

*An Exploration into Changing Behaviours
within Social Media during Covid-19
Pandemic (2020-2021).
A Study of Irish Female Entrepreneurs*

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work

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To my family and friends who took another walk with me through the world of education and kept a firm hold of me, thank you.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to those we lost during Covid-19 and who did not get the send-off they truly deserved, especially M.L.C and to the entrepreneurs who braved out the challenges to save their businesses and to those we sadly lost along the way.

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List of Abbreviations

B2B	Business to business
B2C	Business to customer
Covid-19	Coronavirus Diseases
EU	European Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SMEB	Social Media Engagement Behaviours
TOV	Trading Online Voucher
WHO	World Health Organisation

Abstract

This research explores the experiences and interpretations of Irish (based in Ireland) female entrepreneurs' changing behaviours within social media during the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020-2021. It explores how Irish female entrepreneurs used social media before the pandemic, how this changed during the pandemic and what the learning, so far, is from the experience. The overarching research question of the study is: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed the social media use of Irish female entrepreneurs/founders of SMEs?* To address this question, the study employs an exploratory research design and a mixed-methods approach. Empirical data was collected through an online survey and four semi-structured interviews.

The research finds that social media has played a vital part for Irish female entrepreneurs in aspects of networking and digital marketing during the pandemic. The empirical evidence indicates that the environmental changes led to increased activity on social media, with significant growth in video use and live sessions. These tactics facilitated the entrepreneurs taking a central role in front of their customers, and literally becoming 'the face of the businesses', which resulted in more followers, views, interactions and ultimately revenue. Beyond the use of social media for sales and promotion purposes, the data suggests that Irish female entrepreneurs also used these platforms to connect with and support each other, highlighting the critical need for emotional support for female entrepreneurs.

This study contributes to the entrepreneurial literature by providing empirical evidence around the use of social media by Irish female entrepreneurs during a challenging time and has practical relevance in guiding entrepreneurs in digital marketing planning, as well as social networking practice.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This research explores the experiences and interpretations of Irish (based in Ireland) female entrepreneurs changing behaviours within social media during the pandemic, Covid-19 2020-2021. It explores how Irish female entrepreneurs used social media before the pandemic, how this changed during the pandemic and what the learning, so far, is from the experience.

1.2 Background of the study

While social media platforms are not new, 2020 saw a significant increase in their use. The Digital 2021 global analysis reported a growth of 13.5% in January 2021, when compared to January 2020 (Kemp, 2021). In April 2021 the number of active social media users worldwide has reached 4.33 billion, which equals 55% of the total global population. This is an extra 521 million compared to 12 months previous (March 2020) (Datareportal, 2021). As Irish businesses cope with the difficult circumstances of Covid-19, digital marketing tools and social media platforms have become essential means to promote and sell products and services online. While social media is a broad subject with a number of platforms, this research will explore from a business perspective which platforms entrepreneurs use, how they used social media before the pandemic, during the pandemic and finally what learning was taken to improve businesses in the future.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

This research aims to explore current social media use of female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs from a business perspective. The study aims to uncover if the Covid-19 pandemic brought about any changes in social media use of female entrepreneurs, what specific behaviours changed (if any) and to assess the impact of current practice on business performance. The social media channels investigated were : LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

The five specific research objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify if there was a change of behaviour
2. Identify the factors that drove or pre-empted changes
3. Explore the specific changed behaviours (if any)
4. Evaluate the impact of changes/or lack of changes on business performance
5. Formulate recommendations on social media use for future business growth and development

The overall research question of the study is: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed the social media use of Irish female entrepreneurs/founders of SMEs?*

1.4 Methodology

The research study explored the findings from members of three Irish Women-in-Business Networks based in Ireland with roles as: founders and entrepreneurs. A pilot study was conducted in advance of the research with eleven responses collected and findings are included within the methodology chapter. The research was carried out (pilot and field study) using an online survey tool, Microsoft Forms, which collected data from ninety responses with over twenty-three questions using mixed method approach which included open and closed ended questions. The sampling and sample procedure conducted are outlined with the description of the online survey and interviews, as well as a questionnaire within the methodology chapter. In addition, the researcher carried out four online interviews (Teams) with four Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise which explored the four social media platforms been examined in this study by asking five open-ended questions. The process of interviews was discussed; the validity, data analysis & material followed by an outline of the ethics and permission criteria. The research was conducted between May 2021 through August 2021.

