

Use of Social media by small women entrepreneurs of India for growing their business

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Abstract

With the increasing education level, social awareness, change in attitude and need for more household income have encouraged more and more women to start their own businesses. Online business has been showing a rapid increase in our country in recent times. During the pandemic time, more and more people became aware of the online business platforms. The e- business portals like Amazon, Flipkart, Myntra, Snapdeal, Jabong, etc. became more popular business platforms due to the situation where people preferred to stay inside homes. Swiggy, Zomato, Grofers, Jio Mart, Big basket and others became popular in supplying food staple items during the pandemic time. The increasing presence and growth of such platforms inspired many people to start such online business locally also. Fresh vegetables supply, cooked food services, staple food items and even more items were sold locally through the online platforms. Increasing use of smart phones by women in India made them aware of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. These platforms have been working as the social networking platforms and are also being used to grow online business by the big businesses as well as by the small local businesses also. My paper is an effort to understand the role of these online social media platforms in the growth of business.

Keywords: women entrepreneurs, online, social media, business networking, small enterprises, local business.

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Introduction

As per Indian Brand Equity Foundation, “India E-commerce will reach US\$99 Billion 2024, growing at a 27% CAGR over 2019-2024, with grocery and fashion apparel likely to be the key drivers of incremental growth.” This report by IBEF sounds very encouraging for the online business in India. In the same report it is also mentioned that grocery selling is expanding with a whopping 57% CAGR.

Due to the ongoing pandemic condition, customer preferences are tilted towards the online shopping. In an article published in Business today by *Rai Vinay Kumar* on 17th of August 2021, The Indian online retail saw a 25 percent growth in FY 2021 despite the two month lockdown and other Covid related disruptions across the country. The overall retail market in India shrunk by 5 %, mentions the author but the online retail increased impressively. In the top 8 Metro Cities of India, 1 out of every 3

customers shopped online at least once. Indian retail market is still untapped by the online retailers or is in a nascent stage but looks very promising at the current rate of growth.

Grocery items, fashion Apparels, footwear, home décor goods, cosmetics , consumer durables and many more items are available in multiple online platforms like Amazon , Flipkart, Myntra, Snapdeal and many more.

Along with the organised online retail, one category that also emerged in the market was the local online sales of various goods and services. Mobile phones, tabs, laptops etc. are the items which are very frequently bought through the online shops but I will not discuss much about these items. The objective of my paper is to discuss about the local online enterprises run by the women entrepreneurs which emerged and grew during the pandemic significantly and the role of social media in the growth of such small business. In the month of March 2020 there was a huge chaos across the whole country. Very strict lockdown and the fear of pandemic created an unseen situation across the Globe and in India also, the scene was very uncertain and unprecedented.

During the period while there was Police patrolling in the markets to avoid the spread of virus, relaxations were given to grocers and vegetable vendors etc. Despite the relaxation, people avoided going out and local online sales started growing slowly. Before the pandemic also, small online business, run by the women, did exist but during the pandemic growth was seen. Preferences of many people changed and they tilted towards the online shopping. Social media provided a lot of support to such women because of the platforms being almost free. Spread of the word is easy and convenient. Before going into more details about the endeavours of these women through social media, I will be talking a bit about how online

market platforms grew.

K. Vaitheeswaran started the first online company in India named as Fabmart.com. Along with that he also started Fabmall in the offline platform. Fabmall was later acquired by the Aditya Birla Group and was renamed as “More”. Fabmart.com failed but many more online companies were started in India.

(Ref: PTI, published in Business Standard on 17-7-2017.)

Flipkart was started in the year 2007 and they focussed on selling books online, which was a novelty idea back then. Later Flipkart expanded its business. With the acquisition of Jabong, and the starting of Myntra, Flipkart strengthened itself in apparel business. Flipkart also saw a phenomenal success in selling mobile phones online and now is a very popular online platform in India. Amazon started its India operations in the year 2013 with selling various items like books, electronic gadgets, apparels, utility items, mobile phones etc. The third largest player in the online retail in India, Snap deal, started in the year 2010 and is a popular name now. Number of online platforms has multi folded in these past 14 years. Grofers and Big basket are comparatively new entrants in the online market and cater to the grocery needs especially. During the pandemic time Flipkart and Amazon started their grocery stores in their app. Marketing through the mobile apps further increased the popularity of online stores due to the ease of operations. Apps are easy to operate, payments are easy and selection of goods is very quick. Medicine is another category which saw a growth in online platform. Netmeds, PharmEasy, SastaSundar etc. became popular names.

