

Social media entrepreneurship: Youth participation, evolving business norms, and communication strategies

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Abstract

This research delves into the dynamic transformation ignited by social media within Ghana's business landscape of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Drawing on the COM-B theory of behaviour change, the research examines how capability, motivation, and opportunity influence business shifts from conventional to online platforms and identifies effective communication strategies for online business growth. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from 127 youth-owned online enterprises and qualitative insights from 15 in-depth interviews with purposively selected entrepreneurs. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis via STATA 17, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings from the quantitative analysis revealed that financial limitations, difficulty accessing credit, and regulatory restrictions significantly influence youth participation in social media businesses. While the qualitative analyses also evident that content marketing and audience engagement were the most utilized communication strategies. This study advocates for a comprehensive re-evaluation of business regulations that seamlessly accommodates both online and hybrid social media models. Furthermore, there is the need for social media entrepreneurs to also extend their communication strategies to embrace those of analytical and evaluation strategies which are equally important for business success and their continued employability.

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Introduction

As technology advances, smartphones and high-speed computers continue to be used for business development and innovation. These devices have the capability to assess which market-oriented decisions and innovative products businesses need to modernize (Boateng & Agbenyega, 2019). Virtual businesses have expanded exponentially over the past decades due to technological advancement, enabling the youth to escape unemployment and economic deprivation (Slávik, 2019). Online small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) provide younger entrepreneurs with superior client contacts, market access, and opportunities for strategic company development compared to physical SMEs. This has led to an increase in the number of firms established by younger entrepreneurs online (Samuel & Joe, 2016). Social media in particular has empowered many youths to overcome poverty. The use of social media enables internet firms to increase their profits, while simultaneously lowering their expenses, developing brands, and fostering commercial collaborations (McCann & Barlow, 2015; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Due to its global reach, entrepreneurs who run social media related businesses are more inventive and are inclined to produce goods that are up to worldwide standards (Alzahrani, 2022). Ahmed et. al. (2019), also posit the view that when real-time input is used to produce customer-focused products, social media improves corporate performance and competitiveness. Thus, social media has been shown to help businesses around the world to overcome bureaucratic business roadblocks and unemployment (Okonkwo & Awad, 2023). Yet, it is also widely recognized that social media SMEs are fraught with challenges. Some of the difficulties include the cost of implementation, lack of financial resources and the complexity of technology coupled with limited existing ICT resources (Levy et al., 2005). In terms of financial securities, causes for alarm of revenue short-chains on economies have been reported (Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, given the inadequate monitoring of online activities, virtual enterprises have higher tendency for cyber frauds and other negative imprints (Andoh et al., 2018).

In Ghana, several studies have highlighted the significant advantages of integrating social media into business operations, underscoring its role as a strategic tool for effective business practices (Boateng & Agbenyega, 2019; Amoah and Jibril, 2021; Bruce, et al., 2022). The literature indicates that businesses utilizing social media benefit immensely from various communication strategies, whether through visual effects, digitalization advantages, or the ability to engage in mass communications (Dzisi & Ofosu, 2014; Mahama, 2020). These strategies have proven effective in brand building, fostering client engagement, facilitating rapid marketing and product promotion, delivering superior customer support, and managing crises among entrepreneurs in the country (Asamoah et al., 2024). Perhaps, such benefits inspire the notable trend among Ghanaian youth-led businesses to transition from physical to fully digital operations (Bruce, et. al., 2022). While most studies have explored the benefits and the overall positive impact of social media on business growth, little scholarly attention has been paid to specific insights into

communication strategies offered by social media which are most effective for youths engaged in social media enterprises. Thus, making the underlying drivers of this shift in Ghana largely unexplored in current literature. This gap is significant because the factors driving such trend differ in various parts of the globe as social media enterprises are affected by various factors such as economic, social, cultural, religious and the general business environment (Jia & Lu, 2021). Considering these observations, this study aims to explore the underlying drivers behind the shift from conventional to online business platforms and identify the most effective communication strategies for social media entrepreneurs.

Conceptual framework

In this study, we use the COM-B behavioural theory of change to explore the intentions behind the shift of business setups from physical locations to online platforms by youth. We also use this theory to investigate the factors that attract and retain youths in online business setups. Similar studies such as Cane et al. (2012) and Li et al. (2023) have also employed this theory to explore the psychology and intents of individuals in both academic and professional research. The Michie et al. (2011) COM-B's behavioural change theory is derived from a broader concept known as the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW). It is ideal for explaining the intentions behind people's actions, influenced by their level of capability (C), opportunities (O), and motivation (M). These factors create the mindset and skills necessary for individuals to embark on particular changes that are useful and provide self-satisfaction. The model suggests that capability, opportunities, and motivation are interconnected and relevant to the formation of behaviour to bring about change, offering the right skills and mediums that enable individuals, especially youths, to be problem solvers with designing interventions.

