**For the love of AIDA – developing the Hierarchy of Effects model in SME social media marketing strategy**

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Abstract

Objectives:

1. The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential use of the Hierarchy of Effects-type approach in SME marketing communications on social media.

## Prior Work:

1. AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Action) has been considered for many years as part of the development of SME marketing communications strategy. Since SMEs generally do not have big budgets they usually focus on producing content that can get a message across inexpensively and seek to do this in the most effective way possible. The AIDA ‘sales funnel’ is a marketing technique that is based on achieving specific objectives at each of the AIDA stages. In recent times marketing communications and especially advertising have seen profound change, especially in the way people communicate, socialise and engage with electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). In social media marketing terms it is important that the message makes the audience aware and grabs attention while content should create interest in such a way as to automatically create desire and lead to action which is often purchase. This process can utilize many tools such as video or some other digital resource that might, for example, educate or attempt to change attitudes.
2. **Approach:**

This study provides the basis for a conceptual model that can be tested in further, empirical research.

**Results:**

The paper proposes an SME social marketing AIDA model of message content progression that explains how SMEs might benefit from marketing tools such as social networking for improved marketing performance through the employment of an online resource that can help toward positive engagement with target audiences. While the use of social media should not be viewed as the only communications platform it is seen as critical to the effective and positive influence of audiences.

I**mplications:**

1. There are implications for the design and delivery of marketing learning for SMEs where the importance of relational marketing on social media to SMEs is underlined by its effective use in terms of activities such as networking, relationship-building, online branding opportunities and the use of e-wom in the service of message creation and delivery.

Value:

The results of this study are of value to managers, educators, trainers, developers and those involved in SMEs to help them understand the use of social media in the marketing arena that employs a Hierarchy of Effects approach to the achievement and measurement of effective and efficient engagement with target audiences, helping increase performance in so doing.

**Keywords:** SMEs; AIDA; e-wom; Entrepreneurial and SME Marketing; Social Media; Social Networks.

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**Introduction**

AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) has been around for a long time as one of the earliest of the Hierarchy of Effects models in marketing. Often seen as the earliest of sales models (Strong, 1925), it has been used in sales training since at least the 1950s but has been applied across the marketing communications board in terms of a receiver of a marketing communications message (external stimuli) and how they react to the message in terms of a process that supposedly moves the recipient through from grabbing attention to the desired end result i.e. in many instances, a buying action or sale). It is acknowledged that the desired action may not be a sale but some other desired end state such as, for example, voting or donating if the process is dealing with political or social marketing. AIDA and other Hierarchy of Effects models “have dominated the literature” around how advertising works (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999, p26).

AIDA is often considered by business writers/columnists, consultants and pundits, for example Wiley Publishing’s For Dummies (Mladjenovic, 2015) or Forbes magazine (Geller, 2014), as a tool for use in relation to an entrepreneur’s or an SME’s marketing communications strategy. Since SMEs generally do not have big budgets they usually focus on producing content that can get a message across inexpensively and seek to do this in the most effective way possible. The AIDA ‘sales funnel’ is a marketing technique that is based on achieving specific objectives at each of the AIDA stages. Attention and Interest can be seen as the steps that need to be focused upon in the initial stages of a campaign, while Desire and Action are the steps that will develop automatically. As time passes the concern for the interest step might well lessen as information is stored, leaving the key stage of attention as paramount since without attention to and awareness of the brand nothing else will follow. In marketing terms it is important that the message makes the audience aware and grabs attention while content should create interest in such a way as to automatically create desire and lead to desired action which is often purchase.

In recent times marketing communications and especially advertising have seen change in the way people communicate and socialise. The profound and radical changes brought about through the impact of technology and what the internet and other technologies have provided and continue to provide to the marketer are at the centre of this paper. As Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen (2012) suggest, social networks are having a profound transformational effect on the way customers are using the web and in this way offer a challenge to SME business practices. It can be argued that the Hierarchy of Effects process can now utilize many tools such as video or some other digital resource that might, for example, educate or attempt to change attitudes.

