

Unpacking the Impact of social media on Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: Insights from SMEs and Start-Ups in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

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Received: 22 June 2025 | Accepted: 20 August 2025 | Published: 30 September 2025

Abstract

This study evaluated the impact of social media (SM) technologies on the growth of business start-ups (BSs) and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Specifically, it examined how the following social media platforms—X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok—affect key business outcomes: (i) sales growth, (ii) expansion of customer base, (iii) profit maximisation, (iv) enhancement of brand image and (v) increased product and sales visibility. Through the application of various quantitative analysis methods, the study findings were that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp are the most widely adopted platforms for promoting BSs and SMEs, while YouTube and X (Twitter) are the least utilised. The results revealed a significant correlation between the use of social media technologies and improvements in sales, customer acquisition, profitability, business image and brand awareness among SMEs and BSs in Bulawayo.

Key words: Social media (SM), Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Business Start-Ups (BSs), Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Introduction

A significant increase of Zimbabweans establishing small businesses in the unofficial sector has been observed in Bulawayo, the country's second-biggest city after the capital Harare, in recent years. This comes after a wave of corporate closures in Bulawayo, popularly known as the City of Kings and Queens, which were attributed to a decline in the formal economy. Layoffs increased as large corporations slashed staff or shut operations. Some of those impacted on the way they opened Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Business Start-Ups (BSs) to augment their incomes or generate sustainable revenues. ZIMSTATS (2023) says that there are 60 000 registered SMEs in Zimbabwe. It is claimed that these contribute up to 60% of the nation's GDP. However, SMEs and BSs, encounter, daily, several issues of concern that seemingly threaten their viability. The challenges are a lack of marketing techniques, inadequate marketing knowledge and failure to adapt to the fast-changing business environment are perceived as impediments that are seemingly eroding the capacity of SMEs and BSs to maximise return on investment (Magaisa & Matipira, 2017).

The rise in unofficial income-generating enterprises in Bulawayo has raised concerns since it has intensified domestic rivalry. Another problem is that small business owners do not seem

to be equipped to handle the demands of the global market, such as communication, competitiveness and technological advancement. Another issue is that the rise of small businesses is putting pressure on the market to have a profitable market share (Makanyenza et al., 2023). Yet for any firm to survive, it must create, accept and put into practice strategies that will allow it to generate income and profits while maintaining its competitiveness.

The adoption of new technologies, creativity and innovation can contribute to corporate growth. The use of SM by micro and small firms as a strategic marketing tool could greatly accelerate their growth. Considering this, the paper explores how SM has affected the expansion of SMEs and BSs in Bulawayo and its impact as a marketing tool. The study specifically focuses on how the viability of firms or enterprises is affected by Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), TikTok, WhatsApp and YouTube. The breakdown of these is as follows:

- i) a rise in the number of clients
- ii) a rise in sales
- iii) the maximisation of profits
- iv) the improvement of brand image
- v) a rise in market share.

Theoretical issues

The study considered how SM influences the growth of SMEs and BSs in Bulawayo using the resource mobilising theory of SM (RMTSM) and Rogers' 1962 "diffusion of innovation theory" (DIT). The RMTSM hypothesis states that for any social movement to be successful, it must have access to resources including time, money, organisational skills and social opportunities. The research of academics like Jenkins (1983) and Buechler (1993) served as the foundation for RMTSM.

Companies with access to and experience with SM have a competitive advantage, according to Davis (1989), Khan and Karodia (2013), Constantinides (2014), Icha and Agwu (2015), Kumar (2015), Ali and Mat (2015), and Grewal (2019). (Moghavemi et al. 2012, Rodriguez et al, 2014, Yasmin et al, 2015, Boachie-Mensah, 2016; Gerhards, 2019; Gekombe et al, 2019, Son and Niehm, 2020) It is asserted that they may use SM to affect employee and organisational performance, educate customers about their offerings, encourage communication between parties, increase sales, maximise profits and intensify product and sales awareness. RMTSM underscores the need of understanding how SM impact modern culture and alter customer buying habits, among other things (Ashraf, 2014).