The individual's capabilities, which refer to their psychological and physical capacities such as their ability to reason and make decisions, as well as the relevant skills needed for such reasoning and decision-making, have a direct impact on their behaviour change. According to the model, self-motivation is also a factor necessary to compel an individual to make certain changes in their behaviour. Such motivations come in the form of habitual processes and emotional growth of the individual in order to improve themselves, which in turn has a direct effect on behavioural changes, as well as opportunities identification, which directly facilitates the behaviour change process. Opportunities refer to the set of factors that prompt or create a conducive environment for the growth of the individual. The model further suggests backward effects from behavioural change, as behaviours shaped by these factors, could also contribute to further improvements in these factors, in turn enhancing behaviour outcomes. In the context of this study, capabilities refer to an individual's potential to identify the internet or social media as a market where they can create a business. This is expected to be shaped by their level of knowledge of social media usage for business-related activities, their level of education attainment,

accessibility to social media-enabling devices, and knowledge of friends or mentors in the online space. These factors are expected to boost the capabilities of the individual, making them much more willing to participate in online business. The opportunities, just like Michie et al. (2011), which refer to physical and environmental factors, will also constitute the scope of focus of this study. The environmental factors include national frameworks for online business setups, regulations governing business setups in Ghana, educational curricula tailored to entrepreneurship and online businesses, and financial climate availabilities for business setups in the country. The motivation components shall include all forms of habitual processes and emotive feelings that are likely to cause setups among youths, not only limited to unemployment, fear of failure, urge to be self-independent, among others.

The digital space offers diverse communication strategies for social media entrepreneurs. The literature articulates the importance of effective marketing communication. Amoah & Jibril (2020) focused on marketing communication strategies and explored the challenges inhibiting Ghanaian social media entrepreneurs from using social media channels as innovative tools for advertising and communication among SMEs. They identified several obstacles, including a lack of managerial skills, marketing expertise, perceived costs, regular system updates, links upgrades, and financial constraints, which hinder the effective use of social media for marketing communication by online enterprises. Their study supports earlier findings by Dzisi & Ofosu (2014), which also highlighted that social media provides strategic marketing communication features essential for the success of online businesses. Similarly, Ansong and Boateng (2020) concentrated on digital communication strategies within the market strategy framework, examining how these strategies contribute to business survival in the Ghanaian economy. Their study revealed that effectively integrating social media into online businesses provides a digital communication advantage crucial for business survival, especially during the initial growth stage. This success is highly dependent on the innovativeness and competence of the social media entrepreneurs. Munthali et al. (2021) also examined the mass communication features of social media enterprises in Ghana. Their findings suggested that online businesses use various social media platforms to reach a centralized network of customers, facilitating knowledge and information dissemination and organizational coordination. Despite these insights, a comprehensive evaluation of which communication strategies work best for online enterprises in Ghana remains unexplored.

Furthermore, in as much as literature has documented the relevance of social media for online businesses, the changing norms associated with social media usage have geographical influence, thus what is likely to change in China may be different from Africa and Ghana as a whole. Furthermore, granted the documentation of the changing norms in businesses may be in sync with characteristics in Africa, the literature is silent on which aspects of business compositions that are fast encountering such changes. The relevant push and pull factors for youth participation in such business activities are yet to be explored. This study will therefore add to the world of literature.

Methods

The study employs a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative techniques with the rationale that the combination of the two approaches adequately encapsulate the detailed subtleties involved in the shift from conventional to online business platform and the adoptive communications strategies employed by entrepreneurs. The study focused on social media entrepreneurs in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, following the region's high level of economic activities and digital engagement (GSS, 2021; Hill et al, 2022). Furthermore, the choice of the region rests upon the fact that it houses most telecommunication networks and hence has a high likelihood of better internet connectivity that aid social media business among the youths (National Communication Authority, 2022).

Given the unavailability of specific data on youth engaged in online entrepreneurship, the study applied the sample size formula for an infinite population within the context of a known target population. According to the GSS (2021) the Greater Accra Region has the highest representation of 27,736 youths in business within the Information and Communication Industries among the other regions. Given that the information and communication sector encompass a broader range of activities beyond social media enterprises, this study assumes that 10 percent of individuals within this sector are engaged in social media entrepreneurship. Persons aged 15 to 45 years were considered as youth who use social media for business activities. For a high level of statistical precision, a margin of error (ϵ) of 5 percent and a confidence level (z) of 95 percent was selected. Mathematically, the formula for calculating the sample size for an infinite population is

given by: $n = \frac{z^2 * \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\epsilon^2}$. The simplification with this information suggests that workable sample size of 138 is ideal for the study. A convenient sampling approach was used in the administration of the survey instrument through the aid of an internet-based survey. The survey instrument was designed to capture key focus areas relevant to the study's objectives, primarily deploying a five-point Likert scale to measure levels of attraction, opportunity, and motivation factors as well as the six business factors to establish the changing norms among social media entrepreneurs. To enhance the instrument's clarity and reliability, a pre-test was conducted among ten randomly selected entrepreneurs in Accra. Feedback from this exercise informed minor revisions to improve question wording and overall instrument coherence.

To provide a rich and contextual perspective on the communication strategies employed by the youth, the qualitative aspect of the study, used purposive sampling with the aid of a semi-structured interview guide to interview selected participants whose responses from the quantitative data showed remarkable indication of their awareness and intentionality in their application of communication strategies in their online business.