Apart from the well known app based online stores, hundreds of offline stores started their online platform also. Almost all the big stores have started

their online business to remain attractive and competitive. Demonetization in India brought the various payment apps like Paytm, PhonePe, Google Pay, MobiKwik, etc. in the forefront. Various UPI platforms also started working as the online payment options. Even in the rural area people became aware about these virtual payment methods. After the initial hiccups, common people started using such online payment modes with ease. These payment methods also contributed in the growth of the online shopping.

These IT enabled shopping platforms and payment methods facilitated the emergence and growth of online markets rapidly. Along with the big business houses, one category of sellers also emerged that is “Women entrepreneurs who sell from home”. Home based business that was also referred as kitty party business has been in existence for a long time but of late this sort of business has become more visible and one of the main drivers of such business is emergence of the social media platforms and its use by the women.

Literature review:

Customers have become more comfortable in buying online. Individuals and businesses both are turning to online platforms and the traditional brick and mortar strategies are being modified or replaced. The use of smart phones adds on the online shopping preferences. Easy return policies, try-on and customer reviews have made the online consumers more confident about the use of online shopping (*Kotler and Keller*). Use of Information Technology, in the economy is one of the main growth engines of business. Growth of IT, better telecom connectivity and internet penetration have led to the growth of E-Commerce (*Bajaj and Nag*). People these days are not interested in wasting their time in unproductive activities. Particularly in case of the receiving delayed services leads to strong

dissatisfaction among the consumers (*Wiritz, Lovelock, Chatterjee*). Mobile devices such as smart phones, tablets and phablets are growing in their use very rapidly. The number of mobile phone users is growing fast and will continue to grow fast and the smart phones have even replaced desktop computers and laptop computers to a great extent. Also, the social media like Facebook, YouTube and others have facilitated interactive communication to the users, unlike the platforms which allow only the viewing to the users (*Malhotra and Dash*).

Live streaming provided by the platforms like Instagram and Facebook provide a lot of ease of online business. Facebook Live has become particularly popular. It connects the buyer and seller in a direct manner. Customer feedback, questions and answers between the seller and the buyers can take place instantly. Particularly the unknown facts about the products can be known by the customers because of the presence of the seller, which is not possible in the offline selling. (*Hsin Yin Hsu & Wen Shan Chan*)

Instagram, a very popular mobile social networking application was started in the year 2010 and gained popularity among the youth all over the Globe. Instagram connects people through photos only, unlike the other social media like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn where long text messages can also be posted. Photograph based Instagram has provided an easy platform to the buyer and sellers. The products to be sold can be displayed easily on the page of the user in form of feed, stories and reels. Big businesses are also doing their promotions through celebrities and influencers on Instagram. Social media user community share common interests and the number of the users is huge which gives the seller a good opportunity to market their products. (*Hue and Yazdanifard*)

Research Gap:

Use of social media by the women Entrepreneurs to market and sell their products is investigated by collecting Primary data. This category of small entrepreneurs who work in a micro level is emerging now and they have to fight with the huge giants like Amazon, Flipkart, Myntra, etc. Even in the food supply business, they have to face a stiff competition from Swiggy, Zomato, Dominos, etc. Whether this category of entrepreneurs will survive or not is still to be seen. Online shopping by the Indian consumers is growing very fast but the data about the increasing popularity of the online buying does not talk much about the sales which is generated by the small women enterprises. As an entrepreneurial possibility, this particular field where social media and word of mouth play a very crucial role has to be investigated even further. In the Indian context nothing much has been discussed about this. Organized researches are needed to understand the facets of such small businesses. Growth in such businesses can attract more small entrepreneurs to enter in to the field.

Objective of the paper:

This paper is an endeavour to understand and establish the fact that the small Indian women entrepreneurs are taking help of social media to market their small businesses in the current scenario of extensive use of information technology. The other objective of the paper is to find out which social media and the particular tools of that social media are used more frequently and provide advantages to these small entrepreneurs.