The diffusion of innovation hypothesis, which draws on SM research, identifies five crucial factors—relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trials and observability—that influence how ideas are adopted by SMEs and start-ups. The relative advantage of SM refers to its perceived benefits, while compatibility refers to how well it meets the needs, backgrounds and values of potential users. Complexity characterises the difficulty of understanding and utilising SM. Trials are studies conducted to determine the value of SM and how it affects industry growth. The tangible effects of SM on BSs and SMEs are quantified via observability. According to Rogers (1971), the foundation of diffusion theory is the notion that people who adopt innovations at an early age are not the same as those who do so later in life. The adoption of SM by Bulawayo SMEs and BSs in customer interaction was analysed using the technology acceptance model in addition to Rogers' 1962 "diffusion of innovation theory" (DIT) and the

resource mobilising theory of SM (RMTSM). To aid in better analysis, the researchers also created the theoretical conceptual framework that is shown below.

Hypothesised conceptual framework

The researchers came up with the hypothesised conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1. In this instance, the access to and use of social media (SM) by entrepreneurs to communicate their offerings to a specific group of real and potential customers is the study's independent variable. SM includes YouTube, Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram and WhatsApp. Growth factors including profit, market share, sales, number of clients served and product awareness determine the dependent variable, which is the success of SMEs and BSs.

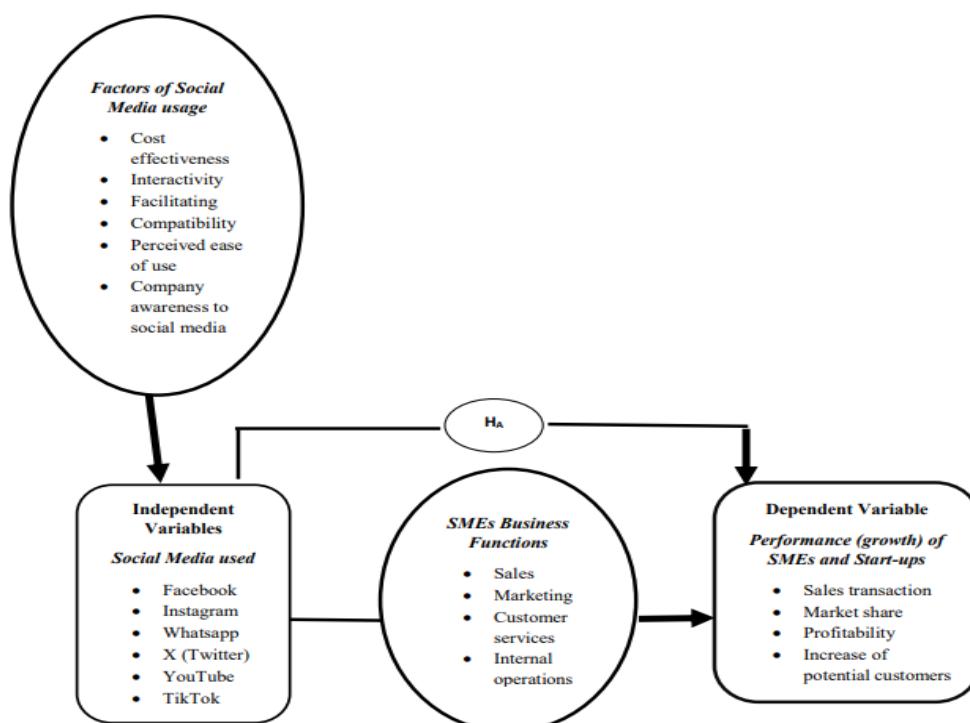


Figure 1: Hypothesised conceptual framework

Source: Researchers, 2024

HA: Access to social media (SM), among other factors, is expected to have a linear relationship with the performance of Zimbabwe's SMEs and start-ups.

Research Methodology

A survey approach was employed by the researchers. Both primary and secondary sources of data were employed in the study. Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires created. Secondary sources included books, research articles, journals, thesis and the Zimbabwe Registrar of Companies and SMEs database, were used to collect secondary data.