The structured questionnaire employed in this study was grounded in a range of thematic communication strategies, encompassing aspects such as content, audience,

evaluation, and collaboration among others. These strategies facilitated an in-depth exploration of the utilization of social media for communication purposes. Similarly, the quantitative analysis integrated various themes that were closely aligned with the study objectives.

The quantitative phase of the study involved survey data cleaning in Microsoft Excel and subsequently exported to STATA 17 for analysis. A do-file was generated to automate the coding process and streamline the creation of descriptive tables, correlation matrices, and regression analysis. The qualitative phase involved manual thematic analysis of transcribed interview data of the 15 purposive selected respondents. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated based on recurring patterns and significant statements aligned with the study's objectives. These codes were then grouped into overarching themes reflecting different communication strategies and challenges faced by social media entrepreneurs. Given the absence of proficiency in qualitative analysis software such as NVivo, manual coding was performed by the authors. To enhance reliability and credibility, multiple rounds of independent coding were undertaken, followed by comparison and discussion to resolve discrepancies and achieve consensus on theme categorization.

Findings

Business norms and communication strategies

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents used for the study. Of the 138 respondents targeted for the quantitative component of the study, 127 provided complete and usable responses, resulting in a 92.02% response rate. Young adults aged 18-30 years old were the most common demographic with social media enterprises, out of the 127 social media entrepreneurs surveyed, 79 respondents representing 62.20% were the young youth as compared with the 48 respondents (37.79%) who belong to the older youth category. Out of the total social media entrepreneurs surveyed from the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, about 76 of the respondents, representing 59.84% did not have physical location as they operated their businesses solely on the Internet. This contrasts with the remaining 51 respondents also representing 40.16% of the social media entrepreneurs who however, complimented their virtual business with physical locations.

Females dominated the social media entrepreneurship space within the Greater Accra Region. Out of the 127 respondents, they constituted 58.27% against their male counterparts who were 41.73%. Accounting for the educational background, those with tertiary education background dominated in social media entrepreneurship activities within the region. A total of 119 respondents, representing 93.70% possessed tertiary education with just 6.30 percent with secondary education. Interestingly, the study did not find any representation of persons with no formal education or primary education with social media businesses.

The sales of varied goods and services is the most frequent business activity on the social media space among entrepreneurs from the Greater Accra Region. About one quarter (25.20%) of social media business activities are largely within the selling of varied products and services that were not explicitly specified by the entrepreneurs. This is followed by those who specialized in the trading of Clothing and Footwear, accounting for 23.62% of businesses owned by entrepreneurs in the region. Fashion and Beauty, and Photography and Videography businesses followed closely behind, each accounting for 13.39% of businesses on social media in the Greater Accra Region. It is further revealed that among entrepreneurs engaged in the sales of varied forms of products and services (i.e. unspecified products), saw equal representation by both the young youths and the older youths. However, in Clothing and Footwear the younger youths dominated. Out of the total of 30 respondents engaged in the Clothing and Fashion activities, 25 of these respondents, representing 83.33% were young youths. However, for Fashion and Beauty, and Photography and Videography there was not much variation among the young and older youths.

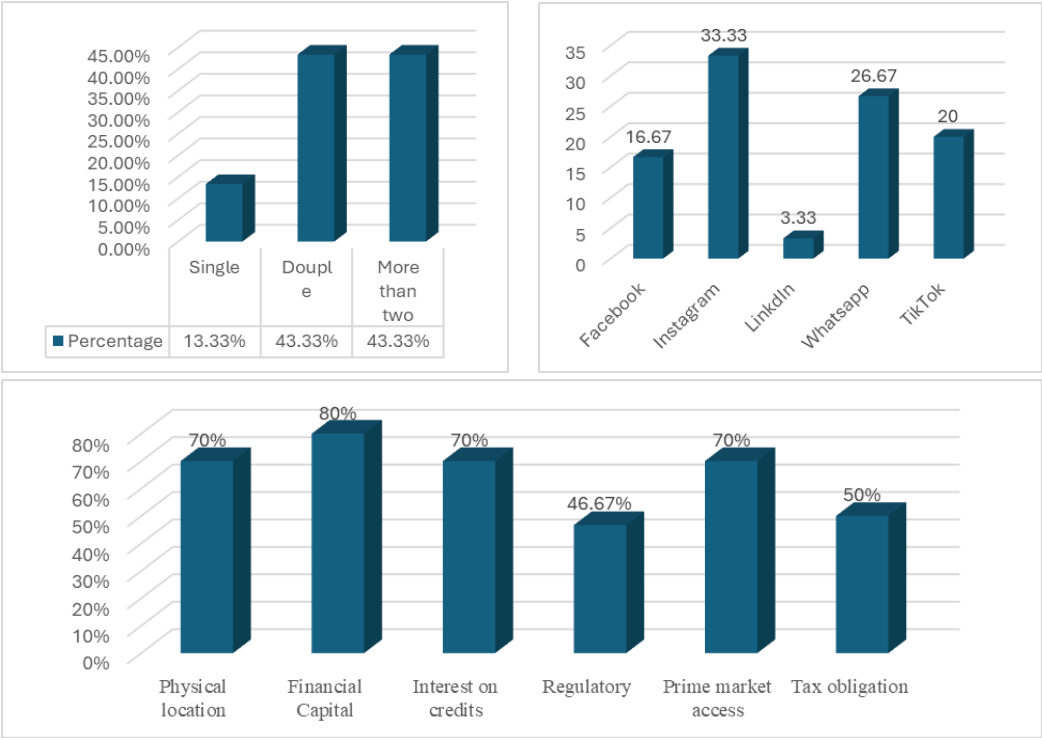
Interestingly, while most social media entrepreneurs continue with their original business activities, a significant proportion have changed since their inception on social media platforms. As high as 34.65% of social media entrepreneurs have pivoted their line of business from one product to another. Younger youths (40.51%) are more likely to do so than the older youths (25.00%). A further breakdown shows that the proportion of entrepreneurs who have been operating for more than ten years on social media platforms were more likely to change their business operations than other categories. This is followed by those operating their businesses for up to five years, with 38.46% of such entrepreneurs changing their business activities since trading on social media platforms . There was, however, no evidence of any business swing among those operating between 6 – 10 years.