1.5 Contribution

This study has the potential to make an important contribution to Irish female entrepreneurs in relation to social media and in doing so bridge the literature gap in this area. Significantly, this research highlights the successes Irish female

entrepreneurs have experienced and the challenges that are still current. While the study only explored four social media platforms and how it impacted on businesses, its findings have potential value to entrepreneurs and literature. Fourteen findings were uncovered. Significantly the research findings found video (19.5%) and live (13.3%) usages grew during the pandemic which interestingly feeds into another finding that people (entrepreneurs and customers) had a need to connect with each other. Zote (2021) reported live streaming grew during the pandemic and customers wanted to see the face behind the business which encouraged online selling. LinkedIn changed while still remaining professional, however the space became kinder and more interactions occurred. Because of this, it encouraged more entrepreneurs to reach out to each other (social relationship), support one another (social capital) and do buy from each other (social interaction).

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

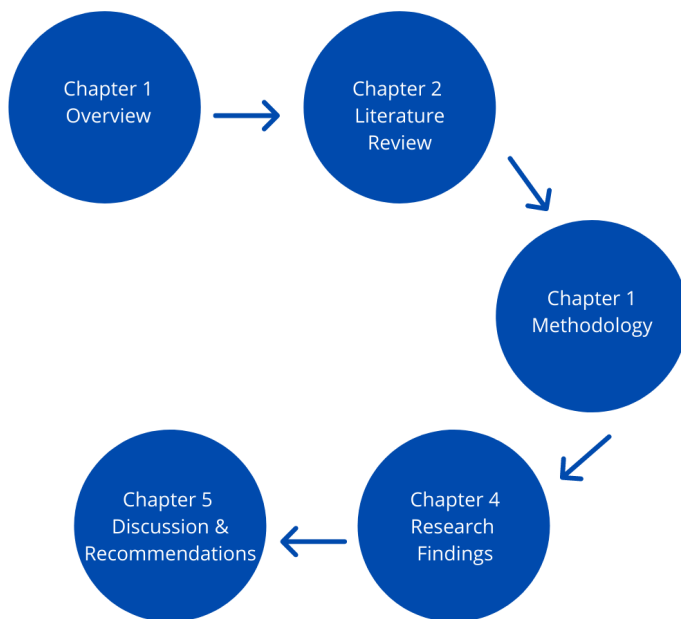
This chapter (one) provides an overview of the background to the research topics. It sets the scene of the study giving the entry point to the research. The aim and objectives are outlined with the scope of the research. Additionally, a brief outline of the study is also given.

Chapter two provides a literature review where two themes emerged: entrepreneurs use of social media for networking (professional development) and for marketing. The literature review explores entrepreneurs traits, how entrepreneurs use social media to network and as a marketing tool. It maps back to the overall research aims and objectives addressing what was happening in social media before the pandemic, during the pandemic and the learning from the pandemic. Specifically, it relates to entrepreneurs with a special focus on Irish female entrepreneurs.

Chapter three outlines the mixed method approach carried out in this study and why it was chosen. It provides details of the research methods and the challenges carrying out the research followed by the sampling and sample procedure conducted.

Chapter four presents the research findings of the online survey and four interviews under ten main findings headings. In addition, this chapter presents the literature alongside the findings.

Chapter five ties together the literature and the research findings while making a number of conclusions from the literature, methodology and findings. It concludes with recommendations for further research.



Flowchart 1.1 Structure of Thesis

Chapter 2: Literature Review

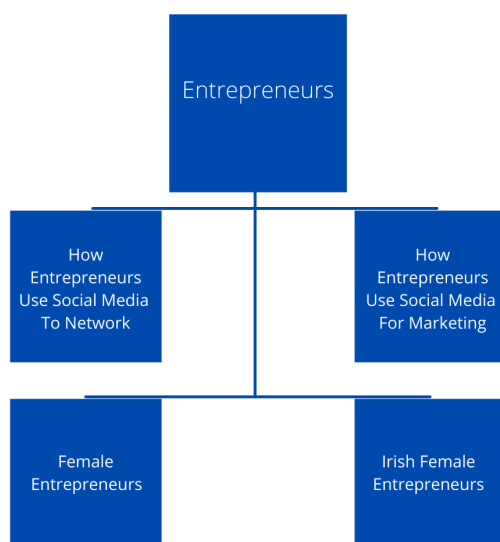
2.1 Introduction

This literature review will explore the main issues surrounding the changing behaviours within social media for entrepreneurs with a particular focus on female entrepreneurs and the pandemic (seen as a crisis globally). The literature will focus on objective 4, to evaluate the impact of changes/or lack of changes on business performance.

