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**Why Did The Home-Based Business Model Flourish
On Instagram During The COVID-19
Lockdown In The UK?**

Abstract

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with interviews and market reports analysis to illustrate the reasons why individuals set up their home business during the UK national lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective is to highlight how social media, Instagram, enabled an entrepreneurial spirit when individuals were asked to work from home. The findings illustrate that spare time is a key motivator in starting a business from home during national lockdown. This research also found financial incentives and Instagram's technological tools to also be motivators as to why businesses were set up on the platform during lockdown in the UK. The findings show that there are multiple reasons for setting up businesses from home, however, without the tools offered on Instagram and the spare time caused by the lockdown, the businesses would not have been curated. With the findings inferring that respondents initially saw their business as a creative outlet which in turn became a business on Instagram.

Keywords: Instagram, social media marketing, COVID-19, home business

Literature Review

COVID-19 caused a national lockdown to be implemented by the government, beginning on the 23rd of March 2020 (GOV.UK, 2020). This meant that the public had to stay at home, and many lost their jobs and income, with 34% of respondents losing an income (Statista, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 had spending habits and social media usage increase compared to previous years with Mintel (2021) reporting 54% of people stating they have spent more online since before the pandemic.

In which gives opportunity to small businesses to utilise social media as a platform for shopping, specifically Instagram. With 8% of people thinking Instagram is easy to use to make money for themselves (Mintel, 2020). The implemented lockdown, changes to spending habits and time online give context to this research project exploring small businesses set up on Instagram.

The background of the Instagram marketing concept throughout this research project, is based in the fact that social media now accounts for having around 3.6 billion users, worldwide, (Statista, 2021). More specifically, Statista (2021) released a report indicating Instagram users in the UK have increased by 8,990 from March 2020 to March 2021. This made the online retail industry a competitive market for small businesses, with 53% of businesses using social media to market and sell products and services (Statista, 2020) during the lockdown. This study investigates if the trends seen throughout the pandemic and lockdown will proceed as restrictions are lifted and how they will affect prospects for these small businesses set up from home on Instagram.

With scholars defining social media marketing (SMM) as a 'two-way' communication platform for businesses to customers (Richter and Schäfermeyer, 2011), with social media being a new generational marketing tool, (Kim and Ko, 2012). Consequently, recent approaches to SMM have been restructured due to the pandemic continuing through 2021 (Sakar and Clegg, 2021) and evolving technologies offering new opportunities for small businesses (Mason et al., 2011). Before March 2020, social media was perceived as an opportunity for businesses of all sizes to market their products and content at a cheap rate compared to traditional methods (Evans et al., 2010; Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Prior to the lockdown, SMM in literature was a growing model to market and to manage customer relationships. As Virtanen et al. (2017, p.472) state, 'social media answers

consumers' demand for immediate access to information'. With literature from 2015 by Stephen, inferring that future consumer marketing will largely be on social media and become digitised in relation to a growth in time spent online; as market reports have suggested (Statista, 2021; Mintel, 2020). With social media channels such as, Instagram and Facebook offering start-up business owners a more affordable opportunity to setting up a business compared to traditional ways of marketing (Hainla, 2017). Jobber and Ellis-Chadwick (2016) stating SMM also offers business owners the ability to form strong relationships with the customer through the ease of direct messaging. This use of direct messenger reduces the cost of 'customer service delivery' (Evans et al., 2010, p.94) in the process of selling products. Henceforth, inferring that SMM is a cheap and intimate method of marketing to customers for small businesses (Dwivedi, 2015). With the main objectives of SMM to maintain brand awareness and reduce market costs (Felix et al., 2017), small start-up businesses utilised social media both before the pandemic and during. Whether social media will continue to be imperative in the small business market after lockdown restrictions are lifted is something that cannot yet be measured to its full extent, as the pandemic is ongoing.