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents

| Variable | 18-30 (n=79) | 31-45 (n=48) | Total (n=127) |
|--|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Education | | | |
| Secondary | 10.13% | 0% | 6.30% |
| Tertiary | 89.87% | 100% | 93.70% |
| Sex | | | |
| Male | 37.97% | 47.92% | 41.73% |
| Female | 62.03% | 52.08% | 58.27% |
| Mode of Business Operation | | | |
| Solely Online | 58.23% | 62.50% | 59.84% |
| Online & Physical | 41.77% | 37.50% | 40.16% |
| Business Type | | | |
| Clothing & Footwear | 31.65% (25) | 10.42% (5) | 23.62% (30) |
| Events | 0.00% (0) | 8.33% (4) | 3.15% (4) |
| Fashion/Beauty | 10.13% (8) | 18.75% (9) | 13.39% (17) |
| Food | 15.19% (12) | 0.00% (0) | 9.45% (12) |
| Graphic Design & Animation | 6.33% (5) | 0.00% (0) | 3.94% (5) |
| Photography & Videography | 10.13% (8) | 18.75% (9) | 13.39% (17) |
| Research | 6.33% (5) | 0.00% (0) | 3.94% (5) |
| Sales (Unspecified) | 20.25% (16) | 33.33% (16) | 25.20% (32) |
| Security | 0.00% (0) | 10.42% (5) | 3.94% (5) |
| Business Change by Years of Inception | | | |
| Yes | 36.70% (40) | 0.00% (0) | 44.44% (4) |
| No | 63.30% (69) | 100.00% (9) | 55.56% (5) |

Source: Authors Survey (2023)

The study further revealed that, online business owners often utilize multiple social media platforms to conduct their operations instead of limiting themselves to just one. According to panel A of Figure 1, approximately 90% of entrepreneurs incorporate two or more social media accounts into their business activities. Among the respondents, 43.33% use three or more social media platforms, while others prefer utilizing only two. A small portion of the respondents, around 13.33%, focus solely on trading their business on a single social media platform. Instagram is the most used social media application for business activities. Approximately 33.3% of these entrepreneurs prefer Instagram for their business pursuits, thus making it the most popular choice (panel B of Figure 1). WhatsApp comes in as the second most used app, with 26.67% of business owners primarily using it for business purposes. It is followed by TikTok and Facebook. LinkedIn is the least commonly used app, with less than 5% of respondents using it as their primary mode of businesses on social media.



Source: Authors' Survey (2023) NB: Panel A: Number of social media platforms used by youths for online business activities. Panel B: Most used social media platforms for online businesses (%) and Panel C: Factors driving youths into business setups on social media platforms.

Figure 1: A multi-panel analysis of factors driving youth engagement in social media enterprises, predominant platforms, and usage frequency

The decision to establish a social media business is influenced by a variety of factors, as evident in panel C in Figure 1. A whopping 80% of social media entrepreneurs cited difficulties in accessing credit facilities as the main reason for opting to operate in the virtual space. This was followed by factors such as access to physical locations, interest rates on credit facilities, and prime market locations for businesses which were also considered as major impediments to owning physical business setups. 70% of business owners on social media platforms regard these challenges as reasons for setting up businesses on social media platforms. Regulatory requirements are the least constraining factor for business setups, with 53.33% of entrepreneurs believing that existing regulatory requirements for businesses in Ghana did not influence their decision to operate in virtual spaces. Tax obligations for business setups are generally of little concern to entrepreneurs, as half of the respondents do not consider them a hindrance to moving to social media platforms.

As the business landscape evolves, traditional norms are shifting, with virtual operations like social media platforms gaining popularity. Despite various reasons cited by respondents for operating in virtual spaces, it remains intriguing that only physical location and prime market access seems to be the significant factors for businesses

to make this shift. Not having a physical location correlates with operating on social media platforms. Specifically, it revealed a statistically significant positive correlation of 54.00% ($p=0.002^{***}$). Additionally, there is a positive correlation of 24.00% ($p = 0.03^{**}$) between difficulty in having prime market access and operating on social media platforms. While access to capital and credit interest seem to positively influence the decision to set up shop online, they are statistically insignificant. Although surprising about the insignificant nature of the financial capital, this could be ascribed to fact that whether virtual or operating from a physical location demands some amount of capital, hence, access to credit facilities and its associated interest rates on such credit facilities may not be the primary factor to the drift onto the virtual space (Bruce et al., 2024).

