with an understanding of an individual’s behaviours and opinions, and these are uncovered by carrying out interviews conducted by using the qualitative research methods approach.

3.5 Research Design

A research design takes a holistic view at the varying methods and procedures used in order to collect and then analyse the information required. For this study, a qualitative approach is used to gather and analyse the required information. Table 3.1 highlights the questions developed by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) which the author reviewed and answered when determining the research design.

Table 3.1: Questions that determine the Research Design

Questions	Researchers Approach
How will the data interact with the issue at hand?	The current theory on social media marketing will be informed as there is currently very little information available relating to SMEs on this topic
How the data will allow the researcher to address processes by which a theory is practiced?	The data and information gathered will be first hand from people who are proficient in social media. As a result of this, they will be able to provide the author with information that is relevant to the theory that is available
What is going to be studied?	Social media marketing and SMEs
How will the enquiries be made?	Enquiries will be made through interviews with representatives from SMEs
What methods of data collection will be used?	Data will be collected by conducting of interviews and this data will be transferred to NVivo software for analyses

Source: Denzin and Lincoln (2005)

3.6 Justifying the Research Approach

The author's justification for conducting research through the chosen approach stems from this dissertation's topic. Carson (1990) states that SMEs, usually under owner or manager control, can suffer through a lack of knowledge and understanding of marketing planning practices. Often, practices, if they exist at all, are founded on traditional industry practices and experiences which may not be suitable when translated into use with small businesses. Often the result is inadequate marketing and business failure. The author's aim is to investigate the application of social media marketing as vigorously as possible in a range of SMEs to identify what approaches are taken by these companies, and what impact the use of social media is having on their marketing efforts.

Having assessed a range of research approaches, the author decided that both an exploratory and explanatory research approach was best suited to the type of research study being conducted. Given the research objectives of the author, this was deemed the most appropriate form of action. A framework by Marshall and Rossman (1989) was examined to guide the choice of the approach most relevant to the study. The framework shows the purpose of research can be exploratory, explanatory, descriptive or predictive. After assessing the available literature on social media marketing in the literature review chapter, the author was satisfied that there was little information available relating to SMEs and this topic. Exploratory research allows the author to investigate little understood phenomena that, in this study, relate to the literature available concerning social media marketing in SMEs. Furthermore, case studies are a primary technique of exploratory research and for this dissertation the author is conducting five separate case studies by conducting in depth interviews. Table 3.2 highlights the framework set out by Marshall and Rossman (1989) which shows how the author's research methodology was evaluated:

Table 3.2: Matching the Research Purpose with Research

Purpose of the Research	Research Question	Research Strategy	Examples of Data Collection Techniques
<u>Exploratory</u> To investigate little understood phenomena. To identify/discover important variables to generate hypotheses for further research.	What is happening in this social program? What are the themes and patterns in participants meaning structures? How are these patterns linked?	Case Study Field Study	Participant-observation In-depth interviewing Elite interviewing
<u>Explanatory</u> To explain the forces causing the phenomenon in question. To identify plausible causal networks shaping the phenomenon.	What events, beliefs, attitudes, and policies are shaping this phenomenon? How do these forces interact?	Field Study Case Study Ethnography	Participant-observation In-depth interviewing Document analysis Unobtrusive measures Survey questionnaire
<u>Descriptive</u> To document the phenomenon of interest	What are the salient behaviours, events, beliefs, attitudes and processes occurring in this phenomenon?	Field Study Case Study Ethnography	Participant-observation In-depth interviewing Document analysis Unobtrusive measures Survey questionnaire
<u>Predictive</u> To predict the outcomes of the phenomenon. To forecast the events and behaviours resulting from the phenomenon.	What will occur as a result of this phenomenon? Who will be effected and how?	Experiment Quasi-Experiment	Survey Questionnaire (Large Sample) Kinetics/Proxemics Content Analysis

Source: Marshall and Rossman (1989)

3.7 Research Method and Data Collection Methods

This section discusses the research methods the author has chosen for this study. As Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggest in-depth interviews, mini case studies and document analysis for exploratory and explanatory research. In sections 3.8.1 to 3.8.3 the author will highlight the data collection methods used.

3.7.1 In-Depth Interviews

Interviews can help the author to answer the research questions and achieve the research objective. Sekaran (1992) states that the main method of collecting qualitative data is to interview respondents to obtain information on the issues of interest to the researcher. Interviews can be structured or unstructured.

Data collected during interviews must subsequently be analysed. The analyst, both during and after data collection, attempts to link the data with explanations. The aim is to find an understanding as to why certain things happen as they do and how the people concerned explain why things happen as they do (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The author decided that he will approach representatives of familiar SMEs in the Waterford area, for interview. For the purpose of this study, the author deemed it necessary to use SMEs that have a social media presence. With representatives of five companies being interviewed, the sample size worked with was small. Therefore, it was imperative that the author spent a number of months monitoring the social media activity of a larger sample of ten SMEs in the Waterford area in order to ensure that the appropriate SMEs were chosen for research purposes. The author contacted each of the SMEs and asked for permission to conduct in-depth interviews for this study. Table 3.3 shows the criteria set when choosing SMEs to participate in the study while tables 3.4 and 3.5 show the details of the interview process.

Table 3.3: Criteria for Organisational Participation in the Study

The SME must employ less than 250 people
The SME must have an active presence on social media sites
The author has permission to conduct research aided by the participation of the company
There must be regular activity on the company social media platforms
The SME must place a strong focus on social media activity
The SME must provide the author with access to information relating to its social media activity
The author is granted access to employees of the SME in the form of an interview
The employee agrees to have the interview recorded for research purposes
The SME agrees to have certain information shared by the author in this study for research purposes

Source: Author's Own

Table 3.4: Interview Respondents

Company	Industry	Number of Employees	Interviewee	Title	Interview Recorded
Mean Bean Coffee	Beverage industry	4	Eoin McGrath	Owner	Yes
Arvum Group	Agricultural	33	Ellenor McDonnell	Marketing Executive	Yes
South East Marquees	Recreational	5	Wayne Kelly	Owner	Yes
Beat 102 103	Entertainment	24	Kolyn Byrne	Marketing Executive	Yes
Chia Bia	Food industry	38	Shannon Forrest	Marketing Executive	Yes

Source: Author's Own

The main purpose of an in-depth interview is to gain explicit detail from a respondent in their own words which can be used for analysis by the researcher. For the purpose of this study, the aim of the interviews is to obtain the opinions and feedback of the respondents regarding the use of social media as a marketing tool for each individual's company.

3.7.2 Mini Case Studies

Completing mini case studies is an appropriate form of research for this study as they enable the researcher to examine modern real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Yin (1984, p.23) defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.

3.7.3 Document Analysis

Analysing documents, both printed and electronic, is a systematic process of reviewing or evaluating documents. Documents used for evaluation can come in many different forms, such as: advertisements, flyers, websites, event information and press releases. Reviewing documents is a largely unobtrusive method of research, is "rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting", and is also useful in gaining an understanding of the organisation (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Documents can provide a background and additional information about an organisation for the researcher. Table 3.5 shows the relevant documentation used by the researcher for analysis.