Mason et al. (2021) as also discussed the importance of SMM during COVID-19, in a time where social distancing was imperative, SMM ensured contact with customers whilst maintaining to the laws during the pandemic. Although Mason et al.'s research was based in the US it does concentrate on the consumer's perspective in SMM, which is a vital contribution as the change in consumer buying behaviour is what has generated many start-up businesses online. A major limitation to the literature surrounding SMM during COVID-19 is that most of it is not based in the UK therefore, applications to this discourse will be relevant, yet limited due to a lot of the research being completed in Asia and the United States. With Mason et al. (2021) and Saleh (2020) emphasising that cultural differences should be recognised when it comes to investigations into SMM and its effects on the B2C and C2C landscape. Mason et al. (2021) states that future research into SMM after COVID-19 should involve longitudinal studies to determine the exact changes in buying behaviours.

Instagram

Instagram was set up in 2010 with the intentions to share photographs and connect with people (Varma et al., 2020; Virtanen et al., 2017). Marketing on Instagram has expanded over recent years (Kavak et al., 2021), ensuring more small businesses use social media platforms to market products and manage CRM, (Varma et al., 2020). With Facebook being the parent company of Instagram (Dwivedi et al., 2021), additional shopping features have been added to the applications with the growth in online retail sales in line with the pandemic. Literature on Instagram marketing is limited, specifically surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and small businesses set up from home. Scholars have inferred that Instagram is one of the top used social media platforms to market business (Saleh, 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021) in comparison to other large social media platforms such as Twitter. With Instagram and Facebook offering a digital visualisation of products (Virtanen et al., 2017), this allows for product marketing to excel for a low cost, which benefits small businesses (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Russmann and Svenson (2016, p.61) infer that the digital visualisation of products is becoming more important in marketing, therefore, concluding that Instagram acts as a 'poster' for organisations and their products.

SMEs in the UK

Foroudi et al. (2017) investigated SMEs in the UK and how technology and the concoction of service and product marketing ensures growth. Their study is applicable to this research project as it is based within the UK and focusing on SMEs and growth with technological advancements. Although written before the national lockdown in 2020, the qualitative research reveals how a SME having both tangible and intangible assets mean for more marketing capabilities and growth. W). Foroudi et al. (2017) are touching on competitive advantage for SMEs through the use of innovative social media channels. Reinforcing the notion that social media marketing is 'cost-effective' (p.236) and an easy mode of communication with customers for selling products.

Working from home

Working from home (WFH) has been on the rise not only within the UK but on an international scale in recent years due to the implementation of telework and broadband technologies (Bouziri et al., 2020). With the developments in information technology (IT) and travel, more people are WFH and having a workplace to commute to is gradually losing its importance (Nakrošienė et al., 2019). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing laws, WFH was on the rise, 'bringing work into the domestic spheres' (Felstead, 2012, p.32), particularly in 'skilled workers' jobs (Beherns et al., 2021, p.4) compared to those in manual labour-intensive jobs. These jobs that allow their employees the flexibility of WFH are the jobs that have been favoured during the pandemic, with Gottlieb et al. (2020) stating that said jobs cover 40% of occupations, favouring western countries such as the UK and USA.

Country-specific analysis on WFH would enable a deeper understanding of the trends over recent years in the rise of WFH (Gottlieb et al., 2020). However, the literature does benefit this research project as it is based within the UK where WFH is cultivating within many industries, including setting up businesses from home. A study by Jarrar and Zairi (2002), based within the UK, explored employee empowerment from flexible WFH opportunities created by IT advancements. The results revealed that over half respondents agreed WFH would empower them.

Objectives & Research Questions

The main objective of this research is to gain insights as to why individuals set up their business during the national lockdown in the UK and investigate how social media and the effects of lockdown enabled this entrepreneurial spirit. A final objective is to confirm if these businesses will continue to be open as we come out of the pandemic and lockdown economy.

This study aims to provide an overview of the following research questions:

1. Why did participants set up their business from home during the lockdown enforced by the government?
2. How and if said businesses will survive as the lockdown restrictions are lifted by the government in the UK?
3. Had the COVID-19 lockdown not been implemented, if business owners interviewed would have set up their business from home otherwise?