The qualitative inquiry substantiates the identified trends pertaining to the transition into the online domain for business operations. Notably, entrepreneurs exclusively engaged in online ventures perceive the virtual space as a strategic avenue for circumventing the substantial financial demands associated with establishing a physical business presence, particularly within prime locations. This strategic choice is primarily driven by the prohibitive startup capital required for procuring physical spaces, as expressed by a respondent operating solely online, *"I actually didn't have enough money to set up a shop or anything. That's why I chose to go online. Moreover, I still don't have the money yet for a shop, so I'll continuously do the online business because it's much profitable"* (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This underscores the pivotal role of financial considerations in steering entrepreneurs toward online platforms, emphasizing the cost-effective nature of digital business models. Similarly, entrepreneurs operating solely online emphasize the inherent flexibility that this mode of business provides, allowing them to synchronize their entrepreneurial pursuits with academic commitments. Financial capital emerges as a key motivator for venturing into the online sector, offering a streamlined approach with minimal financial investments compared to establishing a physical shop, as articulated by another respondent, *"Selling online allows me to manage my business around my academics as well. And financial capital is also a key factor, pushing me to the online sector whereby, you know, you have to get a shop, which requires more money. But here is the case where the online, I have just my phone and an internet, to be able to sell my sneakers."* (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This reiterates the multifaceted benefits that the online space affords, not only in financial terms but also in terms of accommodating the academic pursuits of the entrepreneurs.

Conversely, the motivations for social media entrepreneurs concurrently operating physical and online outlets differ substantially. Their inclination toward the online space revolves around gaining a competitive edge in marketing, enhancing accessibility for customers, and mitigating challenges associated with the bargaining tendencies of clients. As elucidated by a respondent engaged in both modes, *"So, I chose the online in addition so that it will help the purchase go more. Sometimes, some people find it difficult to locate the place I sell. So, once it's online, you can even deliver it to them."* (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This underlines the strategic integration of online platforms to enhance

market reach and improve customer convenience. Moreover, the adoption of online platforms is driven by a desire to maximize profits by circumventing the bargaining dynamics prevalent in physical locations. Respondents operating both physical and online shops emphasize the ease of fixed pricing in the online space, preventing frequent negotiation demands from clients. One respondent articulated, *"The reason why we chose the online is it makes things easier for us. And prices of the thing are based on one price. There is no reduction or something like that."* (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This illustrates a strategic shift to the online domain to streamline business operations and foster a more controlled pricing environment. The study further reveals that the burden of taxation from authorities serves as a significant impetus for entrepreneurs to shift toward online platforms, enabling them to conduct business operations with reduced fiscal encumbrances. Entrepreneurs with both physical and online operations cite the avoidance of substantial taxes associated with physical shops as a key advantage of online ventures. One respondent expounded, *"Basically, with the tickets every day, even if you don't sell, they have to come for ticket money. So, with the online, it's not that. No one demands anything. No land sale will come for any land money. So, it makes things easier for us."* (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This highlights the strategic advantage of online operations in evading frequent and substantial taxations imposed on physical establishments, thereby contributing to profit maximization. In essence, the qualitative findings underscore the nuanced motivations that propel entrepreneurs into the online space. Financial considerations, flexibility, competitive advantages, and tax-related factors emerge as pivotal determinants, reflecting a dynamic landscape where entrepreneurs strategically leverage online platforms to navigate challenges associated with traditional physical business setups.

Attracting factors of social media businesses

The COM-B theory provides a systematic framework for analysing the underlying factors that motivate young entrepreneurs to engage in business activities on social media platforms. The first component of the theory focuses on an individual's capabilities to determine their ability to drive change. The present study's findings indicate that an individual's proficiency in navigating social media platforms and owning devices that support social media operations were key determinants in their decision to venture into social media entrepreneurship. All social media entrepreneurs surveyed considered their ability to navigate various social media applications as a significant driving force in operating their businesses in the virtual space. This observation held true for those who solely operated in the virtual space, as well as for those with a hybrid model of online and physical location-based operations. Notably, approximately 96.67% of the entrepreneurs believed that owning social media supporting devices, such as smartphones and computers, was crucial in their decision to own virtual enterprises. This trend was particularly evident among those with physical locations, where factors

such as visibility and strong marketing opportunities available on social media platforms may have influenced their efforts to use their social media mediating devices to promote their businesses. However, this observation was slightly lower for those who exclusively operated in the virtual space, as approximately 5% of them believed that owning social media enterprises had nothing to do with their ownership of social media supporting devices like phones and computers. One possible explanation for this category of entrepreneurs is their tendency to operate any business from a friend's or relative's phone or computer, which does not require direct ownership of such devices before starting a social media enterprise (Nambisan et al., 2019). The study findings also revealed that respondents' educational background was highly influential in their ability to operate a business in the virtual space, as were the skills and talents of the entrepreneurs. In both instances, nine out of ten entrepreneurs considered their skills and educational background as factors that motivated them to transition to the virtual space for business activities (Shi et al., 2024). This trend was even more pronounced among those with both a physical location and a virtual space, as in all cases, their proportion was higher than that of their counterparts who exclusively operated in the virtual space. (See Table 2).

