

New Game in Town: Selling via Social Media in Harare

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Abstract

The way of doing business has been reconfigured due to technological transformations in human life. The tremendous rise of competition has made the luring of new customers in business a mammoth task. Sharing of online content is now considered to be the powerful word-of-mouth marketing in business world-wide. In Zimbabwe, social media selling has also become very common. The study explored social media selling, focusing on actors that are involved as well as how they are recruited and platforms that they use when advertising and the challenges they are facing. A qualitative methodology was employed where 20 representatives from Tupperware, Table Charm, Herbalife and Avon were purposively selected for in-depth interviews. It was informed by the relational marketing and agency theory. The study established that although online selling has a number of advantages compared to physical marketing, ordinary people are excluded from the game. As such, these emerging virtual markets cannot totally replace the physical markets. The research implored the government to create space for more sellers to encourage equal participation of all by social media selling.

Keywords: *social media, selling, relational marketing, agency, customer, virtual market.*

INTRODUCTION

Companies, such as Tupperware, Avon, Herbalife and Table Charm, recruited dealers to market and sell their products. These companies have

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successfully created network marketing. Selling via social media is a new development and trend in contemporary businesses. Technology has reconfigured the nature of business. In the old days, buying and selling were done physically where consumers and traders would meet. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”.

Dwivedi, Kapoor and Chen (2015) argue that most people regard social media as “a mere platform available for sharing their daily updates and pictures on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and WhatsApp.” In business, it has proved to be a low-cost information exchange platform available to buyers and sellers, to learn, educate, share, build, market, advertise and improvise on the central idea being circulated (*ibid.*). Social media encompasses an inherent shift of informational power from the buyer to the seller, in which consumers decide which content to ignore and which pass onto others in the chain of their networking (Karnegari, Karnam & Shaik, 2013). An advertisement was done mostly through the radio, television, direct mail and magazines, among others. Scott (2010) argues that these methods were not effective as it was difficult to target specific buyers. The advent of the internet brought about an intensive use of social media and this has changed the tools for communicating with customers. Compounded by COVID-19 imposed lockdowns and the high rate of unemployment, social media has become one of the essential factors influencing consumer behaviour. Producers and sellers always sought effective ways of drawing consumer attention and the emergence of social media provided fertile ground for selling via social media. Karnegari, Karnam and Shaik (2013) posit that these days, consumers interact on social media platforms more frequently and this enables sellers on social media to interact with more customers. Social media has become an integral part of people’s lives and it has a significant factor in influencing different aspects of behaviours pertaining to purchases, opinions, tastes, attitudes and evaluations (Danish, 2018). Thus, selling via social media is now considered one of the best routes that sellers can use to advertise and sell their products. Furthermore, the ease and low cost of internet marketing, as compared to the conventional

methods, has enabled various companies to reach their target audiences more efficiently (Danish, 2018).

Thota (2020) has acknowledged the increase in the use of social media across the globe and Samet (2020) pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated social media use among adults world-wide. Thus, social media marketing is now considered the fastest way of linking customers with suppliers and sellers. Lockdown restrictions compelled many people to spend most of their time on social media. Coupled with improvements in technology, globalisation, social media selling has become very common in contemporary society. Spending more time on social media forced many people to do online shopping. According to Mason, Narcum & Mason (2021). "The growth of social media platforms has transformed the dynamics of the electronic market place by creating social networks of consumers, opinion leaders and field experts." Kumar, Dhir Talwar Chakraborty and Kaur (2020) concur that integrated marketing promotional messages can be effective at influencing consumers' perceptions about product image, leading to consumption behaviours.

Thus, the proliferation of social media has attracted several scholars with a view to understanding a number of dynamics, such as the actors involved and nature of social media selling, among others. A study conducted by Thota (2018) established that 93% of U.S. businesses use Facebook and other platforms, such as Twitter and LinkedIn. "As such, social media provides businesses with virtual avenues to enhance consumers' product/brand awareness" (Mason *et al.*, 2021: 3). Mason *et al.* (2021: 5) further elucidate that awareness and excitement for brands can be generated with paid media, such as boosted Facebook posts to activate recognition of a need/problem that the brand can resolve. Posts by consumer peers and opinion leaders can provide brand influencing stimuli (Thota, 2018; Mason *et al.*, 2021). For example, every photo, video, comment, review and other content posted on social media, to which consumers are exposed, plays the role of stimulus (incentives) in recognising a new need (Jashari & Rustemi, 2017: 4). Thus, companies may encourage customers to post product purchases in hopes of activating the product need stage within consumers. It is in this context that social

media selling has become so prominent in Zimbabwe, particularly in urban areas. The study was carried out in Harare Metropolitan.