The Lee Cronbachs Alpha (1951) coefficient was utilised in the research to attain construct validity and internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha (1951) scale was also utilised to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. A pilot test of the survey questionnaire was first conducted before the full data collection was done.

A sample of 210 enterprises was selected from a total target population of 424 SMEs and BSs using the Slovene formula. Data analysis was done using SPSS and Excel.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study are presented below.

Most preferred SM platform

Table 1 shows that a resounding 30% of the businesses said they had adopted WhatsApp as their go-to SM marketing tool and platform for conducting business, followed by Facebook at 21% and Instagram at 18.1%. TikTok, X (Twitter) and YouTube were ranked as the least desirable, in that order. Because of their perceived affordability and ease of use, the researchers concluded that the majority of businesses preferred the top three social networking platforms. With most users worldwide on WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, interactivity is encouraged, and businesses take into consideration platforms that they can easily access to cater to their clientele. A business may quickly trend and raise brand awareness by using SM sites that Zimbabweans are familiar with, which will enhance market share. The outcomes support the conclusions of Oji et al. (2017), who found that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp were the most popular business communication tools and marketing media. These platforms also dominated the messaging market in several nations and were inexpensive worldwide marketing tools.

Table 1: Most preferred SM technology

Preferred social media by rank	Frequency	Percent	Rank
WhatsApp	63	30.0	1
Instagram	38	18.1	3
X (Twitter)	15	7.1	5
Facebook	44	21.0	2
YouTube	37	17.6	4
TikTok	13	6.2	6
Total	210	100	

Source: Researchers, 2024

Use of SM to acquire customers

Table 2 displays the results of the survey conducted among the enterprises. Of those that responded, 86% ($\mu= 3.8$) said that WhatsApp is more frequently used for customer acquisition, 81% of SMEs and BSs ($\mu= 3.7$) said that Facebook is frequently used and 62% of the participants in the survey said that Instagram is frequently used for customer acquisition. According to 59% of respondents, Twitter (X) is not used very often for acquiring new customers. In keeping with this, 52% of respondents ($\mu=2.2$) said that TikTok was not a good platform for gaining new customers. The study concluded that Zimbabwe's SMEs had not yet taken use of these platforms. It also found that reaching Generation Z, who are more prone to make impulsive purchases because of their increased online activity, will boost sales for branded companies (Zhao, 2021).

Table 2: On the use of SM to acquire customers

ITEMS	Always (%)	Often (%)	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Index
1. Facebook	80 (38)	90 (43)	20 (10)	10 (5)	10 (5)	3.7
2. Instagram	70 (33)	60 (29)	25 (12)	20 (10)	35 (17)	3.3
3. X (Twitter)	20 (10)	40 (19)	26 (12)	57 (27)	67 (32)	2.3
4. WhatsApp	100 (48)	80 (38)	10 (5)	10 (5)	10 (5)	3.8
5. YouTube	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	120 (57)	90 (43)	1.1
6. TikTok	10 (5)	30 (14)	60 (29)	70 (33)	40 (19)	2.2
Average	47 (26)	50 (26)	24 (8)	48 (21)	42 (20)	2.9

Source: Researchers, 2024**NB:** Scale (5= Always; 4= Often; 3= Never; 2= Rarely; 1= Sometimes)

Facebook and growth of (BSs & SMEs)

Table 3 below shows an index of 4.02 out of a possible maximum of 5, suggesting a significant relationship between Facebook advertising and the growth of business in Bulawayo. It also showed that 82% of respondents, or a sizable portion, agreed, with 41% strongly agreeing and 41% agreeing. They think that Facebook advertising has significantly accelerated the expansion of Bulawayo's business community. Conversely, 12% expressed disapproval and 5% displayed ambivalence. According to Paquette (2013), the researchers agrees that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can use Facebook's video feature to promote their products, show off how to use them and develop a plan for brand marketing.