Methodology

This research project is an exploration into small businesses on Instagram, the exploratory nature of the research is due to the fact this research project is aiming to gain insights into what and why is occurring (Saunders et al., 2012). A qualitative methodology is applicable for this research project, in order to gain an in-depth exploration into why interviewees set up their business when they did. In correlation with social media marketing and discovering if these businesses will continue as lockdown restrictions are lifted within the UK. The rationale for a qualitative approach is based on the ability for qualitative methods to ensure insights into people's perceptions and feelings towards topics such as, the pandemic. Interviews and focus groups are frequently the chosen method when it comes to exploratory research (Gillham, 2000). Although focus groups offer researchers the ability to discover several respondent's experiences at one given time (Saunders et al., 2012), this research project is based on interview data.

This research project is aiming to explore the 'why' and 'how' of respondent's experiences throughout the pandemic, which is what qualitative research is based on (Mason, 2002). Therefore, a non-probability sampling technique is appropriate. Those involved in the chosen sample must all own a business set up on Instagram during the pandemic. Etikan et al. (2016) infers that judgement sampling is when the researcher decides what needs to be explored, including the 'deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses' (ibid, 2016, p.2). Throughout this research project respondents were chosen and targeted based on their Instagram business page. Identification of whether respondents were applicable to the research involved an

analysis of their Instagram page ensuring the start date was during the national lockdown that begun on March 23rd, 2020.

As mentioned previously, the sample was collected and targeted through the application, Instagram. An identical message was sent directly to the business page of eight respondents. The interviews took place over Google Teams due to the pandemic and location of respondents. A consent form with extra information on the purpose of the study was sent via e-mail after the respondent had agreed to take part over Instagram. This then led to the interview day, where a thirty to forty-minute interview was held,

recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. The research instrument involved was a semi-structured interview. For this to take place, an interview guide was curated to give the researcher a guide to asking questions. The semi-structured interview was chosen over a structured or unstructured interview due to its ability to permit adaptations both for the researcher and respondent. However, the response rate worked out at 75% with six respondents participating in the interview. Once consent forms were signed and sent back via email the interviews could commence. The interviews took place in July 2021, this was after the roadmap to lockdown restrictions lifting was completed on the 19th of July 2021. The interview consisted of fourteen questions, with the final question being that of anything extra the respondent would like to contribute themselves.

Findings

As the interview guide was designed in three main sections, the thematic coding and breakdown of data into themes was aided by this design. Hence, the next stage discussed will be identification of key codes which led to the curation of sub-themes and major themes presented throughout the interview data, contributing to the findings (Figure 1). The coding was accomplished by analysing a sentence and giving a code to each sentence in correlation with the common themes revealed in the open coding, the coding table was then curated. Similar codes were grouped together to form the sub-themes and major themes that are interrelated. Codes are generally imperative in analysing qualitative transcripts to understand the context (Burnard, 1991) and are curated through the repetitious themes. With codes that were found not to be recurring as often, to not be assigned a theme, but still remaining to ensure the researcher maintained comprehension of the data provided by the respondent.