Most businesses are now using social media to market their products. With improving internet performance, social media has become critical to the customer shopping experience, especially in urban areas. There is an increasing role of social networks in direct selling as representatives and customers interact in the transaction process. A social network is used for gaining product and purchasing information. Researchers have noted that 36% of customers have cited social media platforms as essential to their purchasing decisions (Yen, 2008). As such, brands were forced to reconfigure their marketing strategies to suit e-commerce social media strategies to increase sales. Thus, brands, such as Avon, Table Charm and Tupperware, have seen themselves expanding and increasing their customer base.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In any economic system, trade is regarded as the most important thing if one is to supplement income and how it is accomplished is essential (Neatu & Imbrisca, 2016). Yen, Liang and Chieh (2008) argue that direct selling is very common in contemporary societies hence, studies need to be conducted to understand the nature of such kind of a business and proffer strategies that can be employed by different actors to achieve their aims in that line of business. Yen *et al.* (2008) believe that an excellent direct selling company stays strong on the market. This shows the significance of social media selling.

“In the past, when the vendor sells the product using traditional selling ways, profit will be stripped off by vendors in the first stage and second stage sales channels and the cost of the vendor will get increased greatly and accordingly. No doubt, these costs will be transferred to the customer, that in turn leads to a burden to the consumer. Therefore, some suppliers, to reduce profit stripping in several stages by the intermediate vendors, start to find their own personnel for the product sale or try to use mobile technology to assist product sale, the new generation of selling ways, such as” direct selling”, “marketing” and internet shopping are thus generated” (Yen, 2008: 214).

Most of the companies are now hiring representatives or dealers or direct selling.

DIGITAL MARKETING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Digital marketing has become a very popular tool for advertising products successfully. This has been necessitated by the improvement of the internet in most countries. Mason *et al.* (2021) assert that digital marketing can be seen as a tool to promote the company more efficiently. It should be understood by companies so that they are able to select efficient marketing tactics and strategies. Kaplan and Haenlein (2012: 61) define social media as 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. Social media platforms exist in different forms that include Twitter and Facebook (social networking tools), media sharing sites (Instagram and YouTube), commerce communities (Amazon and eBay) blogs and other discussion foras.

These social media platforms have enabled most companies to change their ways of doing business (Ramsaran-Fowdar & Fowdar, 2013). Consequently, some companies, such as Avon, Table Charm, Herbalife and Tupperware, took opportunities to sell products abroad through the use of a chain of representatives who sell products in their respective countries. This has become a prevalent phenomenon in the line of business. Mangold and Faulds (2009: 360) perceive that in the new communication paradigm, marketing managers and producers and business people should recognise the power and critical nature of the discussions being made on by consumers using social media. “Therefore, it is very important for firms to understand how to provide and organise the information they want their customers to consume through the SNS provided” (Silva *et al.*, 2019: 154). Tuten (2020) suggests that social media enables individuals or businesses to create a profile and add or follow users and receive updates on the post of users within their network.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MARKETING OF PRODUCTS

The use of social media influences how buyers and sellers interact by providing a tool for consumers to become better connected to companies and be more knowledgeable about product selections (Agnihorti, Dingus, Hu & Krush, 2016). The use of social media has become a major source of information that businesses cannot afford to ignore. There are few

studies in developing countries that exist in academic literature regarding social media's effectiveness from a business perspective (Barreto, 2015). Mason *et al.* (2021) observe that social media is used by customers to identify the products they want.

Social media is used by customers to criticise or appraise products. It allows customers to show off or discuss their new purchases with friends or other customers. When they are not pleased with the product, they can bad-mouth it as a way of expressing dissatisfaction. "Social media offers a method whereby consumers can express shopping and purchase satisfaction or dissatisfaction" (Mason, 2021: 4). Therefore, social media offers businesses a quick, efficient and relatively inexpensive means of getting feedback from consumers and, thus, provides a method to quickly resolve concerns (*ibid.*).