This paper seeks to explore the potential use of the Hierarchy of Effects-type approach in SME marketing communications on social media. The intention in writing the paper is to provide the basis for a conceptual model that can be explored in further, empirical research. The paper proposes an SME social marketing Hierarchy of Effects model of message content progression that explains how SMEs might benefit from marketing tools such as social networking for improved marketing performance through the employment of an online resource that can help toward positive engagement with target audiences and for example help build communities and brand advocacy. While the use of social media should not be viewed as the only communications platform it is seen as critical to effective and positive influences on audiences. The importance of relational marketing on social media to SMEs is underlined by its effective use in terms of activities such as networking, relationship-building, online branding opportunities and the use of electronic word-of-mouth (e-wom) in the service of message creation and delivery. The paper has value to managers, educators, trainers, developers and those involved in SMEs to help them understand the use of social media in the SME marketing arena.

**Literature review**

**The Hierarchy of Effects Model in marketing**

The AIDA model (Lewis, 1899) is one of the oldest in marketing. Its history is well documented although its origins are a little hard to pin down precisely as with many models and concepts in the history of marketing including the 4Ps marketing mix model that was seen as central to marketing strategy for so long. Barry and Howard (1990) provide a history of the Hierarchy of Effects model up until the time of their publication, highlighting issues and concerns that emerged over a 90+ year period. Some of these are:

* Whether the model can be seen as a long or short term process
* The sequence and speed the message recipient goes through in terms of the steps in the process, the steps not being equidistant and the influence of involvement has on the sequence of steps
* Whether probability can be introduced into the process in terms of progression from one step to another
* Concern over lack of empirical validation of the process

Petit et al (2011, p.43) use the AIDA process to look at intellectual property in European SMEs despite the acknowledged rejection of the AIDA model within “the marketing and communication world” arguing that “the progressive approach of the AIDA model is a scheme that fits to a natural behavior” made it a tool that would “enable the classification of behavioural phases”. These authors therefore use the model not as part of a strategic outlook but rather as a categorisation tool. What has become known as the ‘Hierarchy of Effects’ as a theory deals with audience responses to stimuli in ways that are usually grouped in one of three distinct categories or domains; cognitive, affective and conative. For example a later model by Lavidge and Steiner (1961), known as the ‘Hierarchy of Effects’, dealt with cognitive (awareness, knowledge), affective (liking, preference, conviction) and conative (purchase). In each of these ‘Hierarchy of Effects-type’ models, messages attempt to influence at least one response from one of the three domains of cognitive/think, affective/feel, and conative/do (Vaughn, 1980, 1986). There is much belief that consumers move through stages from unawareness to purchase and brand loyalty but this is assumed rather than validated empirically.

For some time now it has been recognised that a key feature is the sequence of the steps which Barry and Howard (1990) list as a combination of six potential sequences in terms of think (T), feel (F) and do (D): T-F-D, T-D-F, F-D-T, D-F-T, D-T-F and F-T-D. Foot, Cone and Belding as an agency was initially concerned with the importance attached to products in terms of high and low involvement and the think-feel-do sequence Vaughn (1980, 1986). Typically high involvement products that follow a think-feel-do sequence are things like cars but those that follow a feel-think-do sequence tend to be things such as fashion goods because of the emotional attraction brought about through brand image. Low involvement products that follow a do, think, feel sequence tend to be everyday items bought without much cognitive effort. Other low-involvement items that follow a do, feel, think sequence are often bought more on impulse or as a treat.

Since attitudes can appear similar to feelings (Wänke, 2009), problems recognised by Barry and Howard (1990) revolve around questions as to: what is cognition and how this can be measured whereby recall and recognition associated with memory have dominated; what is meant by feeling and implications for the emotion/rational divide in message content; and what is behaviour i.e. is it actual purchase or some other intended end state of action. For Barry and Howard (1990, p.108) there is a primary difficulty i.e. “defining when one stage ends and another begins”. For these authors, another way of seeing the Hierarch of Effects model is one of viewing it as a heuristic tool despite problems with empirical realisation since it is deemed useful in organising tasks within a firm (guidance, management) as opposed to being a tool that has an empirical base to it that can provide consistent and interpretable results. Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) in an article that investigates how advertising works, similarly conclude that the Hierarch of Effects models are flawed in two ways; sequence, where the stages are not empirically supported and the exclusion of experience. These authors call for studies based on context that includes parameters such as product category, competitive environment, other marketing mix elements, stage of product life cycle and target audience. They also advocate single source database studies rather than attempting a broader outlook.