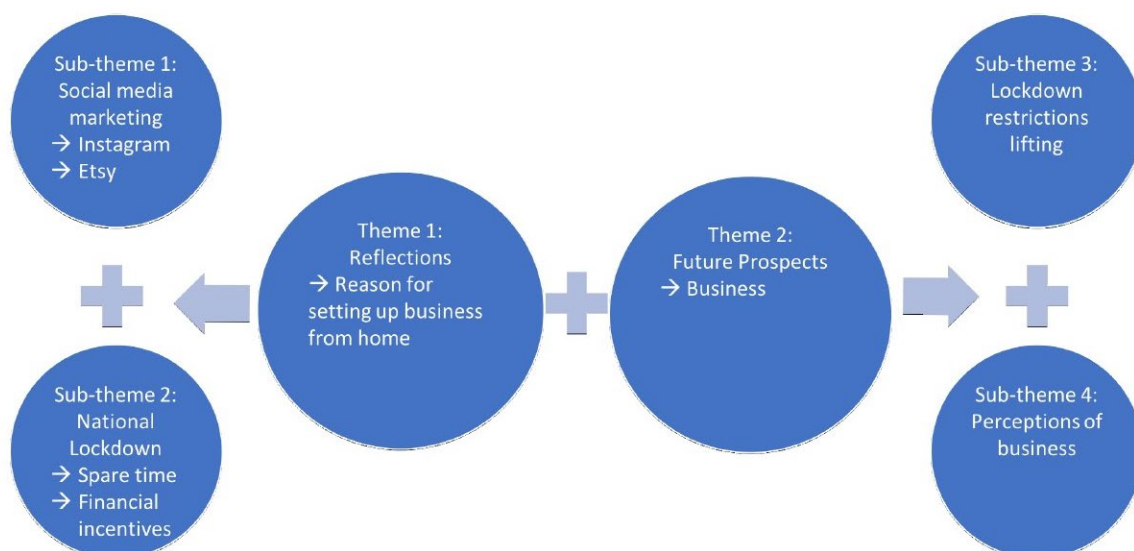


Figure 1: Key themes and sub-themes that emerged for the interviews

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between the key themes and sub-themes that will be discussed throughout this section. These key themes have been formulated and selected from the coded data analysis of transcripts. The themes presented and discussed are those that recurred frequently throughout the interview data from respondents.

Theme 1: Reason for setting up business from home

The first recurring theme to derive from the interview data are the explicit motives behind respondents setting up their business. The theme surrounding reasons for respondent's setting up their business during the national lockdown were found to be the most discussed topic of the interview. With dialogue surrounding how social media and Instagram allow for their creative channels to excel and to brand their product for free. With discussion also touching on respondent's having more spare time due to having to stay or work from home. These themes will be further discussed in the following sub-themes. The findings elaborate on the relationship between SMM and the national lockdown that ensured the establishment of the businesses explored. The findings suggest that all six respondents used Instagram over any other form of social media, such as Facebook, to market their products. As denoted in respondent 3's answer below:

“yeah, so I definitely use Instagram as my main marketing platform (..) as well as Facebook but definitely Instagram is the prominent one and that's how I started on Instagram”

Another reason that came to light for SMM on Instagram was the theme of communication tools and word of mouth (WOM) on the application. Firstly, the method of communication on Instagram being a prevalent reason for using the application to market and create discourse with consumers, using Instagram messenger. With respondents emphasising the ease of messaging and communicating with consumers.

With reference to interactions with tools such as Instagram “*stories*” and “*shares*” on other pages. As respondent 2 infers gaining a following from other pages sharing their business page on their stories, increasing “*reach*” for more “*followers*”. Throughout the responses it is noted that respondents often referred to their customers as ‘followers’ and gaining a ‘following’; which is a common term when referring to a social media following. This leads to the instrument of word-of-mouth (WOM) in concurrence with communication tools on Instagram. WOM ties in with the photo sharing and gaining scope on the business through customer's own discourse and platforms boosting the business. With respondent 3 emphasising WOM in exact terms:

“my friends sharing that [a post of a product] on their Instagram story and then their friends seeing it (...) and their friends following me (..) and their friends buying something (..) their friends seeing that they bought something and follow me and buying something word of mouth is like (...) ridiculous for me”.

Respondents were also asked about their personal usage of social media changing throughout the lockdown, in which respondents generally insisted that they had spent more time on social media in comparison to before the lockdown. With five out of six respondents saying they purchase more products on social media than before the lockdown. Contributing to the research that more people use social media to purchase products during the lockdown compared to the pre-COVID-19 period.

Theme 2: National Lockdown

The second theme found in reasons for setting up business, is the impact of the national lockdown restrictions implemented in March 2020. Focusing the timescale back to during the national lockdown, three out of six respondents reported the exact phrase, having “*mixed feelings*” towards the pandemic. With reference to how “*lucky*” they were to be able to set up their business from home during this time and formulate an “*income*”. Alongside their feelings towards the pandemic, respondents also displayed mixed answers as to what impact the pandemic had in relation to reasons for setting up their business from home. In fact, all six respondents stated they did not have the intentions of setting up their business long-term. With respondent 2 and 6 denoting two examples.