Table 3: Participants' perspective on the correlation between Facebook and growth of BSs and SMEs in Bulawayo

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	Z (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. The brand recognition of my items has increased	80 (38)	70 (32)	20 (10)	20 (10)	20 (10)	3.8
2. Facebook assists customers in identifying my product brand	90 (43)	90 (43)	5 (2)	10 (5)	15 (7)	4.1
3. Facebook makes it easier for me to engage and collaborate with customers	80 (38)	90 (43)	5 (2)	15 (7)	10 (5)	4.1
4. I. Utilise Facebook to do market research	80 (38)	90 (43)	15 (7)	5 (2)	20 (10)	4.0
5. Facebook has boosted the quantity of consumers	80 (38)	90 (43)	15 (7)	5 (2)	20 (10)	4.0
Average	86 (41)	86 (41)	10 (5)	13 (6)	3 (4.0)	4.02

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

Correlation between Instagram and growth of BSs and SMEs in Bulawayo

Table 4, which is shown below, shows an index of 4.0 out of a possible maximum of 5, suggesting a significant relationship between Instagram advertising and the growth of businesses in Bulawayo. Additionally, research shows that a resounding majority of respondents (71%)—of whom 41% strongly agreed and 30% agreed—think that Instagram advertising has aided in the expansion of Bulawayo businesses. Conversely, 15% expressed disapproval and 8% displayed ambivalence.

Table 4: Participants' perspective on the correlation between Instagram and growth of BSs & SMEs in Bulawayo

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	Z (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. Instagram allows me to send customer samples and ads.	150 (71)	60 (29)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.7

2. Instagram allows my company to interact with its customers more deeply	120	60	5	10	15	4.2
	(57)	(29)	(2)	(5)	(7)	
3. Instagram has influenced my customers' purchasing decisions and increased more sales	80	80	20	15	15	3.9
	(38)	(38)	(10)	(7)	(7)	
4. Most of my customers utilise my business post for their future purchases.	90	60	20	20	20	3.9
	(43)	(29)	(10)	(10)	(10)	
5. It is the primary platform used by most of my customers to contact me	65	50	40	25	30	3.5
	(48)	(24)	(19)	(12)	(14)	
Average	101	62	17	14	16	4.0
	(41)	(30)	(8)	(7)	(8)	

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

X (Twitter) and growth of (BSs & SMEs)

The survey results from Bulawayo SMEs and BSs are shown in Table 5 below. Significantly, 56 percent of the companies say that X (Twitter) has not had any impact on their company's expansion. Of the participants, 37% disagreed and 19% strongly disagreed, while 32% of respondents said they thought Twitter (X) was helping their businesses develop. Moreover, 12% of respondents had no opinion. This demonstrates that the marketing strategies of SMEs and BSs were not predicated on the idea that their target audience or customers did not use Twitter. Some SMEs and BSs may not even be aware that Generation Z, who make up the bulk of social network users, even exists, according to the study.

Table 5: Participants' perspective on the correlation between X (Twitter) and growth of BSs & SMEs in Bulawayo

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. My customers are influenced to purchase my products on Twitter.	30	50	25	75	30	2.9
	(14)	(24)	(12)	(36)	(14)	
2. Twitter allows me to obtain a thorough grasp of my clients' requirements.	30	50	25	75	30	2.3
	(14)	(24)	(12)	(36)	(14)	
3. My company's usage of Twitter has greatly lowered its operational costs.	10	40	20	75	65	2.3
	(5)	(19)	(10)	(36)	(31)	

4. Twitter has influenced my customers' purchase decisions in my company	30	40	20	80	40	2.7
	(14)	(19)	(10)	(38)	(19)	
5. Twitter has influenced my customers' purchase decisions	20	40	40	80	30	2.7
	(10)	(19)	(19)	(38)	(14)	
Average	24	44	26	77	39	2.7
	(11)	(21)	(12)	(37)	(19)	

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

WhatsApp and growth of (BSs & SMEs)

There is a significant association between the expansion of SMEs and BSs in Bulawayo and WhatsApp advertising, according to 74% of respondents (mean of 4.0) in Table 6. It also showed that most of the clients who responded to the survey use the platform to make business arrangements. Conversely, 15% of respondents expressed disagreement, and 11% expressed neutrality. The findings support the claim made by Jamaluddin et al. (2014) that WhatsApp has gained popularity as a platform for information sharing and advertising among national and SME businesses. By facilitating quick access to information and prompt responses, WhatsApp helps home-based businesses to reach out to their loyal or potential customers and contributes to the growth of online businesses.