Duffett (2017) analysed the influence of interactive social media marketing communications on teenagers in South Africa and the study established that social media marketing had a positive influence on teenagers' attitudes. Hayta (2013) conducted a study on the effects of social media on young consumers' buying behaviours. The findings showed that social media tools directly affect the purchasing behaviours of consumers, depending on their age group and educational status. However, the current study analysed the nature of social media selling in urban areas of Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was informed by two theories: relationship marketing and the agency theory of marketing. Relational marketing theory was introduced by Berry (1983) as a tool that leaders can use to secure customer loyalty and as a result attain higher competitiveness and enhance customer satisfaction. Relational marketing is gradually reconfiguring the traditional marketing techniques. Turner and Shah (2014) insinuate that when social media is used properly, it can provide firms with a long-lasting relationship marketing tool they can use to increase sales and customer loyalty and build awareness. Clark and Melancon (2013) are of the view that social media is a cost-effective tool for organisation leaders to engage and build customer relationships that could result in increased sales.

According to Möller and Halinen (2000), there are two types of marketing relationship theory, namely Market-based Relationship and Marketing Network-based Relationship Marketing. Both of the models were used in this study. The former deals with fairly simple exchange relationships and assumes a market context, whereas the latter examines complex relationships and presumes a network, such as a business environment (Möller & Halinen, 2000). A market-based relationship helps in creating a long-term relationship with customers through providing adequate information about the product and selling in a way that suits their conditions. These frameworks were adopted because they clearly explain how buyers and sellers interact on social media.

In marketing, agency theory employs the metaphor of contact to explain the relationship in which one party delegates work to another (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In this case, marketing managers and employees of Avon, Table Charm and Tupperware employ representatives that are paid on commission. These representatives move around recruiting other representatives, marketing the product and conducting market research on products for the companies. The more an agent sells and recruits, the more the commission. The agency theory has become prevalent in a society where technology and the internet are accessible. Bergen, Dutta and Walker (1992: 1) propound that “an agency relationship is present whenever one party (the principal) depends on another party (the agent) to undertake some action on the principal's behalf.” Thus, any form of an employment relationship is an agency relationship in the context of marketing. The hiring firm, or a manager representing the owners' interests, is the principal and the employee is the agent (Bergen *et al.*, 1992: 1).

“Given that most marketing departments consist of multiple employees at various organisational levels (product managers, salespeople, etc.), developing and implementing marketing strategies and programs necessarily involves managing agency relationships” (Bergen *et al.*, 1992: 2).

Organisation, such as Avon, Table Charm and Tupperware, rely on facilitating representatives that are performing some work involved in the implementation of marketing programmes. “Facilitating agencies are specialists, such as advertising agencies, research suppliers, or public

warehouses whose services are contracted on a fee-for-service or commission basis” (Bergen *et al.*, 1992: 1).

Tate, Ellram, Bals, Hartmann and Valk (2010) advocate that the application of agency theory has been limited in the marketing literature. Bergen *et al.* (1992) highlighted circumstances in which agency theory can be used in marketing, one of which is advertising agency-client relationships. Several researchers have used agency theory in studies on buyer-seller relational governance (Heide, 2003; Heide & John, 1992). The agency theory marketing concept was used by Sharma (1997) to frame business exchanges involving the hiring of professional service organisations (Tate *et al.*, 2010). In this study, researchers employed the agency theory to explain the process of social media selling that has become prevalent in contemporary society, particularly in, Harare, Zimbabwe. Wang and Kim (2017) submit that social customer relationship management integrates customer interactions through processing and messaging information on social media platforms. The thrust is to involve customers in two-way communication with the goal of improving relationships, customer retention and driving sales growth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach. Researchers sought a rich description of customers' experiences when buying on social media and the challenges they face in the business. A qualitative approach to the study was adopted to understand the nature of online selling. Qualitative research allows direct interaction with those that sell through social media. Smith (2020) defines qualitative research as a form of systematic enquiry into meaning. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 3) describe it thus:

As a situated activity that locates the observer in the world and it consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. It involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. Thus, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them.

Hence, researchers were motivated to conduct a qualitative study so that they would understand the nature of social media selling, how it has impacted people's lives and the challenges being faced by the main actors, the representatives. Furthermore, qualitative research methods allowed researchers to unravel the inequalities created by social media selling and the groups that are affected mostly by the mode of selling that has become very common in contemporary society.