Respondent 2: ***“I never actually saw it as a business to begin with (..) I kind of just saw it as my Instagram account and then like I said I was quite shocked when people liked my items and wanted to get them”.***

Throughout the responses touching on not initially planning to set up a business, there is also reference to the creation of products being a “*hobby*”. The term “*hobby*” was referenced in relation to reasons for setting up four out of six of respondents' businesses. With all six respondents also

referring to having more “*spare time*” that led to them finding new ways of filling this time with hobbies and other extraneous activities. This leads to the reasons for the other two respondents whose business did not begin as a hobby but began for other reasons in correlation to spare time. It was found in the interviews that alongside spare time, financial incentives of selling products online was a key reason in starting their business on Instagram. With suggestion of “*pocket money*” on the side of their job or whether they had to become reliant on the income from their business due to being out of work because of the impact of lockdown.

“so originally I was furloughed which was fine but then I realised that everyone got eighty percent of their salary but what this didn’t include (...) were things like tips and service charge ... that’s why I thought it wouldn’t be enough to pay my rent and so it was quite a large pay cut for me”.

With respondent 5 claiming that their business was set up in the second lockdown due to spare time in-between jobs. Consequently, inferring that the business was set up to create an income until they received a successful job application due to being out of work because of the lockdown. As stated below by respondent 5 when discussing their financial situation and inability to be placed on the furlough scheme:

“it became more of a necessity than anything else cause I needed some extra income in the meantime of trying to look for another job in a lockdown where you know people weren’t really hiring”.

Theme 3: Prospects-Perceptions of own business

Another main theme throughout the interview discourse focuses on prospects as national lockdown restrictions were lifted in the UK and if respondent’s perception of their business has changed from throughout the several implemented lockdowns. The respondents were asked about any success factors they had established throughout the process, enabling the context to be explored and comparisons to be made when asked about lockdown restrictions lifting (LRL).

With respondent 5 setting up their homemade candles selling business in October specifically with Christmas in the forefront as to why they set up their business:

“when I started it, it was late October I think and obviously that’s just round the corner from Christmas so in my head I just thought this could be a really good thing to tide me over for Christmas because (...) obviously candles are always (...) a good- an easy Christmas present”

The respondent highlighted the ability to post pictures of products on their Instagram “*story*” and “*grid*” and seek customer engagement using “*giveaways*” and “*sales*”. These factors ensured continuous customer engagement and increased scope throughout the lockdown. These success factors correlate with the outcome that respondents felt that their business generating a good income due to the fact people were spending more time online.

With half of respondent’s stating that their business is still “*open*” and three stating that they have kept their Instagram page open, however, their business is “*closed*”, to which they are not actively marketing their products anymore. With these three respondent’s implying that their business is closed unless a customer requests a product and they have time to produce this product. As respondent 1, who sells handmade face masks, gives an example:

“I suppose I have shut shop but if someone were to message me and be like please could you make me a mask I might be able to make a few but I just wouldn’t be able to support a large volume as before; but I suppose now, especially with the change in the government regulations with facemasks there’s just not really the need [for face masks] that there was this time last year and so I sort of don’t really see my business continuing past like September October [2021] time”.

The respondents who have detailed that their business is partially closed have also stated that they have left their Instagram page up and running to give them the chance “*to go back*” to marketing the business later. However, when it comes to the three respondents who are still running their business, one premise they had in common was the fact they all worked

from home throughout the lockdown. With all six respondent’s stating that, as restrictions are lifted, there is less time to invest into their Instagram business and they all noticed a decrease in sales. With respondents suggesting this being due to marketing their products less and also customers spending their money elsewhere as restrictions were lifted.