Studies involving Hierarchy of Effects include that of Gharibi, Danesh and Shahrodi (2012) who looked at the use of the AIDA model in insurance advertising in Tehran. This study used AIDA to break up the process of moving from awareness to purchase, testing seven hypotheses along the way. A more recent addition to this ‘family’ of models has been Hofhaker’s (2001) online model that deals with exposure and attention (cognitive), yielding, acceptance, comprehension, perception (affective) and retention (conative). Another attempt to update and adapt the original AIDA model is that of Wijaya (2012) that incorporates developments in technology into the various stages of the model to come up with AISDALS – attention, interest, search, desire, action, like/dislike, share and love/hate. This is conceptual and not based on any empirical data hence the need for further study in understanding the level of communication input required to effect and facilitate change with an optimal communications mix.

**Attitudes, online behaviour and social media**

Attitudes

The basic premise (and a potential source of criticism) of the ‘Hierarchy of Effects’ model is that communication and in particular advertising have a gradual rather than immediate effect over time i.e. a process of moving through personal (including attitudinal) states over the steps or stages of the model, an attitude being understood in these terms as an internal predisposition to behaviour (Mitchell and Olson, 1981) or a durable state of mind (Argyriou and Melewar, 2011) whereby an attitude’s stability can be seen in the persistence a consumer has regarding a particular brand (Suh and Youjae, 2006). Beliefs are core to attitudes (Perloff, 2010) and can be influenced and changed in a self-generated manner (Crano and Prislin, 2008). Attitudes are learnt predispositions (Eagly and Chaiken, 2007) in marketing terms toward things such as advertisements and brands. Recipients of messages need to be aware of and then attracted to the various tools and techniques at the disposal of marketers. Attracting inbound traffic to websites through the use of product information, testimonials, reviews, blogs or case studies requires interaction and engagement but there is also a need for the marketer to reach out in the first place to create interest and desire in order that potential customers can move through to action which is often purchase but can be the very act of visiting a website. Once on a website they can then decide whether or not to sign up, subscribe, contact, join, preview and many other actions that may result in a purchase or even see them becoming advocates for a brand and, via e-wom, share positive experiences, rate things, retweet things and generally ‘share’ in a positive rather than negative way.

Online behaviour and attitudes

There is a strong relationship between attitudes toward the brand and attitudes to the communication in relation to purchase intent long established in the consumer behaviour textbooks (for example, Schiffman, Hansen and Kanuk, 2012). Likeability appears to be a key factor as a reinforcing agent and therefore influences the effectiveness of the communication. In the past this communication has usually been a television or print advertisement. For a number of years now there have been calls for digital marketing to be elevated to a serious status both in terms of practice and what universities include in the marketing curriculum (for example Wymbs, 2011). In more recent times there have been numerous studies of attitudes toward websites (for example Stevenson, Kumar and Bruner, 2000, Bruner and Kumar, 2000). Poh and Adam (2002) looked at the websites in relation to attention paid to advertisements and attitudes toward the advertisement, website and brand in relation to purchase intent and found that the more the website was liked the more effective the advertising would be and that attention to the advertisement would increase. They also found that brand attitude and purchase intent were not related to the attention given to the advertisement but that the attitude toward the advertisement was positively correlated to brand attitude and purchase intent. Poh and Adam (2002) acknowledge, however, that the use of the web is more aligned to direct response marketing. Website schema are the focus of the work of Bellman and Rossiter (2004) who suggest that there is evidence to support the idea of the importance of cognitive structures that guide information processing whereby consumers, if they are comfortable about where to look, will view website content more favourably. This is comparable with traditional media whereby a consumer, if familiar with the content of a television advertisement, will be more favourably disposed toward that content than when not familiar. This is about organising perception through the organisation of expectations. Where attitudes are strongly linked to the attention paid to an advertisement, the design of the website (including the ability to carry brands) may affect the effectiveness of the advertisement. In terms of the Hierarchy of Effects-type model it would seem that attitudes toward a website, if positively correlated with the various component parts of the model and the context in which an advertisement is displayed, have an influence on effectiveness. Such studies as described immediately above are more general whereas others are more specific to, for example, service satisfaction or the level of comfort (Chen and Wells, 1999) or to the effects of attention inertia on advertisements on websites (Wang and Day, 2007). In a study by Lagrosen (2005) on the marketing communication activities of Swedish service companies it was found that personalised relationship communication strategy was used by small or decentralised companies (where the internet has become, at least in part, the means by which networking activities are handled) whereas large companies have the option of either relationship or transaction strategies (where the internet has a part to play in either but where both are mass rather than personalised).