Table 3.5: Documentation to be Analysed

Company	Printed Document	Electronic
Mean Bean Coffee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspaper articles • Flyers • Social media strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Email
South East Marquees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flyers • Social media strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Email
Arvum Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertisements • Social media strategy • Flyers • Event information • Press releases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Email
Chia Bia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertisements • Social media strategy • Flyers • Press releases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Email
Beat 102/103	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media strategy • Press releases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Email

Source: Author's Own

Another unobtrusive measure of data analysis is the measuring and analysing of the chosen SMEs use of social media. The author has identified a social media analysis matrix as a useful tool to help analyse the data gathered from the research methods. Table 3.6 shows the matrix that will be used and table 3.7 shows the values of the assessment criteria. The author will rank the data in the matrix in accordance with the interview data. The author aims to complement the data obtained in the interview process by using the matrix for further analysis.

Table 3.6: Social media analysis matrix

Use of Social Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Forms of Interaction				
Comments				
Likes				
Private Messages				
Consumer Interaction				
Consumer Reviews				
Content				
General Information Updates				
Picture				
Video				
Advertisements				
Display Invitational Material				
Event Planning				
Promotional Activities				
Product Information				
Product Placement				
Product Feedback				
Frequency of Measurement				
Daily				
Weekly				
Monthly				
Total:				

Table 3.7: Values attributable to assessment criteria

Degree to which criteria is met	Shading	Weighting		
		High	Moderate	Low
High degree		10	7	3
Moderate degree		7	4	2
Low degree		3	2	1
Not at all		0	0	0

Source: Author's Own

Table 3.6 shows the matrix which the author will assign a value to each section, table 3.7 shows the values which will be allocated to each section of the matrix for each company.

The author will allocate a ranking value based on the data obtained in the research process.

3.8 Method of Analysing Data

The author has identified the qualitative data analysis software program “NVivo” to be most appropriate when dealing with a large volume of information gathered through interview. Seale *et al.* (2004) state that computer software programmes allow researchers to identify and explore many different relationships that may exist within data. It was used to then explore whether there are links between the information received from the answers given to the interview questions from the five different interviewees.

Bazeley (2007) illustrates that the NVivo software enables researches to:

- Manage the information and data that has been gathered
- Provide easy storage and quick access to the gathered information
- Explore different relationships that may exist between the different information

3.9 Limitations of the Research

The main issue in any research study is the validity of the information that is gathered. As SMEs account for over 99 per cent of registered companies in Ireland (Burke-Kennedy, 2014) the sample size used by the author for this study is quite small and does not represent an accurate evaluation of SMEs on a national scale. The author was restricted to interviewing small companies in one city in Ireland and this means that the information obtained cannot be applicable to all SMEs.

Another limitation of the in-depth interview process is that when choosing suitable companies to interview the author discovered some respondents were conscious of sensitive information being disclosed if perhaps uncomfortable questions were asked by the interviewer. De Vaus (1995) illustrates the difficulty in using sensitive questions is that they may offend the respondents and therefore receive inaccurate responses. The author had to assess which companies were willing to have the interview process recorded for this study. This was a very time consuming process as it was necessary for

the author to contact all companies and decide which were most suitable for the research process based on their social media activity.

3.10 Conclusion

In this section, the research objective and questions have been outlined and the research paradigm of the study was justified. The chosen methodology of the study was highlighted and the author discussed the research design of the study. A justification of the research approach was provided and the research methods along with the data collection methods was highlighted. The chosen method of analysing the qualitative data were also discussed, and the limitations of the research were provided

Chapter 4 – Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the data obtained from the interviews and the author's analysis of each company's social media platforms. The author will present the findings in the form of mini case studies on the individual companies that the author is using for this study. The author will use a matrix to analyse the performance of each company on social media.

4.1 Review of the Research Objective and Research Questions

The overall aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the use of social media marketing in SMEs. The research objective is to investigate the effectiveness of *“The Application of Social Media Marketing as a Business Driver for Small to Medium Enterprises in Ireland”*. In order to achieve this research objective, the author formulated the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

Research Question 2: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Research Question 3: Have SMEs realised the benefits of the application of social media marketing and what techniques are being used to measure these benefits?

Research Question 4: What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

The author analysed both print and electronic company documents in addition to social media analysis and interview questions for each of the five interviews completed. Each question related to the research questions and overall research objective of the study. Each question was carefully constructed by the author in order to obtain the most relevant information that could be applied to this dissertation.

4.2 Mean Bean Coffee

Table 4.1: Operational details of the interview:

Organisation	Number of Employees	Industry	Products & Services	Markets Served	Social Media Platforms used	Interviewee	Position	Date of Interview	Length of Interview
Mean Bean Coffee	4	Beverage	Coffee Coffee - Machines	Consumer B2B	Facebook Twitter Snapchat	Eoin McGrath	Owner	6 th July 2016	34 Minutes

Company Profile:

Established in 2013, Mean Bean Coffee (MBC) is a locally run SME which provides consumers in the southeast of Ireland with coffee, coffee products and specialised coffee machines. The company has four employees and have plans to expand in the near future.

Research Question Two: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Eoin McGrath, owner of MBC, states that his company uses social media to reach people in ways that normal advertising and marketing methods can't. Mr. McGrath stated that social media gives *“potentially thousands of people a chance to see a photo of a product or general information about our company”*. The company use Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat to reach the target market.

Research Question Two: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Social media sites are often referred to as online communities and MBC have a large following on social media, these followers can discuss the company on social media and promote the brand name. Customer interaction is key in helping to promote the brand image of MBC, Mr. McGrath says: *“customers who talk about us bring traffic and numbers to our pages, if they're happy with us then our reputation and brand image is increased”*.

Research Question Three - What benefits have Irish SMEs realised from the application of social media marketing and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?

When first used by Mr. McGrath's company, social media was seen as a disadvantage to the company but this was mainly due to a lack of knowledge surrounding its use. After hiring a consultant, Mr. McGrath began to see the benefits. Mr. McGrath stated:

"After we hired a consultant we began posting better content and promoting ourselves a bit more, things really took off for us then and due to social media our sales and revenue increased very quickly".



*The above are examples of content posted on the MBC social media accounts. Both pictures provide information about the company and also promote other SMEs. The posts reached a lot of people and received positive feedback on social media platforms.

McGrath noticed that the company was getting more business than ever before and stated that the company began to receive orders from clients all over the southeast of Ireland. McGrath added *“we were getting calls from people in Tipperary, calls we would never have got without using social media”*. Mr. McGrath spoke at length about the benefits that social media marketing offers SMEs, including; large potential reach, regular content updates, increased brand awareness and cost. MBC measure their social media on a weekly basis by monitoring the number of likes, retweets and shares on their social media platforms.

Research Question Four - What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

Mr. McGrath states that employee personal social media accounts that are linked to the company account have an accumulative number of over eight thousand followers on Twitter. This has helped the company to grow their customer base as the employees share and post content related to the company. McGrath attributes a large amount of the success the company has had to social media. Mr. McGrath says:

“Between myself and Ken (business partner) we have thousands of people following us, if we post something on the company pages then it can be seen instantly. Our client base has grown massively since we began using social media”.

Mr. McGrath added that without social media the company would have no other way of reaching over ten thousand people between our personal social media accounts and the business accounts, Mr. McGrath says: *“the impact social media has had for us out of this world, we’ve grown so much because of it and we continue to do so”*.