Researchers employed an exploratory case study design. The main aim of an exploratory case study is that of finding answers to the questions of what and who. In the study, researchers sought to know what was the nature of social media selling, the challenges faced by the selling representatives who are the main actors and issues emerging and what can be done to accommodate the group that is segregated in the line of business. Exploratory study helped researchers understand whether physical markets were dying. Twenty-five (25) representatives were purposively selected for the research. These were in the business for more than five years. To get these people, the researchers joined as representatives of Avon, Tupperware, Herbalife and Table Charm. They sought to familiarise themselves with the joining process and procurement and selling of goods through social media. The researchers managed to be added to Agent WhatsApp groups for different companies. This made it easy for them to recruit research participants. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were used as data collection methods. These allowed participants to explain the challenges they faced, the nature of social media selling, inequalities created, strategies employed to increase sells and ascertaining whether physical markets are dying. Thematic analysis was used to present and analyse data. Ethics were observed. Researchers informed the group members that they were researching social media selling. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and no one was forced to participate. Interested participants in the whatsApp were advised to inbox researchers. Focus group discussions were conducted during small gatherings when representatives met for a get-together. COVID-19 safety measures were strictly observed. Two focus group discussions were done with representatives from each of the four companies (Avon, Table Charm, Herbalife and Tupperware).

RESULTS

THE PROLIFERATION OF DIRECT SELLING

Direct selling is now prominent and this has been exacerbated by COVID-19 lockdown measures. Most people, especially those with access to the internet, are into direct selling. They are hired by companies, such as Avon, Tupperware and Table Charm, to sell their products directly to customers. Both unemployed men and women are in the business. It does not require one to go through an interview. An individual should show interest by buying company products and selling them. One of the respondents who have been selling cosmetic products for the past six years had this to say:

I have been an agent for more than 5 years. I started doing this when I was undertaking my third year in Medicine at the University of Zimbabwe. Currently, I am a medical doctor at a hospital but I am still an Avon agent. I get a commission as a team leader and this is actually making my life easier because I can easily supplement my salary. At work, I am always with my stuff.

Another agent had this to say:

Online selling is the order of the day. I am an agent of both Table Charm and Avon companies and my family can now survive with the commission that I get simply because I am now a team leader....

Direct selling companies market their products through country representatives who earn a commission on their sales. In most of these companies, such as Anon and Herbalife, representatives are encouraged to recruit other sellers and earn money from their sales.

THE NATURE OF VIRTUAL MARKETS

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Virtual markets have become so prominent in Zimbabwe and the study findings revealed that most of the people in urban areas have turned to virtual markets, although the majority still rely on physical markets. Due to the high rate of unemployment and poverty, some people cannot afford to rent an office or space in town to sell their products. Representatives for Avon, Table Charm and Tupperware and other sellers trade their

products via social media, mainly WhatsApp. Some respondents indicated that they sell their products via Facebook and they get more customers than on the WhatsApp platform. They use different strategies on WhatsApp, such as groups, and joining other business groups. They indicated that they can even join more than 100 groups. Some respondents reported that they advertise on WhatsApp as they keep updating their statuses.

One of the respondents said:

I advertise on WhatsApp. I have created more than 10 groups and I joined more than 30 business groups. Sometimes my phone blinks because of too many messages but I have to make the business move forward because that is what I am surviving on. I look for social media jokes and post them on my status and at the end of those jokes I put one more status with the product that I am selling or advertising.

Another respondent said:

Virtual marketing is the way to go. You can advertise your products while you are doing something else. I am a nurse by profession and I can sell my products while I am at work.

Some respondents indicated that social media is the way to go these days. Most of the Avon representatives indicated that they make massive profits during Valentine, Mothers' and Fathers' Days, Christmas and New Year holidays and at the end of the month. Tupperware representatives indicated that they get good profits throughout the year. They simply advertise on WhatsApp groups and people come to buy Tupperware products as wedding gifts and kitchen party presents. Kitchenware and tumblers are sold throughout the year. Respondents highlighted that one does not need physical space when selling on social media. Sellers do not need to pay council rates as they operate through social media. All they need is a phone and data bundles to be able to upload products and communicate with customers.