Social media and social media marketing

What has become known as social media is not only the currently dominant proprietary forms that are Facebook and Twitter but is in fact a term used to encompass a wide variety of digital, online forums that involve e-wom and user-generated content (ugc) that include blogs and photographic, video and other images. There is some agreement in the literature that generally speaking there are six types of social media but which overlap, many particular types having multiple forms. For example Gupta, Tyagi and Sharma (2013), interested in the promotion of health and in education, seeing social media as a communication boon for the public health community in terms of having the a tool that can help promote changes in behaviour, especially in times of crisis. Organisations have therefore begun to allocated resources such a dedicated staff member to cover and monitor social media in the knowledge that compared with traditional marketing communications this kind of communication can cost a lot less, have faster diffusion, can be better at targeting certain consumers yet have greater credibility (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). There is a growing realisation that the ‘social’ means social and personal, which has ramifications for message construction and that consumers using social media expect something extra such as a promotional offer. The prospects for social media use appear enormous with links easily made to an organisation’s website or other social media (Southgate, Westoby and Page, 2010) despite the realisation that positive attitudes toward particular social media do not equate necessarily to positive impact on attitudes toward marketing communication content on social media. The 6 types are:

* Collaborative projects such as Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, but there are many others that are more industry or sector specific.
* Blogs and micro blogs such as Twitter, the most well-known blog (or microblog) and its tweet activity. This includes online forums that allow members to hold conversations by posting messages.
* Content communities such as YouTube allow the uploading and sharing of a variety of items such as pictures or video with other social features such as reviews, comments, marketing materials or documents.
* Social networking sites such as Facebook, the most famous yet one of very many lesser-known sites which offer services that often have the individual’s profile and various ways to interact with others or to set up groups. Online communities exist that are often populated by similar people such as mother and baby, sports or motorcycle enthusiasts where people can respond to blogs, read stories and take part in other activities.
* Virtual game worlds such as World of Warcraft, a typical online game that attracts millions of subscribing gamers who wish to join others in a virtual world.
* Virtual social worlds such as Second Life or The Sims, a real-time simulator with ‘people’ with ‘feelings’ such as being confident or depressed.

These six types could be expanded further depending upon more refined definitional requirements. For example business networking, such as the use of LinkedIn, can be separated from social networking, such as Facebook (Aichner and Jacob, 2015). The marketing opportunities that include advertising, sponsorship and product placement are clearly important, especially in the light of the notion that despite its cost-efficiency firms have still been spending less on social media marketing than on traditional marketing in recent years (Kirtis and Karahan, 2011) and smaller firms still are (in the USA at least) in 2015 but which is surely set to increase still further (Soderlund, 2015). The resultant explosion of digital messaging and the knock-on effect on traditional media-based messaging such as press coverage as a result of, for example, a ‘tweet’ have become major sources of influence on aspects of consumer/customer behaviour across the acknowledged cognitive, affective and behavioural divides within any given buying behaviour context that include states of awareness through to purchase and post-purchase behaviour. The notion of social media as an element of the promotional mix has been aired by Mangold and Faulds (2009) who argued that with the advent of social media not only could businesses communicate with customers (BtoC) but customers could also communicate more effectively to other customers (CtoC) if that communication was facilitated by social media (this would apply to the consumer as well as the customer). It could be argued that it is not social media that is an element of the promotion mix but the content and e-wom activity that is transmittable through the digital facility that is social media. As the name implies social media is part of media just as television or radio are – all of which might carry an advertising message for a company or brand. However, the point is taken that for some time social media have provided a platform for if not promotion then communication of messages that has the potential to ‘go viral’ in an e-wom manner. A key comment from Mangold and Foulds (2009, p.352) is “the content, timing and frequency of the social media-based conversations occurring between consumers are outside managers’ direct control”, which they argue is in contrast to the traditional Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) paradigm where there is a high degree of control present. Vollmer and Precourt (2008) suggest that since consumers are in control; the question is how can this be harnessed?