Table 4.2 shows the author’s analysis of the social media performance of the company. The author analysed the interview data as well as relevant company documents, shown in table 3.5, relating to the marketing of the company. The author has scored the company on the relevant social media platforms shown in table 4.1 based on the analysed data. The company social media accounts are given a total score and the company is given an overall score based on the author’s analysis.

Table 4.2: Mean Bean Coffee social media analysis:

Use of Social Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Forms of Interaction				
Comments	10	10	3	0
Likes	10	10	3	0
Private Messages	10	10	2	0
Consumer Interaction	10	10	3	7
Consumer Reviews	10	10	3	7
Content				
General Information Updates	10	10	4	3
Picture	10	10	10	10
Video	7	10	7	10
Advertisements	7	7	7	4
Display Invitational Material	7	7	4	3
Event Planning	0	0	0	0
Promotional Activities	10	10	7	10
Product Information	10	10	7	3
Product Placement	10	10	7	3
Product Feedback	10	10	7	3
Frequency of Measurement				
Daily	2	2	2	2
Weekly	10	10	10	10
Monthly	3	3	3	3
Total:	146	149	89	78
Overall score:			384	

Degree to which criteria is met	Shading	Weighting		
		High	Moderate	Low
High degree		10	7	3
Moderate degree		7	4	2
Low degree		3	2	1
Not at all		0	0	0

Conclusion:

Facebook is the social media platform that is used the most for marketing purposes for Mean Bean Coffee. The company use this platform to a high degree and this is reflected in the score awarded by the author.

4.3 South East Marquees

Table 4.3: Operational details of the interview

Organisation	Number of Employees	Industry	Products & Services	Markets Served	Social Media Platforms used	Interviewee	Position	Date of Interview	Length of Interview
South East Marquees	5	Recreational	Marquees	Consumer B2B	Facebook Instagram Snapchat	Wayne Kelly	Owner	22 nd July 2016	32 Minutes

Company Profile: South East Marquees was set up in 2015 in Waterford. At the time of interview, the company employs a total of five people. The company provides customers in Waterford and surrounding areas with marquees for a range of events.

Research Question One - How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

Wayne Kelly states that social media allows for consistent contact with customers, something traditional media can't offer. Mr. Kelly says: *"In our case, constant updates and contact with a customer is hugely important"*. Mr. Kelly also spoke of the importance of word of mouth for the company, Mr. Kelly said positive customer experiences can be shared on social media but also by word of mouth, Mr. Kelly states: *"we rely a great deal on word of mouth to get our name out there with the customers – social media allows this to happen"*.

Research Question Two: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Social media is seen as a very effective way to promote a company and Wayne Kelly supports this by stating that the company have profiled the market and have found that a very large portion of customers use social media. Mr Kelly says: *"we post pictures and*

videos quite regularly to help boost our image". Mr Kelly spoke at length about the importance of promoting a brand or service and social media has helped the business enormously. Mr. Kelly states:

"The company Facebook page has received a lot of attention in the local area. If the Facebook page gets noticed then we get noticed, we have over one thousand likes on the page but we have thousands of shares. It gets us great exposure and without it we wouldn't have a fraction of the customers we get".



*An example of a social media post by South East Marquees. The company regularly post pictures and videos displaying their products and services allowing the consumer to gain an understanding of the company.

Research Question Three - What benefits have Irish SMEs realised from the application of social media marketing and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?

Mr. Kelly was asked questions relating to the positive effects of social media for SMEs, commenting that the level of exposure, the low costs and the information social media provides to the customer were the main benefits but there are countless advantages of social media marketing. Mr. Kelly says:

“We communicate regularly with satisfied customers on social media and this allows us to build relationships. Much of our business comes from repeat customers so it’s important to us to build and maintain relationships”.

When asked questions regarding the measurement of benefits, Mr. Kelly said that his company measure their social media on a weekly basis by measuring engagements on the company accounts, Mr. Kelly added:

“It’s important to know who the customer is. We use analytics tools to measure our impact on a weekly basis and then we try and target the people who are new to our social media accounts”.

Research Question Four - What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

Mr. Kelly stated that the company avoids traditional marketing methods due to budget constraints so the company relies solely on social media to market themselves. South East Marquees have built their company base by just using social media to reach customers. Mr. Kelly says:

“We simply don’t have the budget to allow us to advertise in newspapers or by radio, social media allows us to target exactly who we want and we’ve built a substantial client base by just marketing ourselves on social media accounts”.

In table 4.4, the author has used the interview data to score the company’s use of social media. Having analysed the company’s performance and relevant documents, stated in table 3.5, relating to the business the author ranked the scores based on the data that was

obtained and analysed. The social media platform with the highest score indicates the platform that is used most by the company. The highest overall score indicates the overall use of social media in the company.

Table 4.4: South East Marquees social media analysis:

Use of Social Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Forms of Interaction				
Comments	10	0	7	7
Likes	10	0	7	3
Private Messages	10	0	7	3
Consumer Interaction	10	0	7	10
Consumer Reviews	10	0	7	10
Content				
General Information Updates	10	0	7	10
Picture	10	0		10
Video	10	0	3	10
Advertisements	10	0	3	0
Display Invitational Material	0	0	3	0
Event Planning	10	0	10	4
Promotional Activities	7	0	7	4
Product Information	10	0	10	10
Product Placement	10	0	10	10
Product Feedback	10	0	10	0
Frequency of Measurement				
Daily	0	0	0	10
Weekly	10	0	10	0
Monthly	4	0	4	0
Total:	151	0	112	101
Overall score:		364		

Degree to which criteria is met	Shading	Weighting		
		High	Moderate	Low
High degree		10	7	3
Moderate degree		7	4	2
Low degree		3	2	1
Not at all		0	0	0

Conclusion:

As shown in table 4.4, Facebook and Snapchat are the two most used social media platforms. These platforms are used to carry out almost all of the company's marketing and with little or no documents to analyse regarding other forms of marketing carried out, the author has ranked the company accordingly in his analysis of the company social media use.

4.4 Arvum Group

Table 4.5: Operational details of the interview

Organisation	Number of Employees	Industry	Products & Services	Markets Served	Social Media Platforms used	Interviewee	Position	Date of Interview	Length of Interview
Arvum Group	33	Agricultural	Agronomy Seed Animal nutrition	Consumer B2B	Facebook Twitter	Ellenor McDonnell	Marketing Executive	11 th July 2016	37 Minutes

Company profile: There are five different brands operating under the Arvum Group company. Arvum Group brands provide a range of products and services including; grass and forage crop seeds, animal nutrition and feed additives. At the time of interview, the Arvum Group company employ a total of thirty-three people.

Research Question One - How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

According to Ms. McDonnell, Arvum Group brands serve a multitude of different markets, so using traditional media outlets to advertise would not be practical and also far too expensive. With so much activity happening on a daily basis the company need to update customers every day. Ms. McDonnell says: *“social media allows us to do this whereas newspapers can't. The cost would be astronomical – something we couldn't sustain”*.

Research Question Two: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

When asked questions relating to social media promoting brand awareness, Ms. McDonnell stated that the company attend and host open days and meet respected industry leaders. Ms. McDonnell says: *“we then interact with these people on social media and by interacting with them they get our name out into the open on different platforms”*.