ACTORS IN SOCIAL MEDIA SELLING AND THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The findings of the study revealed that social media selling involves a number of actors, namely companies, truck drivers or runners, banks, buyers and sellers. Sellers are the main actors. These are also known as

representatives. Representatives make sure that the business moves forward, by constantly advertising on social media. They get a commission for recruiting more representatives. Representatives recruit on Facebook, from work places and some are into roadside brochure tossing. They achieve titles when they recruit more and those titles are rewarded according to levels. For example, at Avon, they have the following stages: Leader, Advanced Leader, Senior Leader, Executive Leader, Advanced Executive Leader, Senior Executive Leader and Premier Executive Leader. For Table Charm, they are called sales consultants. They also do have titles. These agents move around selling products and customers do not need to go to the shop. They move around with brochures or send them via social media for customers to select products of their choice. This is the same with Herbalife and Tupperware. Should there be new products, they advertise on behalf of the company. Leaders communicate directly with management staff via email. Ordered products are ferried by truck drivers or runners who sometimes smuggle them at the border. In addition, banks play a pivotal role as they provide visa cards for the agents to be able to pay for the products online. Customers are also actors as they are final users of the products.

PROCURING PRODUCTS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Representatives buy and make orders online. They deposit money in their visa accounts and buy whatever products are asked for by their customers. Sometimes these representatives buy products in bulk online. These products take one to two weeks to arrive in Zimbabwe. The products do not attract duty at the border. Most of the products are purchased at discounts. The agents have a point where they collect their products. Lost products are easily traced. The more you buy, the more you get some points and the more you can increase your commission. Commission is increased by luring more representatives into the business. One can get more points by simply inviting friends and relatives to be dealers. One of the respondents said:

We buy products online. One has to be online all the time checking for products on discount and new products for the clients. One needs to be well versed with technology and must always have access to the internet.

Another respondent had this to say: “One needs to have internet and orders can be placed any time of the day.” Respondents indicated that data bundles, literacy, age good social relations, smart phone, frequent use of social media and Wi-Fi are crucial in the business. They highlighted that it is not easy for the elderly to participate in the business because it needs people who make jokes, advertise frequently on social media and look for new friends.

THE EXISTENCE OF PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL MARKETS

The proliferation of social media selling has affected a number of physical markets in a number of ways. Those in physical markets are affected negatively although they continue operating. Physical markets require one to have a place where you rent or a place of your own. You need to pay water bills and tax to the government. Representatives of online selling, such as Tupperware, Avon and Table Charm, do not have a physical market place. They interact with physical markets greatly because they have to deliver products on physical markets. Online selling representatives deal directly with the producer and the customers. They do not pay taxes for utilities like water and electricity. The study found out that physical and virtual markets exist together but virtual market sellers make more profit than physical markets.

CHALLENGES FACED BY REPRESENTATIVES

LACK OF TRANSPORT

New representatives who earn less cited transport problems as a challenge. They indicated that some customers are far away and it is difficult to deliver their orders especially when one is not driving. One of the respondents said:

The main challenge that I have is that of transport. I am still new in the business. So, my commission is not much and therefore cannot afford a car yet. The problem then comes when I want to deliver products to clients that are not in Harare.

From this observation, mobility comes in as a critical matter of concern in trade that involves delivering goods and services. This is also confirmed by

another respondent who also said: “Delivering products to more than five clients per day is a challenge due to transport problems.”

FOREIGN CURRENCY RATE

Market rates were also cited as one of the challenges faced by the representatives. They indicated that some people, especially civil servants, get paid in local currency, that is, Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS). Therefore, they cannot afford to buy in foreign currency. Instead, they do money transfers and the representatives then buy foreign currency on the parallel market.

One of the respondents cited the challenges of buying foreign currency from the parallel market as the reason for them running at a loss. They are forced to sell in the local currency because most of their clients are paid in RTGS.

Another respondent indicated that they will be glad if the country could go back to the 2009–2017 era, where the rate of RTGS and the ZS dollar was one is to one.

DELAY IN THE DELIVERY OF ORDERS

Representatives cited delays in the delivery of orders. Most of the orders usually take seven to 10 days to be delivered. Sometimes clients do not know what happens to their orders in transit, and end up getting their products after 20 days and the client would have made other arrangements. Clients who would have made other arrangements may end up claiming refunds. Some customers who would have paid a deposit refuse to pay the balance claiming that the late delivery disadvantaged them. COVID-19 has made the delay of most products very common and this has affected a number of representatives as they end up disappointing their customers. Respondents highlighted that some customers are short-tempered and they do not entertain any excuses. So, they may end up losing customers to other representatives.