It has been argued that managers must “learn to shape consumer discussions in a manner that is consistent with the organisation’s mission and performance goals” by using methods such as networking platforms, blogs, social media tools and promotional tools (Mangold and Foulds, 2009, p.357). Just how mangers incorporate social media into their IMC strategies (Li and Bernoff, 2008) is a key issue. Voorveld, Neijens and Smit (2011) suggest that markets should look at media channels and correlate and integrate those that are compatible with each other in order to have a suitable mix. Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) have established a growth in the number of studies into social media marketing in recent years. There are, as would be expected, a range of ideas. Alam (2012) for example that social media can be used to enhance relationship marketing and social media tools be used for trust and interaction with customers. A number of researchers suggest that generally social media is being used in the search for information, for example for new products, with an effective turning away from traditional sources (Rashtchy et al 2007, Vollmer and Precourt, 2008, Lempert, 2006) and that social media is seen as more trustworthy (Foux, 2006). Jan and Khan (2014) see social media marketing as being about relationships and a public relations tool while Kim and Ko (2012), looking at luxury fashion branding, see social media as having a potential impact on aspects of equity. Karamian, Nadoushan and Nadoushan (2015) also looked at equity in terms of consumer perspectives on the brand and found social media marketing to be influential on equity, perceived quality, awareness and loyalty. In this sense these authors claim that social media marketing could be useful in the establishment of relationships with loyal customers and affect personal perception of the product. Social media promotions are now commonplace and apparently popular especially when tied in with the likes of Groupon (Grenier, Fair and Schumaker, 2014).

**Social media marketing and the SME context**

Social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) is now everywhere in society at the level of the individual and of the business and part of the fabric of marketing communications (Copley, McLean and Siddle, 2103). Beck (2011) recognises the need for rules of interaction and engagement where a certain skills set is needed to manage social media (Li, 2012, Beck, 2011). Social media are now being used for much more than the original intention (Knapp, 2012). Social media allows very small businesses to engage with marketing activity free of charge, although it is obvious that nothing comes free and effort is needed to facilitate that engagement. This demonstrates the power of social media generally and Facebook in particular as tools for marketing brands online. There is tangible value in getting closer to the customer via social media and this is now recognised by senior management who have endorsed its use (Baird and Parasnis, 2011, Strategic Direction, 2012).

There have been calls in the literature, especially in recent conference papers, for more of a systematic approach to the research in the area of social networks and networking, especially in the area of small companies (for example, Michaelidou et al, 2011, Barnes et al, 2012). As can be seen from the commentary and examples above the SME’s (and even micro businesses) ability to use social media is not in question. An example of the use of AIDA as a tool to help strategize the use of social media in Malaysian SMEs is described by Hassan, Nadzim and Shiratuddin (2015, p.262). From their discussions with SMEs they provide a guideline on how to “strategically use social media for marketing”. The findings use the AIDA stages to categorise the various activities at each stage i.e. what tool to use to get attention (such as the creation of controversy), to gain interest (e.g. use of information), to engender desire (e.g. through promotions) and to secure action (e.g. delivery options). Other examples of SME or small business use of social media marketing are extant in the literature. For example Copley, McLean and Siddle, (2013) discuss the use of social media marketing in the UK with the childrenswear brand of outdoor clothing Baggers Originals whereby Baggers Originals “recognised the importance of social media right from the planning stages of the business” but that while social media was recognised as an important tool for marketers, the message needs to be heard by the right people so that getting “engaging content to the right people” should be the goal. Facebook was used to engage with their audience of parents with young children through the use of interesting and entertaining ideas so that rather “than being a tool for direct selling, social media allows the business to show an online personality – the personality of the brand and business”. Other activities include competitions that allow Baggers “to engage with customers, old and new” and the sharing of testimonials on product quality, improved Search Engine Optimisation, the vocabulary on the website and the use of posts, pictures, testimonials, competitions, tweets and retweets and links with other digital forms such as LinkedIn profiles. An example in the French tourism context of social media and entrepreneurship comes from Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen (2012, p.386) who suggest that social networks are “profoundly transforming and changing the way customers use the web and thus challenging SME business practices” but that although affordable some “SMEs and entrepreneurs still question their (social media) credibility and sustainability” leading to these authors concluding that the tools of social media are underused. Dealing with the level of trust small business entrepreneurs have in social media for employment in their businesses that includes the use of social media in image building, strengthening relationships and networking with both entrepreneurs and customers in the Malaysian context, a study by Kahar, et al (2012) suggest that there is still a need to convince small business entrepreneurs that social media is a source of cheap and convenient marketing and communication tools. However, such entrepreneurs and businesses are in need of guidelines on how to use social media, taking into consideration language and other cultural considerations. An Indian study by Sharma and Bharathi (2013) looked at start-ups using social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube in innovative ways with existing and new customers but suggests that Facebook is effective in terms of reach, awareness, visibility and relationship.