Methodology:

Secondary research has been done to understand the topic well but number of published material in this particular field is still less due to the ever changing scenario of penetration of Information

Technology in current time. Also, the pandemic situation brought some unprecedented changes in the behaviour of the consumers and the sellers also. Small home based women centric enterprises adapted to the new situation very rapidly as the kitty parties and get together were restricted due to continuous lockdowns and the fear of the virus. Hence, to understand the importance of social media for such small home based business, one survey was conducted by me. One part of which was to know if more women entrepreneurs entered into the field and which type of goods or services are sold primarily by them. The other part was to know if social media is helping them and if yes, then which social media platforms are used by them frequently.

Also because the targeted subject (The women entrepreneurs) who deals with such kind of small format of business is comparatively new, carrying out a fresh survey, full of the relevant questions was a good way of finding out the facts. Apart from these two things, few interviews of such entrepreneurs were also taken to understand how they are running their businesses in the current situation.

Analysis and discussion

Mainly the points of discussion were centred on the small women entrepreneurs who use social media for selling their products. Another very important aspect in the discussion was to know if the pandemic situation brought more online sellers to the forefront. Finer details about the use of social media and the product categories that are sold online by these women entrepreneurs are also checked with the help of a questionnaire which is the main tool of the primary research. Direct interviews of a few such sellers were also taken. Such interviews revealed that most of the sellers had started their small business a few years back but simultaneously it was interesting to know that

during the pandemic time social media gave their enterprises a good boost and even after the 2nd wave of Covid 19, such women entrepreneurs are more keen to sell their goods either completely online through some online business platform or to take the order online and then manage the supply in their own way. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were used for cataloguing and advertising while WhatsApp business appeared as a new feature that enabled small women entrepreneurs to carry on business on a platform that they were already comfortable with and through which they could reach most of their customer base. Swiggy Genie, an offering for delivery of goods by Swiggy, and other courier services, are also used for the delivery of goods. Particularly in the home made food services it is the team of own employees who supply the cooked food. About the home cooked food supply, the information is based on the direct interviews. The questionnaire does not cover the aggregator like Swiggy genie.

The discussed points in the questionnaire and the findings are listed below one after one:

The whole discussion revolves around the small women entrepreneurs who sell their products through online platforms and in particular through social media. It was necessary to discuss and analyse these points in the practical scenario and through Primary researches like using questionnaire and taking interviews. More nuances about the use of social media are also discussed.

Respondents were asked about small women entrepreneur's choice of social media platforms. As there are different sub tools under the social media platforms, the questionnaire dug deeper about these sub tools as well. This was to identify whether conventional tools like chat retained predominance or newer features had been adopted and were being used extensively.

The next point was to discuss the items which are sold most through the social media platforms. The items discussed are limited to the type business which is at the centre of the paper.

A question was asked to understand the payment methods used by the consumers while purchasing through the small online women centric businesses. This was a particularly relevant question in light of the fact that during the preliminary interviews different respondents followed different mechanism of payments, some taking advance payments only while others offered credit facilities (buy now, pay later).

Research Findings

Small online businesses owned by women entrepreneurs saw a growth during the pandemic. Of the 120 respondents responded that during pandemic small businesses owned by the women saw a growth.

In the response about the items which are sold most (through social media) many categories were mentioned by the respondents, few of them were not part of the questions and they came up as the "other" categories. The items are named here in order of high to low: Apparels, Fashion jewellery, Home décor items, Home-cooked food, bags, ready to eat food items, footwear, kitchen utility items and precious jewellery. Only a couple of respondents mentioned some more items as the "others" like: make up products, Amway products, skin and hair care and art.

88% respondents said yes to the question if the women sellers take help of social media. Further analysis of this question leads to the social media platforms which are used by such women entrepreneurs. Instagram emerged as the most popular social media platform used by the subject, followed by Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube.

25% of the respondents chose “other” social media platforms like LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, etc. The respondents were given a choice of selecting multiple platforms hence the result shows 25% of the respondents selecting “others” and indicating the names. Although WhatsApp is different from the other social media platforms like Facebook and is typically limited to the chat facility only, but the ease of use and its user friendly features was chosen by 68 % of the respondents. Interviews had also revealed the growing relevance of WhatsApp business which made it a complete platform wherein promotion could be done through status and orders could be directly received.