COMPETITION AND LACK OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP SKILLS

The findings of the study revealed that representatives face stiff competition. The majority of the respondents indicated that they are

suffering from the competition as there is a glut of representatives in the field. They highlighted that they are losing many customers due to competition and sometimes they are forced to reduce the prices of the products that they sell just to lure customers and this results in them making some losses. Most of the respondents said that they need to have more stuff and clients. They need to practise good customer care and have more data bundles to be able to interact with clients and the supplying company. In addition, the findings of the study reflected that some representatives do not have an Ordinary Level education. They lack entrepreneurial skills. Even those with Ordinary and Advanced Levels cited the same problem. One of the respondents said:

I did not go to school that much. Sometimes it's really difficult for me to know how best I can boost my business. I do not know what to do to increase my sales. At times I make losses. I think I need some kind of training. Unfortunately, there is no college that can train me without Ordinary Level.

CONFISCATION OF PRODUCTS AT THE BORDER

Table Charm, Avon and Tupperware products are smuggled at the border. Representatives do not declare them as they use runners. The reason for not paying tax is that it would be difficult for them to resell the products as they will become very expensive. Sometimes smuggled products are confiscated at the border and one will be required to pay a fine and declare them. Once these products are declared, an agent is forced to increase the price to make a profit. This becomes a challenge as one cannot tell a customer who would have committed to pay the full amount to top-up for the same product. An agent is then forced to use his or her own money. The Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) makes it hard for the representatives to earn profit. So, representatives are compelled to use the so-called “runners” to smuggle the products and pay 2% of the total price to the runner who would have smuggled the products. In the event that products are confiscated at the border by ZIMRA officials, runners are not held responsible for the payment needed. An agent will have to look for them to pay or forget about the products. This was cited as one of the challenges facing representatives.

SOME CLIENTS REFUSING THEIR PRODUCTS

Some clients have a tendency of refusing their products when they are delivered. This happens due to a number of factors, one of them being late delivery. The main factor is that sometimes the internet and magazines make products appear very nice but when the actual product is delivered, it looks different from what it was in the magazine or as advertise on WhatsApp or Facebook. Representatives cannot argue with their customers. In the event that a customer refuses to take the product, they then take them and look for other customers or turn the product to personal use. This means that a representative is forced to refund the customer if he or she had already paid for the product. In addition to that, some products from Avon and Herbalife might not work for some customers who will bad mouth the products to an extent that some customers refuse to accept the products that they will have ordered. Representatives are sometimes forced to incur costs as a result of customers who would have refused to accept their products.

Representatives have indicated that sometimes they do receive the wrong order in their name. They said that they make orders with specifications. They get be shocked when they get to the delivery centre to realise that the products they ordered, are not the ones that were delivered. This automatically means that customers will refuse them and the representative will have to look for a new customers or use the product and refund the customer who would have placed orders.

OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY SOCIAL MEDIA SELLING

Findings of the study showed that representatives who have been in the business for more than six years have substantial commissions and they have managed to buy houses and cars. Respondents highlighted that several opportunities, such as employment creation, diversified income, meeting several entrepreneurs and venturing into other business activities, such as making peanut butter for sell, agriculture, poultry and livestock farming, have been made possible by the proceeds they get from social media selling. Some representatives learnt a lot about businesses from their friends whom they shared groups with. They have learnt entrepreneurial skills that they hope will help them venture into other businesses to earn a living. Furthermore, direct selling through social

media has enabled women without lower qualifications, to enter into businesses and empower themselves.

DISCUSSION

The marketing relationship and marketing agency theories were used to analyse different scenarios of the new game in town where social media has become the driving force for direct selling. Direct selling has become prominent as shown by the research findings. Companies, such as Avon, Herbalife, Table Charm and Avon have grown big and spread all over the world. They do not have buildings in most of the countries they operate in, but have representatives that sell products on their behalf. Harare has more than 500 representatives of Avon, more than 300 representatives of Herbalife and more than 500 representatives of Table Charm. Representatives use a channel of networks to market their products. There is a channel of social networks where reciprocity, friendship, trust and overall personal relationship are considered as important drivers to salesperson effectiveness (Merrilees & Miller, 1999: 271). An increase in the number of representatives shows that there are more customers of these products. The findings of the study are in tandem with Locket's (2018) findings where small-scale businesses were aware that social networking is a new way to communicate with consumers. Big businesses, such as Avon, Table Charm and Tupperware, have established a customer base and have more representatives that are selling products on their behalf. These representatives, especially leaders, use social media to interact with company managers and there is no face-to-face interaction. An increased number of representatives indicates the commonality of social media selling in Harare. Recruitment is done through Facebook, in work places or even by the roadside. The more one recruits and sells products, the more one's income.