**The Hierarchy of Effects, social media and the SME marketing context**

Since the establishment of Web 2.0 and the tools that have become available and those that continue to develop and emerge for use in a planning and managing arena (Lehtimaki et al, 2009). The issues which arise in the strategic SME marketing arena are how social media can be integrated in to strategy that is made up of both traditional and newer digital media, which tools are appropriate, what impact will the use of such tools have on relationships and whether there size of the smaller firm matters. A key issue is whether approaches continue to be used to achieve actual sales while digital approaches using the likes of social media are employed in relationship building and maintenance.

A strategic approach to planning would necessarily need analysis, goal-setting, strategy development in terms of media and creative approaches, implementation and aspects of control including research, evaluation and monitoring. Some of the reasons for the inclusion of social media in SME marketing strategy are not in dispute. For example the medium’s ability to help marketers meet and understand clients and potential clients, allowing marketers to ‘dip a toe’ in the water and measure the temperature of a particular situation is clearly advantageous. Some of the tools of social media allow marketers to achieve a saliency and top of mind presence, to keep up to date through easy to gather information conveniently through listening and discussion and to reach certain targets that might be difficult or impossible to reach otherwise, principally because of cost barriers. The challenge, however, is to understand how social media can be harnessed by marketers in a strategic fashion whereby the armoury of marketing and corporate communications tools can be put into practice effectively by small firms. A Hierarchy of Effects framework approach provides a framework in understanding where vehicles such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other might fit in achieving awareness, attention, interest, comprehension, desire and some form of action, whether this be, for example, outright purchase or further enquiry via tools such as blogs and video.

**Initial findings**

While this study, like those illustrated above, seeks to enlighten the use of social media by smaller businesses and SMEs in terms of the kinds of activities that are occurring it also seeks to look more toward strategy and the potential for the use of a Hierarchy of Effects-type approach to developing social media marketing. Initial, exploratory ‘conversations’ with a small number of actual and would-be entrepreneurs resulted in the findings that follow that has appropriate links back to the literature.

**Findings**

Social media is an important part of SME digital marketing strategy which in turn is inevitable. Social media and SEO (search engine optimisation) are part of this and part of a mix (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). This relates to the example above from Copley, McLean and Siddle, (2013) regarding the childrenswear Baggers Originals brand where there was recognition of a digital (and traditional) marketing communications mix. It would appear that to not use social media in some way means that a business is inviting trouble, the perception being one of ‘must have’ just as having a website was de rigour 20 years ago with social media having a profound effect on the ways people are using the web and therefore challenging SME practices (Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen, 2012). The challenge being one of establishing rules of engagement (Beck, 2011, Li, 2012) in order to see the tangible value (Knapp, 2012, Baird and Parasnis, 2011, Strategic Direction, 2012) given that the consumer or customer is in control (Vollmer and Precourt, 2008).

Customers and potential customers are being seen more as ‘community’ rather than as ‘targets’ with social media a potential key to unlocking access to that community which is digital in nature, at least on many occasions in the first instance. Trust is important as is credibility (Liu-Thompson, 2012). More time and effort are being spent on social media as trust and confidence grows (Southgate, Westoby and page, 2010, Kirtis and Karahan, 2011, Soderlund, 2015).

Social media provides the means to achieving personalised message delivery. Such messages can be unique and involve a kind of trust that traditional ways of marketing communication such as advertising cannot and which are being discarded or ignored. Referrals and reviews from trustworthy sources in the community are seen as very important. A number of types of social media were recognised (Mangold and Faulds, 2009, Gupta, Tyagi and Sharma, 2013). Social media is seen as being capable of delivering many things across the marketing communications mix including brand equity (Kim and Ko, 2012, Karamian, Nadoushan and Nadoushan, 2012), public relations (Jan and Khan, 2014) as there is a move away from traditional activity (Rashtchy et al, 2007, Vollmer and Precourt, 2008, Lempert, 2006).

There is a recognition that social media is an integral part of how consumers/customers interact and behave in terms of buying. Social media can help explain what the business is (and why it exists) and can help the business connect with existing and potential customers. This reflects commentary in the literature around the realisation that there is tangible value to be had through getting closer to the customer through social media use (Baird and Parasnis, 2011, Strategic Direction, 2012) perhaps through the traditional idea of sales promotion used in a digital way on social media (Grenier, Fair and Schumaker, 2014).