The study further suggests that entrepreneurs in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, are drawn to social media businesses based on their abilities and motivation, rather than the availability of opportunities (see Table 2). In contrast, those who choose to operate in the virtual space prioritize their own abilities and motivation over opportunities, with a higher percentage of social media entrepreneurs valuing these factors over opportunity. Table 2 further shows that less than half of social media entrepreneurs had access to the necessary opportunities to start their business, and less than 40% had prior entrepreneurial training. This trend was even more pronounced among those who operate exclusively online, with only 27.78% receiving training, compared to 50% of those with both physical and virtual operations. Mentorship from successful entrepreneurs was less important to social media entrepreneurs, with 73.33% reporting no access to such support prior to starting their business online. Among those without physical locations, 77.78% never had mentorship training, compared to 66.67% of those with both physical and virtual operations. National support for social media entrepreneurs is also scarce, with only 6.67% of respondents receiving such support. This was even less common among those with physical locations, with none reporting national support, while 11.11% of those with virtual operations received it.

Many aspiring entrepreneurs in the study area are drawn to the online world due to the inspiring success stories of others who have thrived in the digital space. According to the study, a significant 86.67% of these motivated individuals have shifted their business operations online. This driving factor is key in attracting businesses to the virtual world, with an even higher percentage of 88.89% for those who exclusively operate in the digital realm, compared to 83.33% for those with both physical and virtual locations. The study also found that an impressive 96.67% of social media entrepreneurs in the Greater

Accra Region were inspired by the success of friends and family, with an even greater percentage of 100% for those who operate solely online, compared to 91.67% for those with a physical presence as well (See Table 2).

Table 2: Attracting factors for social media enterprises: capabilities, opportunities, and motivations

| Factors | Solely Online | Online and Physical | Total |
|--|---------------|---------------------|-------|
| Capabilities | | | |
| Ability to navigate social media | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Social media mediating device ownership | 94.44 | 100 | 96.67 |
| Education | 88.89 | 91.67 | 90 |
| Talent/Skills | 83.33 | 100 | 90 |
| Opportunities | | | |
| Entrepreneurship training | 72.22 | 50 | 63.33 |
| Mentorship training | 22.22 | 33.33 | 26.67 |
| National Support | 11.11 | 0 | 6.67 |
| Motivation | | | |
| Inspired by successful online entrepreneurs | 88.89 | 83.33 | 86.67 |
| Inspired by relatives/friends into online enterprise | 100 | 91.67 | 96.67 |

Source: Authors' survey (2023)

The effect of the changing norms on youth employability

Our goal is to explore how changes in social norms impact youth engagement in social media ventures. To begin, we examine the relevance of social media to youth employability and then delve into the effects of changing norms on their employability. Notably, just over half (56.67%) of those who ventured into social media had no prior work experience. This was especially true for those operating exclusively in virtual space (61.11%), compared to those with a physical location (50.00%). It is no surprise that 63.33% of respondents who were unemployed turned to online businesses for employment, with this figure being even higher among those operating solely online (66.67%) compared to those with a physical presence (58.33%). The desire for independence was a key motivator for a high percentage of respondents to start social media businesses, with 8 out of 10 entrepreneurs in the study area citing this as a factor. Interestingly, this figure was much higher among those with a physical location for their business (91.67%) compared to those operating solely online (72.22%) (NB: For lack of space result could not be presented here but available on demand).

The qualitative analysis substantiates the prevailing trend of limited antecedent work experiences among the respondents prior to embarking on online business ventures. Evidently, their exposure to labor dynamics predominantly emanated from familial apprenticeship, a mode frequently acquired by assisting family relatives who operated

brick-and-mortar establishments (Pimentel, 2016). This pattern was discernible among entrepreneurs exclusively operating online, as well as those integrating both physical and online business models.

As articulated by a respondent engaged in a mixed business model, *"I was in my mom's business. She was at the physical store. So, I introduced her to the online business. Because I have been educated on that"*. (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This expression encapsulates the role of familial apprenticeship as a precursor to the initiation of social media entrepreneurship. Likewise, another respondent involved in solely online business echoed a similar sentiment, stating, *"I used to help my mom sell fruit and vegetables in the market when she's tired"*. (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). These testimonials underscore the familial apprenticeship paradigm as a foundational aspect of the social media entrepreneurial journey. Moreover, the study illuminates the role of social media entrepreneurship in imparting employability skills, particularly benefiting youth seeking avenues for revenue generation to address their basic needs. As elucidated by a participant, *"I wasn't having that perception all that long. I wanted money that was my own"*. (Personal communication, Accra, 2023). This sentiment is congruent with the findings suggesting that engagement in social media enterprises is not principally driven by a lack of employability elsewhere but rather originates from the youth's intrinsic motivation for self-independence (Adebayo & Kavoos, 2016).