McDonnell also spoke about consumers posting pictures and videos of crops and grass on their land that was grown using Arvum Group products is a great way to promote the brand. Ms. McDonnell says:

“We have so many different products available it’s hard to promote them all but when customers can do it for you on social media by way of a picture or a video with a few nice words it has a very positive impact for us”.

Research Question Three - What benefits have Irish SMEs realised from the application of social media marketing and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?

Ms. McDonnell states that social media has helped break down geographical barriers for SMEs by allowing people from all over Ireland and further afield see and experience all that the company has to offer. Ms. McDonnell says: *“from putting pictures and links to our website on Twitter, we’ve had calls come from clients all over the country”*. Reaching potential clients across Ireland is a major benefit to the company and is seen as the main benefit by Ms. McDonnell. Arvum Group measure their social media stats at the end of each month in order to evaluate their situation and assess the impact of monthly social media campaigns. Insights are used to measure the number of visitors to the company social media accounts. Click through to websites and social media impressions are monitored to see what impact the brand is having amongst its followers and fans.

Research Question Four - What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

Ms. McDonnell was asked questions relating to the influence of social media on an increase in customers, McDonnell spoke about the impact it has had on the company, Ms. McDonnell says:

“Our open days are advertised on social media, then we post pictures and content while the event is happening, this gets a very good response on social media from the company followers”.

Arvum Group companies have separate social media accounts and McDonnell states that



the companies are not interested in thousands of followers, and are focused on maintaining a core group of social media followers who are company clients. Ms. McDonnell says: *“We don’t want thousands of followers who we are anonymous to or who aren’t interested in us, we want followers that we can turn in to clients or who are already clients”.*

is



*This
an

example of an event invitation from an Arvum Group company. This invitation was posted on social media and was shared, liked and retweeted by followers of the account.

*This is an example of a social media post from an Arvum Group company. The post tags another company and was shared by many social media users.

Table 4.6 shows the authors social media analysis of the company. Having analysed the company's performance and relevant documents, stated in table 3.5, relating to the business. The researcher ranked the company's use of social media accordingly based on the data obtained in the interview process.

Table 4.6: Arvum Group social media analysis:

Use of Social Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Forms of Interaction				
Comments	4	10	0	0
Likes	4	10	0	0
Private Messages	4	10	0	0
Consumer Interaction	4	10	0	0
Consumer Reviews	4	10	0	0
Content				
General Information Updates	7	10	0	0
Picture	7	10	0	0
Video	4	7	0	0
Advertisements	7	10	0	0
Display Invitational Material	7	10	0	0
Event Planning	7	10	0	0
Promotional Activities	2	10	0	0
Product Information	7	10	0	0
Product Placement	7	10	0	0
Product Feedback	7	10	0	0

Frequency of Measurement				
Daily	0	0	0	0
Weekly	0	0	0	0
Monthly	7	10	0	0
Total:	89	157	0	0
Overall score:			246	

			Weighting	
Degree to which criteria is met	Shading	High	Moderate	Low
High degree		10	7	3
Moderate degree		7	4	2
Low degree		3	2	1
Not at all		0	0	0

Conclusion:

Arvum Group brands have Twitter accounts but only one brand has a Facebook account, this is a strategic decision by the company as the Facebook page belongs to the only brand that sells directly to the consumer. The author recognises the company's extensive use of Twitter and has given this platform the highest score available in the above matrix. Interestingly, the author has given the company a low overall ranking score, despite the company being active on a daily basis on social media platforms.

4.5 Beat 102/103

Table 4.7: Operational details of the interview

Organisation	Number of Employees	Industry	Products & Services	Markets Served	Social Media Platforms used	Interviewee	Position	Date of Interview	Length of Interview
Beat 102/103	24	Entertainment	Broadcasting Live music Talk shows	Consumer B2B	Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat	Kolyn Byrne	Marketing Executive	17 th July 2016	41 Minutes

Company Profile: Established in 2003, Beat 102/103 is a leading radio station in Ireland. Winner of many national awards for outstanding service, the company employs twenty-four people at the time of interview.

Research Question One - How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

According to Kolyn Byrne, social media is used by Beat to interact with customers on a constant basis, Mr. Byrne says: *“we run live competitions all day every day so it’s a necessity really. It’s real time and it’s relevant so we had no choice”*. Mr. Byrne stated

that the company is using many forms of social media to interact with their customer base and added that the company have a dedicated team of people who run the social media accounts of the company to help reach the customer.

Research Question Two - How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Customer interaction and promotional activities are seen as a way of increasing brand awareness. Mr. Byrne spoke of exclusive social media competitions that are organised by the company, Mr Byrne says:

“In order to win a competition the customer has to visit our social media accounts. We then get them on the radio and they tell everyone that they won x, y or z on our Facebook or our Twitter page”.

Mr. Byrne stated that the image of the company is very strong in the eyes of the consumer, something that the company credits social media with.



*These images are examples of social media competitions run by Beat 102/103. The competitions are exclusive to social media, both competitions received hugely positive feedback for the company and this is a great example of brand awareness and promotion by Beat 102/103.

Research Question Three - What benefits have Irish SMEs realised from the application of social media marketing and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?

According to Mr. Byrne, the main benefits of social media marketing is the increased exposure that it gives the company, Mr. Byrne says: *“It gets our name into the places where people are hanging out digitally. It makes people aware of our brand that have not heard of us before”*. Mr. Byrne also added that social media allows Beat to create and maintain working relationships with people who interact with the company both online and on air. The company measure their social media accounts each week and draft reports based on social media engagement figures which are then given to senior managers to analyse.

Research Question Four - What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

Kolyn Byrne states that social media marketing is vital to the strategy of the company. Mr. Byrne says: *“because we’re a radio station that only reaches six counties in Ireland, social media allows us to reach people from all over the country and even abroad”*. Mr. Byrne added that the emigration of thousands of people from Ireland over the last number of years actually helped the radio station grow its consumer base. Byrne says:

“We have people contacting us from all over the world because they have heard about us from a person from Ireland and they listen to us online and interact with us on social media”.

Table 4.8 shows the authors social media analysis of the company. Having analysed the company’s performance and relevant documents, stated in table 3.5, relating to the business and the researcher ranked the company’s score accordingly. The company carry out social media marketing campaigns across a number of social media platforms and this is taken into consideration by the author.

Table 4.8: Beat 102/103 social media analysis:

Use of Social Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Forms of Interaction				
Comments	10	10	10	10
Likes	10	10	10	10
Private Messages	10	10	10	10
Consumer Interaction	10	10	10	10
Consumer Reviews	10	10	10	10
Content				
General Information Updates	10	10	10	10
Picture	10	10	10	10
Video	10	10	10	10
Advertisements	10	10	10	10
Display Invitational Material	10	10	10	10
Event Planning	10	10	10	10
Promotional Activities	10	10	10	10

Product Information	10	10	10	10
Product Placement	10	10	10	10
Product Feedback	10	10	10	10
Frequency of Measurement				
Daily	0			
Weekly	10	10	10	10
Monthly	7	7	7	7
Total:	167	167	167	167
Overall score:		668		

		Weighting		
Degree to which criteria is met	Shading	High	Moderate	Low
High degree		10	7	3
Moderate degree		7	4	2
Low degree		3	2	1
Not at all		0	0	0

Conclusion:

Having assessed the performance of Beat 102/103 on social media, the author felt it was appropriate to assign the highest ranking scores available to the company for every social media platform. The company has a dedicated team of people to monitor the social media accounts and in terms of social media activity and performance, the company performs the best of any company that was assessed and interviewed for this study.