Discussion

This objective is in conjecture with the research question as to why respondents set up their business during a national lockdown. The findings conclude a snapshot insight as to why respondents created their business on Instagram instead of other social media platforms. The majority of respondent's did not have the intention of starting a business yet used Instagram to market their products that began as a creative hobby. However, the spare time generated by either made redundant, furloughed or WFH ensured respondents had time to create these products and actively market them on Instagram. As respondents were questioned on their business as LRL, respondents stated a lack of time to produce as many products compared to before. This infers that spare time was a key motivator in starting a business from home. This research also found financial incentives and Instagram's technological tools to also be motivators as to why businesses were set up on the platform during lockdown in the UK. Questions around the respondents' feelings towards both social media and the lockdown gave deep insight into the respondents' personalities. Hence, several of the respondents stated their marketing role in their professional life, which enables them to utilise their skills in both areas. This objective gives some context to the overall study, with the entrepreneurial spirit being caused by the lockdown and extra spare time. This research has found that there were multiple reasons for setting up businesses from home, however, without the tools offered on Instagram and the spare time caused by the lockdown, the businesses would not have been curated. With the findings inferring that respondents initially saw their business as a creative outlet which in turn became a business on Instagram.

One of the key findings in this research was to find out if businesses will continue as LRL. The data implies that half of respondents have left their business completely open, with the other half closing shop, but leaving their Instagram page active. Leaving three respondents with a semi-open business. In conjecture to this, it was found that the three respondents who are confidently keeping their business open are the three respondents who have been WFH throughout the entire lockdown. All three respondents who have left it partially open have been furloughed and now are going back to work or education. Thus, although the research may not have come to a conclusive answer to if businesses will survive as LRL; there is a correlation found between the ability to WFH and run the Instagram business. With those to have to go into their place of work and education not actively continuing their business due to time constraints. This also infers the notion that the two who were furloughed used their business in order to create an income when the furlough was not enough, inducing a temporary time limit on their business.

Implications

This research offers some practical implications for the home-based business throughout the pandemic, with half of participants working in an industry that enabled them to WFH and the other half in the industry that did not. This reassures the literature that the pandemic and WFH created socioeconomic discrepancies which favour certain sectors of employment, as displayed by respondents' financial situations. Furthermore, practical implications from the findings include the suggestion that WFH will benefit running an Instagram business. Whereas if a person must travel to their work destination this takes up the spare time that would otherwise be utilised in investing in the business. Furthermore, a practical suggestion arising from this research for the home-business is to ensure strong relationships with consumers through the direct messaging channel that Instagram offers. This can build trust amongst consumers and therefore, increase sales and income. To build a strong customer relationship, interactions via Instagram stories and posts will also ensure a validity desired by consumers before purchase. With mention of the photographic aspect of Instagram ensuring consumers can perceive what they are getting before purchase. Another insight gained is that the three respondents whose Instagram accounts are still open for business, also mentioned having an Etsy account. Hence, leading to the practical application for home-based businesses to sell their products across multiple platforms instead of Instagram alone.

Limitations and future research

Limitations to the research must be considered, with the first limitation that comes to light including the sample size. The sample size for this research project is limited to six respondents.

A larger sample size would offer both wider and deeper understandings into the research. Furthermore, with the results of three respondents (50%) leaving their business partially open, a larger sample would have ensured an enhanced understanding and conclusion to this research question.

Within this sample, the products of businesses were not considered in the effects that they would have on how well the businesses did as LRL. With one business offering face masks, this is a product that would affect the sales and progression of a business due to the change in

restrictions in the UK. Thus, it is possible that the nature of the products sold influenced the respondents' decision to close their shops. Also, the researcher understands that for future research purposes, a longitudinal study would be beneficial to answering the question of if these businesses will continue to be open as LRL. As this study was completed adjacent to LRL in July 2021, future studies would be able to investigate further if WFH and other contextual factors, such as the progression of COVID-19, have an impact on the businesses still open at the date of this research project. The future impacts of COVID-19 are uncertain, therefore, future research in the longitudinal sense would offer greater understanding and comprehension of what this research was aiming to explore.

Further potential for future research could also include the likes of investigating consumer trends in social media purchasing throughout the pandemic. With this research project offering insights from the business perspective; insights and research into consumerism during the pandemic could be beneficial to the literature. This would be useful as touched on in this research project, business owners felt that they also were spending more time on social media than before the pandemic. With the findings also indicating that respondents were spending less and saw a decline in online purchases as LRL, this could be investigated in further detail on a larger scale. Subsequently, this research could also have been completed on a larger scale, if a quantitative approach had been employed. A larger sample, derived from questionnaire completion, would present additional insights that should be considered.

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