The study reveals that youth engagement in social media enterprises is motivated by the allure of self-employment, affording flexibility and autonomy. As expressed by a participant engaged in solely online business, *"So I just love the social media space right now. Me working on social media has actually made me so independent that I, I don't have any hours as someone will tell me that I have to wake up at this time."* (Personal Communication, Accra, 2023). The participant further elucidates the liberating aspects of self-employment, underscoring the ability to manage work hours according to personal preferences and academic commitments and this is sync with the observations by Rehman & Frisby (2000). In essence, these qualitative findings underscore the transformative impact of social media entrepreneurship on individuals' work experiences, particularly among the youth. They highlight a paradigm shift from traditional apprenticeship models to self-directed and digitally driven enterprises, contributing to the evolving landscape of contemporary employment dynamics.

Effects of social media on youth employability

Employing an ordinary least square regression analysis, the study examined the impact of six identified variables of changing business norms on the social media employability of the youth. The results indicated that three of the six changing norms had significant impacts on the decision to move businesses onto the digital space. Specifically, the impact of regulation restriction and interest rates on financial instruments had direct impacts on the employability status of youths. The more unfavourable the regulation governing business setups, the more likely youths were to set up businesses on virtual

platforms such as social media. According to our model, social media entrepreneurship is expected to increase by 43.5 percentage points for every percentage point increment in unfavourable business regulations. Additionally, deterring interest on financial instruments hinders physical operationability of businesses, further encouraging virtual business operations. Results indicate that for every percentage increment of interest rates on loans, there is a 33.5 percentage point increment in social media enterprise setups among youths. Furthermore, financial restrictions in the form of access to capital had an inverse effect on social media enterprises, indicating that as access to capital becomes more favourable, the drift of businesses onto social media platforms dwindles by 69 percent. These findings are statistically significant, with an F-Statistic (6,80) of 31.53 and a p-value of 0.000. Other changing norms indicators such as physical space restrictions, prime marketing location restrictions, and taxation did not have significant effects on determining the employability status of social media enterprises among youth.

Table 3: Regression results of the effects of the changing norms on youth employability

| Variables | (1) Out_OLS |
|--|----------------------|
| Physical Space Restriction | 0.00360 (0.176) |
| Finance Restriction | -0.690*** (0.186) |
| Interest rate on Financial Instruments | 0.335** (0.153) |
| Regulatory Restriction | 0.435** (0.184) |
| Favourable Marketing Physical Space | 0.117 (0.113) |
| Tax Restriction | -0.291 (0.196) |
| Constant | 1.698*** (0.470) |
| Observations | 87 |
| R-squared | 0.355 |

Source: Authors' Survey (2023) Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1;

Communication strategies used by social media entrepreneurs

Following the identification of drivers prompting entrepreneurs to shift from conventional to online business platforms and its implications on their employability—key study objectives—there is a crucial need to uncover the communication strategies employed by these social media entrepreneurs for business growth. Drawing on Katz’s

(1959) Uses and Gratifications theory, our findings strongly align with the proposition that individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs or desires. Social media entrepreneurs strategically utilize content and engagement strategies to effectively meet the demands of their audience.

It is evident from the study findings that entrepreneurs employed diverse communication skills, the most prevalent strategies revolve around content and audience engagement. In terms of content communication strategy, authenticity and direct customer involvement are central themes. Some respondents demonstrate this by showcasing customer experiences and feedback to create genuine, relatable content and sharing videos of customers using their products to build trust. For example, a respondent, sharing an experience said, *"I film customers using our products to show authenticity on social media"*. Entrepreneurs enhance user-generated content with editing tools which adds visual appeal as one respondent claims that *"I combine client footage with music to create engaging posts"*. These strategies not only boost credibility but also encourage others to trust the brand and make purchases.

Understanding specific audience needs is crucial in the content communication strategies deployed by social media entrepreneurs. For example, another respondent targets gadgets like ring lights and phones, aligning with their audience's preferences, especially on WhatsApp: *"I know what my audience wants and tailor my posts accordingly"*, the respondent asserts. Similarly, others emphasize personal network engagement through the use of platforms like WhatsApp to promote products within trusted networks, while others use straightforward language to maximize reach such as *"I use clear messages like "Need a gift? Contact us! on WhatsApp"*. Such messages also turn into catch phrases which in turn became identified with the product. These approaches ensure content is accessible and relatable to a wider audience.

Regarding audience engagement strategies deployed by social media entrepreneurs, the study reveals diverse approaches aimed at fostering interaction and strengthening customer relationships. A pivotal strategy involves using interactive and demonstrative content. For instance, entrepreneurs encourage customers to showcase their purchases, particularly highlighting the appeal of products. Similarly, entrepreneurs utilize video demonstrations to showcase product quality and usage, effectively persuading potential buyers while employing incentives and direct interactions to sustain customer engagement. Others offer discounts and bonuses to encourage participation and repeat purchases. Furthermore, communication strategies such as the use of interactive content of polls, questions, and giveaways to stimulate engagement as stated by one respondent, *"We regularly post polls and host giveaways to encourage interaction and feedback from our audience"*.