Table 6: Participants' perspective on the correlation between WhatsApp and growth of BSs & SMEs in

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	Z (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. I have utilised WhatsApp to send samples, ads and other materials to my customers.	130 (62)	50 (24)	10 (5)	5 (2)	15 (7)	4.3
2. WhatsApp allows my company to interact with its customers more deeply.	120 (57)	60 (29)	30 (14)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.4
3. WhatsApp has influenced my customers' purchasing decisions and increased more sales	100 (48)	60 (29)	20 (10)	20 (10)	10 (5)	4.0
4. Most of my customers utilise my business post for their future purchases.	100 (48)	50 (24)	20 (10)	30 (14)	10 (5)	4.0
5. WhatsApp is the primary platform used by most of my customers to contact me than other platforms.	60 (29)	40 (19)	40 (19)	60 (29)	10 (5)	3.4

Average	102	52	24	23	9	4.0
	(49)	(25)	(11)	(11)	(4)	

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

YouTube and growth of (BSs & SMEs)

According to Table 7, there is a significant association between the expansion of SMEs and BSs in Bulawayo and YouTube advertising, as reported by 57% ($\mu= 3.5$) of the respondents. Nonetheless, a sizable 28% of respondents disagreed, with 15% remaining undecided. According to Edosomwan et al. (2011), while YouTube businesses can help increase brand awareness and promote a product quickly, the platform's lack of profitability stems from the fact that the businesses must pay for advertising. Thus, the researchers are of the opinion that Bulawayo SMEs and BSs were not utilising the platform in great numbers due to the cost of initiating the ads.

Table 7: Participants' perspective on the correlation between YouTube and growth of BSs & SMEs in Bulawayo

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	Z (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. YouTube has allowed me to exhibit my items through video and audio	100 (48)	40 (19)	30 (14)	15 (7)	25 (7)	3.8
2. YouTube advertising has proven to be useful to my business.	90 (43)	40 (19)	30 (14)	21 (10)	29 (14)	3.7
3. Through YouTube, I was able to persuade them to purchase my items.	50 (24)	60 (29)	20 (10)	50 (24)	30 (14)	3.2
4. YouTube has influenced my customers' purchase decisions in my business.	70 (33)	50 (24)	40 (19)	40 (19)	10 (5)	3.6
5. My sales have improved as a result of using YouTube	60 (29)	40 (19)	40 (19)	61 (29)	9 (4)	3.4
Average	74 (35)	46 (22)	32 (15)	37 (18)	21 (10)	3.5

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

TikTok and growth of (BSs & SMEs)

According to Table 8, which shows an evenly distributed average index of 3.1 among respondents, 46% of them concur that TikTok positively correlates with the growth of SMEs and BSs in Bulawayo. Nonetheless, 23% of respondents were ambivalent and 34% disagreed that TikTok had any effect.

Table 8: Participants' perspective on the correlation between TikTok and growth of BSs & SMEs in Bulawayo

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. TikTok has allowed me to exhibit my items through video and audio.	50 (24)	20 (10)	55 (26)	25 (12)	60 (29)	2.9
2. TikTok advertising has proven to be useful to my business.	55 (26)	25 (12)	50 (24)	19 (9)	61 (29)	3.0
3. Through TikTok, I was able to persuade them to purchase my items.	50 (24)	60 (29)	20 (10)	50 (24)	30 (14)	3.2
4. YouTube has influenced my customers' purchase decisions in my business.	50 (24)	40 (19)	60 (29)	40 (19)	20 (10)	3.3
5. My sales have improved as a result of using TikTok in my Business.	50 (24)	41 (20)	59 (28)	38 (18)	22 (10)	3.3
Average	51 (24)	37 (22)	49 (23)	34 (16)	39 (18)	3.1

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

Reasons for using SM

The study's goal was to find out why and how SM is used by SMEs and BS in Bulawayo. According to Table 9 below, which presents the results, businesses are very concerned about using SM to reach clients ($\mu=4.7$). Bulawayo businesses strive to meet the demands of their customers by providing services, which is one of their business functions ($\mu=4.2$). According to the survey, companies use SM platforms because they are an inexpensive way to communicate with clients ($\mu=3.9$). Another reason why companies use SM is perceived ease of use ($\mu=3.8$).