4.6 Chia Bia

Table 4.9: Operational details of the interview

Organisation	Number of Employees	Industry	Products & Services	Markets Served	Social Media Platforms used	Interviewee	Position	Date of Interview	Length of Interview

Chia Bia	38	Food	Chia Seed Chia Oil Nutritional supplements	Consumer B2B	Facebook Twitter Instagram	Shannon Forrest	Marketing Executive	22 nd July 2016	44 Minute s
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Company Profile: Chia Bia was established in 2009 and is currently the largest provider of Chia seed in Europe. Located in Waterford, Chia Bia supplies hundreds of supermarkets, health stores and independent consumers across a number of markets across Ireland mainland Europe and even Asian countries including Japan. At the time of interview, there are thirty-eight people employed in Chia Bia.

Research Question One - How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

Shannon Forrest explains that due to the increasing popularity of Chia seeds across Europe and further afield, the best way to reach the consumer market is through social media. Ms. Forrest states that print media only reaches a certain number of people and the message we can get across through newspaper adverts is limited, Ms. Forrest says:

“With social media, we can reach people in many different places in many different ways and it can be done at the same time. This can’t be done with traditional marketing methods”.

The level of control that social media marketing gives the company is another reason that Chia Bia places an emphasis on using social media. Chia Bia can deliver their message when and how they want and this is something that Ms. Forrest states is important to a small company trying to reach the market.

Research Question Two: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Ms. Forrest states that through social media, Chia Bia have been able to educate existing and potentially new clients by posting pictures, video and general content on social media accounts. Ms. Forrest says:

“We have several brand ambassadors who regularly communicate with us on social media and we have been building a strong online presence with the help of these ambassadors”.

Several high profile sports personalities in Ireland are representing the Chia Bia brand and Ms. Forrest has credited these ambassadors with helping to build a strong brand image on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

*This



is an

example of a tweet from Chia Bia using their brand ambassadors. The image was liked and retweeted on their social media accounts hundreds of times and both brand ambassadors also engaged with the company via their social media accounts.

Research Question Three - Have SMEs realised the benefits of the application of social media marketing and what techniques are being used to measure these benefits?

Chia Bia have benefited from the use of social media marketing in many different ways, the main benefit which Ms. Forrest spoke of is that social media allows the company to interact constantly with the consumer by updating our accounts on a regular basis and promoting work carried out in local supermarkets and at local events. Ms. Forrest says: *“We encourage our followers to join us at events so it gives them a chance to meet Chia Bia staff and we can then interact with customers on a personal level”*.



*This is an example of Chia Bia promoting their brand through use of social media. The company updates social media followers by posting pictures and information of their products and services.

Social media also gives the customer a chance to ask questions about Chia Bia products and it gives the company a chance to give customers advice, something which is important to Chia Bia. Ms. Forrest states that the company reviews their social media on a monthly basis as it allows them to change what is not working and improve on what is working. Ms. Forrest says:

“Keeping this updated and fresh is very important, social media can go stale if not managed properly by the company and once that happens you start to lose customers”.

Research Question Four - What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

Ms. Forrest explains that a strategic decision to introduce competitions for customers has driven a large amount of traffic to the Chia Bia social media accounts, Ms. Forrest states that the company began giving products away through social media interaction with the customers. Ms. Forrest says:

“I have seen first-hand that social media is an incredibly easy way for a company to grow its following and we have been successful in turning followers into customers. It’s all about interaction and reaching the customers in the right way”.

Delivering the correct message in the correct manner allows Chia Bia to drive traffic to all of their social media accounts and once they have the followers, the company’s target market grows in numbers.

Table 4.10 shows the researcher’s analysis of Chia Bia’s social media presence. Having analysed the company’s performance and relevant documents relating to the business. The researcher ranked the company’s score accordingly. The author analysed all social media platforms used by the company and awarded scores that he felt were correct based on the data obtained in the interviews in addition to the analysis carried out.

Table 4.10: Chia Bia social media analysis:

Use of Social Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Forms of Interaction				
Comments	10	10	10	0
Likes	10	10	10	0
Private Messages	10	3	3	0
Consumer Interaction	10	10	3	0
Consumer Reviews	10	10	10	0
Content				
General Information Updates	10	10	7	0
Picture	10	10	10	0
Video	10	10	10	
Advertisements	10	10	7	0
Display Invitational Material	7	7	7	0
Event Planning	10	10	10	0
Promotional Activities	10	10	10	0
Product Information	10	10	10	0
Product Placement	10	10	10	0
Product Feedback	10	10	10	0
Frequency of Measurement				
Daily	0	0	0	0
Weekly	0	0	0	0
Monthly	10	10	10	0
Total:	157	150	137	0
Overall score:		444		

			Weighting	
Degree to which criteria is met	Shading	High	Moderate	Low
High degree		10	7	3
Moderate degree		7	4	2
Low degree		3	2	1
Not at all		0	0	0

Conclusion:

Chia Bia have a social media presence on three platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and update the accounts on a daily basis. The overall score given by the author in the

above table shows that Facebook is used the most frequently by Chia Bia but Twitter and Instagram rank just below Facebook in terms of usage.

4.7 Conclusion

After analysing company documents, stated in table 3.5, analysing company social media accounts using table 3.6 and conducting interviews, the author discovered key findings during the course of the research. It was discovered that SMEs use social media for a number of reasons such as; promotion of a company name, being able to control what content the consumer is exposed to and building and maintaining relationships.

It was found that there are many ways SMEs can benefit from social media marketing including; increased sales, lower advertising costs and increased brand awareness. Each interviewee spoke about the benefits offered by social media use and the author was able to gain a better understanding of how advantageous social media marketing is to SMEs. Benefits of social media marketing for SMEs include:

- Reduced costs
- Excellent word of mouth opportunities
- Building and maintaining of relationships with consumers
- The ability to control content that is released to the consumer

The research allowed the author to discover that the brand awareness of an SME can be increased and a strong brand image be established by using social media marketing. Frequent updates of relevant and valued content can get a great response from the users of social media platforms and interviewees spoke of the success that social media has brought to the SMEs in which they are employed. Posting relevant content keeps the consumer interested in the brand and can help increase the audience on social media through likes, shares and word of mouth. This was also found to be how SMEs can grow their customer base through social media. Satisfying the customer's needs and wants has helped to increase the customer base of the SMEs focused on for this study.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse and discuss the data obtained in the research findings chapter and how this data relates to the research objective of the study. The author will compare and contrast the research findings with the literature assessed in chapter two. In order to effectively examine the data, the author used NVivo software for a deeper analysis of the data obtained in the research process.

5.1 Review of Research Questions

Research Question 1: How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

Research Question 2: How does social media help promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Research Question 3: Research Question Three - Have SMEs realised the benefits of the application of social media marketing and what techniques are being used to measure these benefits?