The study revealed that women dominated as representatives of direct selling companies. Respondents highlighted that the business required people who have friends, can easily make friends and talk and are able to persuade customers to buy products. The study showed that a large number of women are representatives of Herbalife, Table Charm and Avon. With this new environment, the increased number of female and young population has shown to have a share in the workplace. Gença and

Öksüz (2015: 295) contend that “this demand to participate in business life has been met by new communication technologies enabling flexible working”. Social media selling is a business for women as the environment it provides is favourable to them. Of the respondents that were interviewed, the majority of them were women (17 women and 3 men). Men mentioned that the business was really good for women as they are good at displaying photos. They have many friends and can easily convince clients. Ukpere *et al.* (2014: 553) maintain that:

“women micro entrepreneurs are proactively using the social networks to advertise their goods and services and then make use of this mobile technology that work for them in terms of client payments and banking and is beneficial because all it requires is for one to have a mobile phone and basic literacy to operate the phone”.

The study has also found that recruitment of the agents or representatives is a web-like network. The more one recruits, the more they get paid. Thus, one needs to have good relations with people in general so that they are able to recruit and sell more products. This is in tandem with the marketing relationship theory where one is required to have strong relations with people for them to flourish in the business. Thus, it is very difficult for an ordinary person to participate in this line of business. Social networks created by women are a component of relational marketing theory. One needs to have strong relations with the masses if one is to have a wider customer base that will result in increased sales. From a genetic and biological foundation, women are physically better ‘wired’ (brain’s structure) for empathy than men, implying that they are better at social skills, such as their perception of other people and social adaptability (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 2). These social skills are very important in the relational marketing theory.

The study revealed that the burgeoning of selling on social media did not stop the existence of physical markets where buyers and sellers meet. Some representatives physically advertise products to their friends and people. Ukpere *et al.* (2014) claim that female business owners globally have proven to be leading the SME social media revolution, as their male counterparts fall behind in terms of embracing and investing in these new channels. However, the study found out that the COVID-19 pandemic

and related lockdown restrictions made it appear as if the physical markets no longer exist. Some representatives use both virtual and physical markets. In addition, there are various goods on the market that do not require one to base on virtual markets but rather to exploit the physical market.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found out that social media selling is the new norm, especially in urban areas in Zimbabwe. The new selling technique is dominated by women and it gives them extra income. The study has shown that for one to be successful in the business, one has to establish good relations with customers and friends. Social media selling does not embrace everyone for a number of reasons, such as literacy level, age, affordability of smart phones and data bundles, including Wi-Fi and religious belief systems that do not allow people to use social media. Not everyone is able to participate in this line of business, although there is easy entry and exit. Representatives are also paid for recruiting more sales agents. The recruitment is done on social media or by visiting work places and visiting crowded places (pre-COVID-19).

The business is made easy because of internet and representatives place orders via the internet. Products are smuggled into the country and this increases the price of the products. Companies, such as Avon, Tupperware, Herbalife and Table Charm, are making profits as they do not need to pay rent and other expenses, such as employees' salaries since representatives are paid on commission. Representative work round the clock recruiting people and advertising the brand to increase their commission. Social media selling has created new opportunities for these representatives. These include employment creation, extra income and channels for new business ventures. Some women became economically empowered as discussed above. It should, however, be noted that the burgeoning of online selling does not mean that physical markets no longer exist.

Physical and virtual markets co-exist though the operations of physical markets are being hampered by COVID-19. Some sellers are utilising both physical and virtual markets to increase sales. Selling on social media

has its own challenges such as confiscation of products by ZIMRA, the delay in delivery of goods, receiving wrong products, transport problems, lack of business entrepreneurship skills, particularly among those who do not have an Ordinary Level education but can read and write, and lack of foreign currency and competition. Furthermore, it does not allow the participation of ordinary people. The study has revealed that WhatsApp is a dominant social media platform used by most representatives to reach clients. The following recommendations are made:

- The government must make an effort to make the internet affordable to the general population for them to be able to sell products online, especially in this era where COVID-19 has restricted the movement of people.
- The government should make physical markets affordable to allow representatives of different products to sell their goods to different customers that are not on social media. This can increase government's revenue.
- The government is encouraged to introduce short free courses to train entrepreneurs on how to manage their businesses.

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