Table 9: Reason(s) for utilising SM

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	Z (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. Supplement use of traditional media	109 (52)	41 (20)	30 (14)	10 (5)	20 (10)	4.0
2. Reach more customers	140 (67)	70 (33)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.7
3. Satisfying my customer needs better	110 (52)	55 (26)	25 (12)	10 (5)	10 (5)	4.2
4. Competitors use it	70 (33)	50 (26)	33 (16)	40 (19)	17 (8)	3.6
5. Low cost to connect with Customers	100 (48)	40 (19)	22 (10)	39 (19)	9 (4)	3.9
6. Perceived ease of use	80 (38)	80 (38)	20 (10)	25 (12)	15 (7)	3.8
7. Comparability	50 (24)	40 (19)	30 (14)	40 (19)	50 (24)	3.0
Average	106 (50)	51 (24)	20 (10)	20 (9)	11 (7)	4.1

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

Problems associated with SM use

The study determined the restrictions associated with using SM in business endeavours (refer to Table 10). The issues respondents encountered with utilising SM in their businesses were questioned. According to Table 11's data, danger and insecurity rank first among the top concerns for many SMEs in Bulawayo ($\mu=4.2$), followed by a lack of consumer awareness on SM usage ($\mu=2.9$) and customer feedback ($\mu=2.2$).

Table 10: Problems associated with SM (Social Media)

ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	Z (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Index
1. Risk and insecurity	90	90	20	10	0	4.2

	(43)	(43)	(10)	(5)	(0)	
2. Awareness	40	40	25	60	45	2.9
	(19)	(19)	(12)	(29)	(21)	
3. Feedback from customer	10	33	30	57	80	2.2
	(5)	(16)	(14)	(27)	(38)	
4. Cost evolves	9	30	27	54	90	2.1
	(4)	(14)	(13)	(26)	(43)	
5. Accessibility	0	0	0	120	90	1.6
	(0)	(0)	(0)	(57)	(43)	
Average	30	39	20	60	61	2.6
	(14)	(18)	(10)	(29)	(29)	

Source: Researchers, 2024

NB: Scale (5= SA –Strongly Agree; 4= A- Agree; 3= N- Neutral; 2= D- Disagree; 1= SD- Strongly Disagree)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the respondents acknowledged that companies used SM to promote brand awareness, boost sales, increase revenue and increase awareness of their products and services, the study's conceptual framework was able to assess the influence of SM on the expansion of BSs and SMEs in Bulawayo. The study discovered that there was no significant association between TikTok and YouTube and the growth of BSs and SMEs. On the other hand, it established a significant positive correlation between Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter and the growth of BSs and SMEs.

Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter have a beneficial effect on business growth, resulting in higher sales and a larger market share. TikTok and YouTube were found to have a little beneficial impact. WhatsApp is the most recommended SM platform for SMEs and BSs because it is inexpensive and simple to use. It has been discovered that Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter have a beneficial effect on business growth, resulting in higher sales and a larger market share. TikTok and YouTube have a little beneficial impact. Because it is inexpensive and simple to use, WhatsApp is the recommended SM platform. The respondents believe Twitter is least used and find TikTok ineffective for customer acquisition.

The study also highlighted the challenges faced by these businesses, such as danger and insecurity, lack of consumer understanding of the marketing platforms and lack of customer feedback. To create target market segments that are sustainable, BSs and SMEs need to have strong customer acquisition strategies. Future studies may want to explore the influence of SM (social media) marketing on client purchasing decisions.

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