The flexible quality of social media fits well with the flexible nature of small firm business dealings. There may be a link here with the impact of involvement and the use of the sequence of the steps of the Hierarchy of Effects (Barry and Howard, 1990).

Social media use needs to be relevant to the business/sector. More businesses will take up the use of social media if educated to do so (Wymbs, 2011), there being a need to learn about social media use not just what it consists of bearing in mind that there is a likely expectation that claimed capabilities need to be real and relevant otherwise there could be negative reaction.

One view is that social media should not be viewed as a quick fix solution to solve problems but can be used in the achievement of long term objectives such as those associated with reputation management. There is a link here to the literature in terms of social media being used as a public relations tool (Jan and Khan, 2014). Another view that emerged is that social media can be used for brand awareness. The backdrop to this is the well-travelled view in the literature that small firms need to see a quick return on investment which is in opposition to the view that social media should be part of long term strategy. There is a recognition that as part of strategy there could be a slow(er) build-up to the formulation of a digital marketing strategy where there is no need to do everything at once and with social media the business can work on one platform to start with and then build toward a fuller set of applications.

Educated and informed employees are one way to facilitate the implementation of social media ideas or using social media as a marketing intelligence source. This tallies with the literature in terms of, for example, the Baggers Orginals brand (Copley, McLean and Siddle, 2013) using a dedicated employee but then, in this instance, moving on to the employment of a consultant. This move falls in line with the idea of employing an agency, the arguments for this being the usual objectivity and professionalism but also the need to have good stories that relate to audience experience and sentiments. Part of the issue is of course the limited nature of the budget and the argument that there is economy of access by using a team as opposed to one or two people employed. The team may work for other businesses but it can be cost effective with the ability to gain access to expertise and knowledge of, for example, trends in the marketplace. On the other hand there might be a loss of authenticity and consequently trust. People are more willing to give information on profiles and so targeting is enhanced but there is the danger of damaging the trust and authenticity if the business is seen to be overtly commercial or aggressive with its marketing. There is some sort of balance to be struck since it may not be prudent to be seen to be critically analysing target markets.

There is a belief that a business can be really effective with just a little money but that the benefit comes through a build-up over the longer term. This would seem to suggest the importance of generating interest and desire rather than the awareness or attention. Short term (or quick) objectives such as brand recognition are seen as possibilities but the main return on investment comes from engagement (content and community). There is an expectation that the business can ddevelop social media activity in line with short, medium and longer term objectives.

Despite the dominance of AIDA and other Hierarchy of Effects models in the traditional marketing literature over time (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999) there is little so far in this study that suggests a full, holistic use for this kind of model in the social media marketing context. This may be linked to the rejection of the Hierarchy of Effects approach generally (Barry and Howard, 1990, Petit, Dubois, Harard and Quazzotti, 2011) yet the use of its parts in studies bring in digital influences (for example Gharbi, Danesh and Shahrodi, 2012, Hofhaker (2001), Wijaya, 2012). There is concern for traditional attitudes and attitudes online when it comes to consideration of brands, advertising content (for example Eagly and Chaiken, 2007), websites and paid-for advertising (Stevenson, Kumar and Bruner, 2000, Bruner and Kumar, 2000, Poh and Adam, 2002), web navigation (Bellman and Rossiter, 2004) and more specific studies such as attention inertia (Wang and Day, 2007) and personal communication (Lagrossen, 2005).

**A conceptual schema of integrated SME Social Media Marketing within a Hierarchy of Effects framework**

The results of this study appear to suggest more than specific issues are of concern in the chosen context. A fuller, more strategic interest might yet emerge. Some studies hint at this but only take it as far as managing the process (for example Hassan, Nadzin and Shiratuddin, 2015, Copley, McLean and Siddle, 2013, Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen, 2012, Sharma and Bharathi, 2013). This schema can be conceptualised to involve strategy (creative, including for example blogs or video, and media, for example LinkIn or Facebook) that is integrated and used to impact on the various stages of the Hierarchy of Effects model that can fit in with an integrated marketing communications model with a control stage (research, evaluation, monitoring) before feeding back into the start of the process and becoming part of a new stage of analysis, goal setting and so on. This conceptual schema will be presented and explored at conference.