Research Question Four - What impact does social media marketing have on the customer base of Irish SMEs?

5.2 Key Findings of the Research

In the research chapter, the author discovered a number of key findings relating to the research objective of the study from the data obtained in the interview process. These key findings are:

- The use of social media by SMEs in a marketing context
- How social media has helped to promote brand awareness and the brand image of SMEs

- The benefits of the application of social media marketing and how these benefits are measure
- How social media has increased the customer base of SMEs

5.3 How Social Media is Being Used in a Marketing Context by SMEs in Ireland

According to Weinberg (2009) social media marketing is a process that empowers individuals to promote their websites, products or services through online social channels, and to communicate with and tap into a much wider community that might not have been available via traditional advertising channels. When analysing the research findings, the author discovered through the use of NVivo software that two of the interview respondents strongly support the statement from Weinberg (2009). This was reflected in the respective company analysis matrix scores assigned by the author in the research findings chapter and NVivo software allowed the author to establish a link between the interviews.

Eoin McGrath of Mean Bean Coffee outlined that social media can help to reach potentially thousands of people in a very quick time and with relative ease. Mr. McGrath spoke of the importance of his company reaching as many people as possible, as the company budget was limited social media was the best way to reach people. Social media marketing and social media platforms are becoming increasingly important in consumers' purchasing decisions, mainly because of the growth of “word of mouth” marketing (Karimi and Naghibi, 2015). Wayne Kelly of South East Marquees spoke of the importance of word of mouth for his company. Mr. Kelly stated that the company rely a great deal on word of mouth and this directly attributed to the use of social media. A positive perception of the company in the eyes of the consumer is vital for SMEs and social media can help to shape a customer's perception. Positive reviews from users of products and services posted on social media can be seen by potential customers and they can then recommend the company to others.

SMEs who use social media must recognise and comprehend its value to the company, this value can come from reaching the significantly large numbers of social media users

by appealing to their needs and wants (Patterson, 2015). Kolyn Byrne of Beat 102/103 supports this statement by stating that the company “*interact with customers on a constant basis, we run live competitions all day every day*”. Customers need to be attracted to the company and through social media competitions Beat 102/103 can satisfy particular consumer’s needs and wants. Shannon Forrest of Chia Bia states that the company reaches their customers through social media due to the level of control that social media gives the user. SMEs like Chia Bia can use social media to reach certain customers and appeal to them in different ways. Ms. Forrest stated that through social media can reach people in a multitude of locations at the same time, something traditional marketing methods cannot offer. Both Beat 102/103 and Chia Bia use social media to appeal to certain customers in different ways that satisfies their needs and wants.

The scores allocated to each of the companies in the social media analysis matrix is the author’s evaluation of their social media use. Through the use of NVivo, the author was able to discover similarities between each company and how they relate to the literature assessed in chapter two.

5.4 The Promotion of Brand Awareness and Brand Image Through the use of Social Media in SMEs

A company can grab the attention of potential customers in a cost-effective manner by being active on social media platforms and increase their brand exposure (Barnes and Mattson, 2008). Ellenor McDonald of Arvum Group supports the statement by Barnes and Mattson (2008), the company uses social media to promote its products and services. Ms. McDonnell stated that the company uses social media to interact with market leaders, something which can attract attention to the brand on social media platforms. By interacting with respected industry leaders on social media, the company image is improved in the eyes of the customer. Shannon Forrest of Chia Bia also stated that the company has high profile sports people as brand ambassadors for the company and engaging, through social media, with these high profile people can help promote and strengthen the brand.

Posting pictures and talking favourably about the company on social media can help build a strong brand image for a company in the eyes of the consumer and this, according to Ms. Forrest, is reflected in the following that the company has on social media. As stated by Hutter *et al.* (2013) activities such as advertising, promotion and public relations activities are such things that can create brand awareness. Social media represents one way to expose a consumer to a brand and therefore create brand awareness (Hutter *et al.*, 2013). This statement can be linked to the social media activities of both Chia Bia and Arvum Group.

In the research findings chapter, the author used the social media analysis matrix to rank these two companies to a high degree in areas such as; using social media to promote company activities, use picture and video content to appeal to the customers and interact with the consumer. These are elements which help build brand awareness and build the image of the brand and this is something that both companies use social media for to a high degree.

5.5 The Benefits of the Application of Social Media Marketing for SMEs and how they are Measured

During the data analysis process, the author discovered that all interview respondents stated a major benefit of social media marketing for their company to be that it is low cost. In describing cost as a major benefit, the representatives of the SMEs concerned were in agreement with Conley (2014) who stated that traditional marketing activities can be a drain on funds; social media marketing on the other hand is low cost and provides a direct line to current and prospective customers.

Cost is not the only benefit of social media for SMEs. Through analysis of data using the NVivo software, the author discovered that two interview respondents stated that social media allowed their respective companies to reach a consumer market far bigger than the local area in which the company operates. Ms. McDonald of Arvum Group stated that through social media potential customers can be reached all across Ireland and internationally. Regular updating of content allows the company to keep its customers

informed of the company's activities and Ms. McDonnell added that the company have received sales orders from across Ireland thanks to the company social media accounts.

Social media sites can sometimes be referred to as online communities; this is applicable to Mean Bean Coffee. Eoin McGrath states that his company, similar to Arvum Group, now has customers from all over the southeast of Ireland and social media is directly responsible for this. Mr. McGrath stated that without social media use the company would not have gained exposure outside of Waterford. The potential consumer market for Mean Bean Coffee grew thanks to social media use and Mr. McGrath also mentioned benefits of social media marketing for his company include instant customer interaction and instant contact through messaging services available on social media platforms. Jackson (2011) states that with a simple Facebook or Instagram post or a short message on Twitter, businesses can promote products and services and provide instant feedback or support to customers. Both Arvum Group and Mean Bean Coffee use these social media opportunities to maximum effect and have been very beneficial to the companies.

Measuring social media performance is hugely important for SMEs. According to Mulready (2013) it is important for companies to know if their social media activities are worthwhile. For any business, it is important to know what their objective is and why they are using social media marketing. Through document analysis in addition to analysis of the interview data, the author discovered that each of the SMEs focused on in this study carry out regular social media measurement activities. The use of metrics allows companies to easily monitor their social media performance on a week to week or month to month basis. Wayne Kelly of Southeast Marquees stated analytics tools are used to measure impact on a weekly basis and the company then tries to target those who are new to company social media accounts. The ability to identify new social media account followers is important to the company as it allows them to identify potential customers that can then be targeted by the company in order to try and turn these followers into customers.

Hoffman and Fodor (2010) state that customer investments should be the social media marketing objectives for a company. Many social media marketing objectives exist, but the most important are perhaps creating brand awareness and customer engagement.

Kolyn Byrne of Beat 102/103 states that the company evaluate their social media objectives on a weekly basis in order to make sure they are relevant to the targeted customer base. Mr. Byrne stated that a dedicated social media team draft weekly reports that are submitted to the management for analysis. Analysing the social media performance is essential as it ensures that marketing campaigns can be readjusted if they are becoming outdated or going stale. Chia Bia use a similar approach when measuring their social media but measurement is carried out on a monthly as opposed to weekly basis, Ms. Forrest outlined the importance of keeping social media accounts updated and fresh as social media can go stale if not managed properly by the company and this can lead to a potential loss of customers.