Moreover, most of the respondents emphasized the importance of soliciting and showcasing customer feedback to enhance credibility and trust by encouraging customers to share their experiences and opinions. This leads to the building of a community with a common interest. This holistic approach not only enhances engagement but also cultivates a loyal customer base that feels valued and appreciated. By employing adaptive

communication strategies such as regular needs assessment of customers, awareness of customers changing needs, the entrepreneurs are enabled to stay proactive, flexible, and well-informed in the dynamic landscape of social media business space. It was further evident that many social media entrepreneurs appear to use fewer analytics and evaluation communication strategies in their operations and those who do so often rely on informal approaches as articulated by one respondent *“I don’t use formal metrics to monitor my social media business; I mainly observe seasonal trends”*.

Discussion

The transformative influence of social media on business landscapes, particularly among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in developing nations like Ghana, is unmistakable (Boateng et al., 2022; Tweneboah-Koduah et al., 2019). This paradigm shift is progressively steering traditional retailing activities, which constitute around 90% of Ghana’s business operations, towards the online domain (Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum, 2011). Notably, social media is easing the burden of customary prerequisites for establishing businesses, with the exorbitant costs associated with physical spaces and the challenges of securing prime locations compelling entrepreneurs to migrate online (Amoah & Jibril, 2019). Even those with existing physical establishments are increasingly drawn to the digital realm due to recurrent taxes, cutthroat competition, and the allure of online ventures (Oduro & Nyarku, 2018). However, an analysis of social media entrepreneurs reveals a somewhat static nature in their business activities, particularly among those who have not diversified their product lines over the years. This pattern contrasts with the more dynamic approach observed among newer entrepreneurs, who tend to adapt their product lines within the first five years of operating a social media business (Amoah & Jibril, 2019).

Diverse social media applications are instrumental in the operations of entrepreneurs, with many utilizing two or more platforms to enhance online visibility. Instagram emerges as the most popular choice, while LinkedIn lags behind in terms of usage. Applying the COM-B theory to this context unveils that the appeal of online business to the youth is closely tied to their self-capabilities and motivation, rather than mere availability of opportunities (Michie et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2010). Proficiency in navigating social media applications, bolstered by educational backgrounds and skills, along with inspiration from other successful entrepreneurs, significantly contributes to the youth’s inclination towards online ventures. While social media businesses offer employment opportunities to the youth, the study discerns that changing norms in business practices, regulatory constraints, and unfavorable interest rates exert a direct influence on employability. Stricter regulations and unfavorable interest rates drive the youth towards transitioning from physical establishments to online platforms for employment (Djankov et al., 2006; Beck et al., 2005). Conversely, easy access to capital has an inverse effect on youth employability in social media enterprises. When capital is readily available, youths

tend to favor traditional physical business setups over online ventures (Agyei-Mensah, 2018). It is further evident from the study findings that social media entrepreneurs are employing a variety of communication strategies to boost their visibility and enhance the productivity of their businesses. Social media entrepreneurs predominantly prioritize content creation and user engagement, which have been instrumental in driving their growth and success. However, there is a significant deficiency in their use of evaluation and analytical strategies—essential components for long-term sustainability that are being overlooked. This lack of attention to these critical areas indicates a need for a more integrated approach, one that broadens the spectrum of communication strategies within social media enterprises. Top of Form

Limitations and directions for future research

The study acknowledges the limitations of the sample size utilized. The targeted population, representing 10 percent of the total workforce in the Information and Communication Industry within the Greater Accra Region, may be subject to overestimation or underestimation. As such, strengthening the labor database within the Ghana Statistical Service could be highly advantageous for accurately evaluating research that examines social media enterprises within the country. Considering the findings concerning the transition from traditional business environments to digital platforms, along with the incorporation of diverse communication strategies, it is crucial to evaluate the direct impact of these strategies on the productivity and earnings of social media enterprises in future research.

Conclusion

The dynamics of business establishment have undergone profound transformations with the rise of social media and the expansion of the internet. Young entrepreneurs, grappling with the challenges associated with physically situated businesses, are increasingly turning to social media, perceiving the virtual space as more liberating and conferring a comparative advantage over traditional physical setups. Elements such as the search for physical space, the significance of prime business locations, regulatory prerequisites, and access to financial resources, which were once deemed primary requirements for business setups in Ghana, are now relegated to a secondary status. Social media provides entrepreneurs with an avenue to circumvent these challenges, redefining the landscape of youth employability through the diverse communication strategies available for their use in order to make their presence more relevant.

The study underscores the connection between changing norms in business practices and youth employability. Regulatory restrictions and unfavourable interest rates exhibit a direct and significant impact on the choice of social media for business setups, while access to capital demonstrates an inverse effect. Recognizing the influence of these factors, the

study recommends a thorough review of existing business regulations. This review should aim to foster an environment that supports both online and hybrid social media business models, addressing the evolving employability needs of the country. Additionally, the study advocates for the regulation of online activities to harness income generation for national development. This strategic approach seeks to align business regulations with contemporary trends, promoting a dynamic and inclusive entrepreneurial landscape that leverages the potential of social media for economic growth and youth empowerment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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