**Concluding remarks**

There is some suggestion in the literature that the Hierarchy of Effects model can still be used as an effective, strategic marketing tool, not just by large corporations but by SMEs and even smaller businesses. It has also been suggested that this can be applied to the social media marketing context. On the other hand for others the Hierarchy of Effects is portrayed merely as a heuristic tool for guidance and management within the firm. In other words, the employment of one of traditional marketing’s central tools can be no more than an aid to managing or administration and guidance rather than being a strategic marketing tool that can aid the successful exploitation of what is seen as a potentially powerful tool like social media. The original ‘sales funnel’ idea behind the AIDA model appears to be understood in the SME context but not in a strategic way. The indication from the exploratory ‘conversations’ seems to suggest that the Hierarchy of Effects elements are known and used but not in a strategic or holistic fashion. One element such as sales promotion may be chosen as the sole tool to use to achieve certain objectives (action) while other parts of the model are used but to simply classify attention and awareness or some form of action in relation to social media use rather than formulate a strategic approach. The idea of a ‘sales funnel’ is seen and accepted but not in a holistic strategic way. For example an end state, rather than sales or purchase appears to be being part of a community and even help to build it with a hope that this will help build the business in that community. This appears to more akin to reputation building and as such part of a corporate PR effort that will pave the way for other marking to operate more effectively. The goal in the end seems to be one of using social media to have a positive effect on attitudes toward the brand and strength of relationships.

Despite the clarion calls of ‘digital, digital, digital’ in recent years there is, unsurprisingly, still a mix of traditional and digital marketing communications activity. This paper has set out to provide the reader with a conceptual model of the Hierarchy of Effects within SME marketing communications on social media that can be tested in further, empirical research. It has been asserted that by using a structured approach to message content progression SMEs might benefit in terms of improved marketing performance through the employment social media as a way toward positive engagement with target audiences. The importance of relational marketing and social media to SMEs is underlined in this paper in terms of activities such as networking, relationship-building, online branding opportunities and the use of e-wom in the service of message creation and delivery. The literature suggests that the use of social media by smaller enterprises is now firmly part of a mix of newer digital/virtual and older traditional media and other marketing communications tools being used in both digital and traditional approaches. This study so far suggests that there is a will to ‘be strategic’ in the use of social media but that there is a need to understand how to do this and move beyond the heuristic to the strategic. It is still unclear whether the Hierarchy of Effects approach can be of assistance in this endeavour.

**Further research**

1. This paper has focused on how, potentially, social media can be used to target audiences more cost-effectively by the employment of a more structured approach to marketing communications but in particular social media on which a range of devices such as video for instruction or as part of message creation can be employed. This paper suggests that one such potential avenue as to how social media can be used that might involve (say) co-creation, is in the employment of an effective Hierarchy of Effects approach to social media in the SME marketing context that goes beyond mere heuristic intent.

The intention of this paper is to provide a platform for further research into the potential for the use of a Hierarchy of Effects model in the use of social media by SMEs. A qualitative and interpretive approach to researching SME marketing is envisaged in order to explore this critical area of SME marketing activity. Further study will explore this activity in a way that will see the researcher as a subjective individual making sense of particular social arenas. The study will adopt a social constructivist approach involving the researcher and a small sample of relevant participants in order to offer some clarity and depth in this SME marketing context where perceptions of marketing phenomena involved shared SME socio-cultural artefacts. This primary, qualitative research will employ a semi-structured interview that, when transcribed, will provide research texts that will be analysed using a form of thematic analysis. Through this method of analysis recurring themes will be identified. The themes that emerge from the texts will illuminate aspects of marketing in this particular SME context i.e. the potential for the employment of a Hierarchy of Effects approach to the management of social media activities.

This research will therefore involve the researcher using a purposive, convenience sample of participants - SME principals - on the basis of their relevance to the aim of the study. All participants will be interested in marketing; and the research interest is in the person, not the business per se. The research will seek out standpoints that the participants combine, adapt, juxtapose or shape in order to fit conditions in their everyday business lives and expose these through the research to enlighten the SME social media marketing condition. The research texts are expected to contain metaphorical and other references that reflect key tensions in this context and the results of this study should be of further value to managers, educators, trainers and developers involved in SMEs to help them understand the use of social media in the marketing arena that potentially involves a Hierarchy of Effects approach.

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