Aided by NVivo, the author has discovered that each company regularly evaluates their social media performance and measures the benefits of their social media activities. As seen in the research findings chapter, each company scores highly on the analysis matrix in areas relating to benefits such as; information and product updates but also measurement, each company measures their social media to a high degree even though each SME uses different methods.

5.6 Increasing the Customer Base of SMEs Through Social Media

Marketing

Baird and Parasnis (2011) state that social media holds enormous potential for companies to get closer to customers by engaging with them in a personalised manner, and that by doing this the company increases the likelihood of customer retention. Beat 102/103 is a radio station that services just six counties in the south of Ireland yet the station has listeners from all over the world. Kolyn Byrne of Beat states that social media allows the station to have a customer base far outside the south of Ireland. The company has listeners in contact from a multitude of foreign countries that discovered the company social media accounts. Social media and word of mouth allow the company to have a worldwide following. The listenership of the station continues to grow and this is a direct result of their social media marketing efforts.

According to Jackson (2011), social media is rapidly transforming the way organisations communicate with customers as it gives a brand a voice to reach customers on a more personal level. Larger organisations are the focus in the publication by Jackson (2011), however the author discovered that this statement can be applied to a number of SMEs that are the focus of this study. Shannon Forrest of Chia Bia states that social media has given the company a voice and a modern means of communication with the customer, Ms. Forrest states that social media gives her company an easy way to grow its following. Chia Bia have been successful in turning followers into customers. Ms. Forrest stated that social media is all about interaction and reaching the customers in the right way. Ms. Forrest added that the increase of business for the company is directly linked to the increase in social media followers. Eoin McGrath of Mean Bean Coffee also states that social media has played a role in increasing his company's customer base. Between business and staff social media accounts the company name can be exposed to close to fifteen-thousand people. The client base has grown considerably since Mean Bean Coffee first began using social media with much of the company sales coming as a direct result of social media use.

With regards to social media, it is customers rather than firms who produce much of the value-added content in social media, and sharing this content with their network of followers and friends is a major benefit for organisations (Berthon *et al.* , 2012). This statement rings true with Ellenor McDonnell's response to interview questions regarding the correlation between a social media following and a growth in client numbers for her company, according to Ms. McDonnell the two go hand in hand. Ms. McDonnell states that company open days are advertised on social media, pictures and content are then posted while the event is happening. This enables customers to have live updates to engaging and relevant content. While the customer base of Arvum Group has grown thanks to their social media marketing efforts, the growth has been small. This however is in keeping with the marketing strategy of the company. They do not want an influx of social media followers who are not customers of the company, rather they want followers to be a concentrated group of actual or potential customers.

The author discovered through the analysis of the interview data that each company engages in social media activity that, according to studies such as Berthon *et al.* (2012) that certain activities can help grow a social media following and increased customer base by offering value added content on social media such as; company information, promotional content, picture and video sharing and this is reflected in the scores the author awarded to each company in the social media analysis matrix in the research findings chapter.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the author has analysed and implemented data gathered in the research findings as they relate to the literature assessed in the literature review chapter. The data was compared to existing literature and in the most part, the author discovered that the findings were supportive of existing theories relating to social media marketing. The next chapter will provide a conclusion to the study and the author will offer recommendations based on the research conducted throughout this study.

The author was satisfied that enough data was collected in the research process to compare with the existing findings assessed in the literature review chapter, in order to determine if the overall objective of this study was satisfied.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overall conclusion to the study. The author will review the research objective and the research questions and discuss whether the overall objective of the study was satisfied. The author will highlight the limitations of the study and summarise the main conclusions. Finally, recommendations for future research will be provided.

6.1 Conclusions of the study

The main conclusions of this study will be discussed using the research questions as headings to discover if the research objective was satisfied.

Research Question One - How is social media being used in a marketing context by SMEs in Ireland?

Through qualitative analysis, the author discovered that SMEs main reason for using social media marketing is that it allows SMEs to have direct access to the consumer as well as constant contact. With social media allowing for instant updating and publishing of content, it has become a vital part of SMEs every day marketing ideas. In a matter of seconds, thousands of people can be reached on social media platforms and this is something which SMEs place enormous value on.

Research Question Two - Has social media helped promote brand awareness and brand image for SMEs?

Posting picture and video content on social media has become hugely popular as social media has evolved. This enables the SME to post engaging and informative content which allows the consumer to see what the company can offer. SME social media platforms can have many followers and fans who have an outlet to discuss the company in a positive way. Followers of an SME can like, comment and share content and information that can increase brand awareness and promote the brand image. The author discovered that word of mouth was a direct outcome of social media marketing and helped to promote brand awareness and build a strong brand image.

Research Question Three - Have SMEs realised the benefits of the application of social media marketing and what techniques are used to measure these benefits?

The author discovered many benefits of social media marketing, including: low cost marketing and advertising compared to traditional marketing methods such as newspaper and radio, the ease which social media can be used, the level of information that can be published and shared and the level of awareness of a brand that can be reached using social media. It was found that social media can be measured on a regular basis using analytical tools and measuring the number of followers an SME social media platform has. This can be crosschecked with sales generated and the author discovered that each SME carries out this process.

Research Question Four - Can social media marketing increase an SMEs customer base?

Social media marketing was found to be very effective for companies in terms of helping their customer base grow. Social media has an advantage over traditional marketing methods in that its reach is endless. It was discovered that SMEs based in Waterford gained customers from all over the country as well as internationally due to social media. Positive word of mouth in addition to an up to date social media platform that appeals to the needs and wants of customers are attributed to the growth of the customer bases.

Research Objective of the study

Overall, the author is satisfied that the objective of this study was achieved. A better understanding of the application of social media marketing in SMEs was gained and the benefits of social media marketing for SMEs were realised. The author has discovered that the application of social media marketing is seen as a major benefit and a successful business driver for SMEs in Ireland. The interview respondents spoke at length about the advantages that it offers and the success that it has brought to each of the companies focused on for this study. The interview respondents stated that social media marketing will continue to be considered a vital part of their company's long term marketing plans.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

During the course of this study, the author encountered several limitations which were challenging to overcome. The author discussed limitations of the research in chapter three but the limitations affecting the overall study include:

- The overall conclusions that the author found from the research is limited to a small sample size and does not represent a wide range of SMEs
- The data obtained from the interviews with the representative SMEs was quite similar, this resulted in the author analysing somewhat repetitive data for each interview respondent
- The SMEs chosen for the study were all based in one geographical area. Consequently, this did not apply to all Irish SMEs.

6.3 Recommendations

Following on from the research carried out during the course of this study, the author has recommended the following:

- SMEs should incorporate social media marketing into the overall marketing strategy of the company. This will ensure that all areas of marketing in the

company are used to the maximum potential instead of separating social media marketing from the rest of the company marketing efforts.

- A consistent image of the company must be portrayed at all times on social media. This will help the brand to build and maintain a strong brand image in the eyes of the consumer. This will help the business to grow.
- Different social media platforms should be used in different ways to help the SME. For example, Facebook and Instagram are both functionally different, this means that SMEs should be using these in different ways to ensure the benefits these platforms offer to business users are achieved.
- Regular publishing of engaging and interesting content is a necessity. Picture and video content is a great way of engaging customers and posting this type of content will help reduce text information allowing for a more interesting experience on social media.
- SMEs could develop their social media pages and platforms into direct sales channels. This will make it easier for SMEs to track social media followers who purchase or use the products and services of the company. This will allow for a more accurately measurable return on investment.