85% of the respondents chose Instagram, 80% of the respondents chose Facebook and 48% of the total respondent chose YouTube as an online social media platform used by these women.

Regarding sub tools, it was found that WhatsApp status was the choice of 77 % of the respondents, 58% of them chose WhatsApp group messages followed by WhatsApp business (55%) and 35% of them chose direct chat. Only 2% of them chose WhatsApp broadcast as a sub tool for marketing.

About Facebook sub tools 87% of the respondents chose Facebook posts followed by Facebook stories (60%), market place and Facebook groups were chosen by 48% each, while 43% and 25% chose Facebook Live and messenger chats respectively.

Among the Instagram sub tools, Instagram posts were chosen by 82% of the respondents, closely followed by stories and reels (75% and 73%) to be precise, while 28% of the people said direct messages are used by the sellers. Once again I am repeating that the respondents were given the choice to make multiple selections if they find them suitable.

Regarding payments, Google Pay was found to be the most popularly used payment method (87%), followed by Paytm (72%), PhonePe (67%), and BHIM (57%). Cash and online banking were chosen by 48% of the people who responded and only 1% expressed opinion for credit/debit card.

The above responses were received in the online survey which was randomly sent to people across the various age groups. Apart from this, one interesting fact emerged while taking telephonic interviews of a few online sellers who deal in bags, clutches and fancy apparel items. These sellers do not keep inventory of the goods on themselves. Online E-platform “Meesho” helps them in this. The women sellers take orders online through online apps and pass the orders on “Meesho”. Meesho gives the order to the seller registered with them. Delivery is taken care of by the e-commerce website. Meesho that is the short form of “Meri e-shop” has a business model where they help the small re sellers to grow their online business. Home furnishing, kitchen utility, apparels and accessories are the categories sold by the online sellers in conjunction with Meesho.

At least 4 women respondents, who are running Tiffin service, said that although they advertise their service through WhatsApp, Instagram stories and Facebook stories, it is WhatsApp statuses that fetch the maximum number of orders. When asked why WhatsApp status fetches the maximum number of orders they said that it is probably because customers tend to visit WhatsApp status more than Facebook and Instagram stories.

Limitations of the paper:

While writing the paper it was found that there is a lack of published materials in this particular field. There are publications about E-commerce and its growth across the world and in India. However, Writing about the role of social media in small

businesses is in a very primary stage. In India, availability of publications is still less. This paper focuses on the Indian urban scenario and lack of publications about this particular area; hence the author has to depend largely on the primary findings. The facts can be established more emphatically with more respondents on board. More has to be found about the methods of delivering the products/ services to the doorsteps of the consumers. Pan India survey may lead to more precise conclusions, the survey conducted through questionnaire in this particular case is largely concentrated in Kolkata and adjacent areas. Situation in the rural area is not captured in this paper.

Further scope of the study:

This paper provides scope for further study in this field. Few points in particular can be explored, one of them can lead to find about the kind of capital being invested by the micro women entrepreneurs & the availability of funds and the other being whether these women started their small business to provide cushion to the dwindling earnings of the male members of the family or they had started their business before the pandemic. Also it can be studied that if the women enterprises have started taking the help of institution based financial funding or not. It was also found after multiple interviews that many consumers want hand ground unbranded pure spices but for them trusting the seller is an issue. How to win the trust of the consumers in this category can be studied further to understand a viable option for the small online sellers.

Conclusion:

As conclusion out of this small study, the author can say that the women small entrepreneurs are fighting an adverse condition at present but they have started taking help of the newly found

technology, based on Smartphone. Also, they are well aware of the various online payment methods like online banking and the instant payment apps. They are using them comfortably. Women entrepreneurs are becoming aware of the selling platforms like Meesho to sell their products. They are using their knowledge and interests about cosmetics, accessories, apparels etc. to convince their customers easily. Also they are utilizing their skills of cooking, baking, pickle making etc.

Another thing can be concluded that these micro businesses have a potential to grow when the situation become easier. Pandemic time struggle and insights will give these micro businesses a good chance to understand the details of arranging for finance, communicating with the probable consumers, delivering the goods quickly, using the safe and secure payment methods and using the social networks effectively.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that such small businesses do not require a large amount of inventory and can be run from home and simultaneously larger business can also be run using the same model if more investment can be done and more workforce is involved.

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