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Appendix A – Reflective Log

*“Since everything is a reflection of our minds, everything can be changed
by our minds” - Buddha*

When I set a date to meet my supervisor in October, I felt that I had all the time in the world to complete this dissertation. August seemed an age away and I could chip away at the work for the next ten months. In my final year at undergrad level, I started my dissertation at the earliest possible time and completed it a full six weeks before the due date. I had worked on it bit by bit and felt that I was managed my time very well considering the workload that I had in a final year of education. I presumed that I could apply the same attitude to a postgrad thesis. I quickly found out that this just was not possible, a few hours work here and there was not going to be acceptable at this level. Such an emphasis is placed on time management at the induction day held at the beginning of the semester at master’s level and looking back, I should have listened more carefully. I did not start my dissertation at the earliest time possible and this was a major error on my part. When the hard work started coming in semester one I found myself working twice as hard as other people due to my inability to apply my full attention to the dissertation straightaway. Luckily, a lot of hard work got me back on track but it took a long time to get up to speed and if I had the chance to go back and change things, I would

make sure that I would begin the work as soon as humanely possible. Luckily for me, I was able to get all my work done on time and handed in to my supervisor for assessment as semester one ended.

If I was to give prospective master's level students one piece of advice it would be to take a break over the Christmas holidays, after a huge effort in semester one it is essential to take a break and relax and recharge. I found myself in the library on the first week of January totally refreshed both physically and mentally and this was a huge benefit to me going forward into semester two. I gave myself two weeks off completely from academic work and enjoyed a rest and, I feel, this was the best decision I made in the whole year. I made huge strides in the first two weeks of January and I conducted a huge amount of research in those early morning hours in the library. The quality of my work improved hugely and my literature review began to fall into place. I found that making a study plan in the library my first day back after the Christmas break was a huge benefit to me. My time management skills definitely improved and I feel this set me up for the rest of the year. Suddenly, August did not seem so far away now. October was a very distant memory now and I certainly began to take a lot more interest in keeping myself to a strict schedule with regards to putting in a set number of hours dedicated to dissertation research each week.

Throughout the course of semester two, I began to monitor the activity of SMEs on social media platforms in order to identify prospective interviewees for interviews for my research. This took much time and effort but it was a major benefit for me as I was able to pick the most appropriate companies for the study. A big challenge for me was finding the time to monitor all of these companies but also manage my workload in college and my part time job. Although I had a plan and a schedule I felt myself working extremely hard to adhere to my own personal deadlines. Often I found myself staying up very late in the night to get work completed. I think a major challenge for me was working part time and trying to juggle a postgrad workload. Often I could work thirty hours over a three-day period at a weekend. I would encourage any person doing this to think long and hard about taking on too much in terms of employment and academic workload. I certainly found it very challenging and I would certainly work less hours in my part time job over

the course of the academic year if I had the chance again. I feel that I have certainly worked hard over the year and I think that although trying to find the time to do everything was a challenge I believe I have learned the true value of hard work and this will stand to me going forward into the future.

Although it was a highly challenging experience, I feel that completing a postgrad degree and dissertation is certainly one of the biggest achievements of my life to date. I learned so much in the year and I know that the skills I have developed will benefit me greatly for many years to come, both personally and in an employment context. For my primary research, I had the opportunity to examine company documents for the SMEs I was focusing on for the study. This was a new experience for me and it is not something I had done before. I analysed marketing strategies and although I had seen strategies before I had only seen the finished product. Luckily, during the course of my research I had the opportunity to be present in a company where a strategy was being drawn up. This was a great learning experience and I would like the opportunity to be involved in something so interesting again. Getting the chance to interview representatives of SMEs in Waterford was a great experience as I got to hear about how their company's marketing departments work and how their adaption of social media as a marketing tool has impacted on their business.

Examining the company social media accounts was a tiring but enjoyable experience for me. I spent many hours monitoring companies that I wanted to focus on for this study and after some time I began to examine other companies' social media. I found it very interesting to monitor competitors take different approaches to their social media use i.e. content posted, formal vs. informal conversation and how often the company engaged with the consumer. Social media is a highly interesting and surprisingly complex phenomena and I am delighted I had the opportunity to carry out research on the topic.

Although it was a challenge, undertaking this dissertation on a topic and area that I am highly passionate about is something I am very proud of. The benefits of my year in postgraduate education in Waterford Institute of Technology far outweigh the challenges I faced and I would repeat the year over again if given the chance. I feel I have grown so

much as an individual and I now feel I am ready to progress further into my career and the experience of this year has got me very excited about what the future will bring.

Appendix B – Interview Questions

1. Your company is regularly active on social media sites, the main site being used is Facebook, but I notice the company is less inclined to use traditional marketing methods such as newspaper and radio. I am interested to find out the reasons for this. Can you tell me a bit about your use of social media in a marketing context and why you use social platforms rather than print media?
2. Social media use has grown rapidly in the last number of years, Facebook leads the way in terms of social media user numbers but other sites such as Twitter and Instagram are equally as attractive for companies – are you aware of the benefits of these other sites?
3. Having reviewed your company's activity on social media, I have noticed that you update your company page regularly. What are your reasons for this?
4. From assessing your activity on social media, it is clear that you have a social media marketing strategy in place. Can you explain what it is and why you chose to implement this strategy?

5. As a locally owned and independent business your resources will be limited compared to your larger competitors, has social media played a part in allowing you to compete with similar companies who operate on a larger scale?
6. I have spent a lot of time monitoring your interaction with people who “like” or “follow” you on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Your interaction is quite regular with your followers; can you explain the reasons for this?
7. What benefits are there for companies who regularly use social media as a marketing tool? As a small business does social media help to raise your profile and reach potentially new customers or does it act as a way of keeping in regular contact with existing customers?
8. How do you measure your progress on social media & how often do you measure it?
9. What were your company’s expectations when you first began using social media? What did you want to achieve and now that you’re an established online presence, have you achieved what you initially set out to achieve?
10. Has there been an increase in your customer base since you began using social media to market & advertise?
11. Studies have shown that social media marketing can increase brand awareness and promote customer interaction, is this important from your company’s point of view? As a small business is this something you place an emphasis on?
12. There are many different social media sites available, although some may not be suited to your company or the industry in which you operate. Have you assessed other social media sites? If so, what are they and what are your plans for the future in terms of social media marketing in the long term?

Appendix C – Interview Consent Form

* I agree to participate in an interview for a research based project conducted as part of the Masters of Marketing course in Waterford Institute of Technology. I confirm that my participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and I am under no obligation to disclose any information that I am uncomfortable in doing so. The interviewer has given explicit guarantees that no sensitive information that could jeopardise my employment will be disclosed in this study. I agree for the interview to be recorded for the purpose of research and the researcher has agreed that I have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) which I may deem to be inappropriate or of a sensitive nature towards my employers.

Interviewee Signature: _____ Interviewer Signature: _____

Date: _____