Section 1 will examine who entrepreneurs are, their traits and the manner in which they use social media. Two important themes emerged from this exploration of literature in relation to the use of social media: entrepreneurs use social media for networking (professional development) and for marketing. The scope of the research is to explore the way entrepreneurs use social media for marketing their businesses.

Section 2 examines female entrepreneurs and narrows the literature to Irish female entrepreneurs. A theoretical framework: the 3 stages to entrepreneurs using social media to network, is presented.

Section 3 discusses behaviour within social media and section 4 reviewing industry reports and statistics on social media behaviour during that time.



Flowchart 2.1 Literature Review Structure

2.2 Entrepreneurial Traits

The term entrepreneur refers to a person (male or female) who starts a new business and takes on the risks associated with that business (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Entrepreneurs cross multiple sectors globally, are males and females of all ages who act upon an idea to create a business. Entrepreneurs undertake innovation, have business acumen and invest financially to endeavour to create goods and services (Dowla, 2011). Research has examined entrepreneurs' profiles focusing on common patterns to understand the common traits among them. Shane & Venkataraman (2000) list the key traits of an entrepreneur which include sector experience and academic qualifications (Delmar & Davidson, 2006). The traits of an entrepreneur is usually seen as someone who takes opportunities, where their focus is to seize an opportunity and create a possible exchange with other like-minded people (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000 & Delmar & Davidson, 2006).

Extensive research has shown that entrepreneurs have many behaviours and experts insist personality traits are the central factor to these behaviours (Olakitan, 2011, Michaelis et al, 2022, Treanor & Henry, 2010, Stephens et al, 2021). There is an unambiguous relationship between behaviours and personality traits cited by Olakitan (2011) when examining entrepreneurs' innovation. The academic literature on entrepreneurs has revealed the emergence of several traits which are; hard working, confident, risk taker, controlled, innovative and self-directed (Olakitan, 2011, Michaelis et al, 2022, Treanor & Henry, 2010, Stephens et al, 2021). Olakitan (2011) draws attention to the 'friendship' traits and the flexibility of this friendship. Both Olakitan (2011) and Michaelis et al, (2022) suggest social relationships as the starting point for a number of entrepreneurs and that they build up social capital where sharing ideas and collaborating is possible. More recent attention has focused on behaviours under the headings; innovative, openness, resourcefulness and extraversion. The factors that mainly drive entrepreneurs (males and females) to using social media are for professional development (network) and marketing of business.

2.3 How Entrepreneurs Network

Broadly speaking networking covers: reaching out to experts, networking, searching for information and contacting with co-entrepreneurs (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). Dowla (2011) examined the structure of the networking process used by entrepreneurs at early start up. At the early stage entrepreneurs were reaching out to other entrepreneurs as experts in their field, in an informal manner, and in some cases resulted in joining formal network groups (social relationship). In these case studies Dowla (2011) found leadership of the network was vital to its success as a strong network working together and passing business to each other. The second stage was seen as semi formal where the sharing of resources and advice took place (social capital). It is now well established from a variety of studies that the sharing of information and participation from users on social media after contact is a key driving instrument for success (Ham et al., 2019). Therefore, the benefits of using this communication tool has given a reach to entrepreneurs seeking advice and exchanging data among their sectors while growing in knowledge, building a network and expertise. Social media has a pivotal role in entrepreneurs' businesses with its affordability and ease of use, making it a powerful platform. The third stage, a formal stage, is where the entrepreneurs collaborate (pass on leads/contacts, employs the service of one another and becomes a customer and works together on a project) in producing products and services (social interaction) (Dowla 2011). The prime factors when networking on social media are: cooperation, leadership quality of the third person (the other entrepreneurs' contacts), culture, frequency and connection. There is a consensus among Dowla (2011), Ham et al., (2019) and Olanrewaju, *et al.* (2020) that entrepreneurs hugely benefit from networking among each other. Evidence suggests that the lack of funds is among the most important factor for entrepreneurs using social media in the early days, however not just limited to this, in reaching out for support to experts and searching for information. The benefits of using social media to network include the low cost-effectiveness, compared to print and media advertising, and geographical reach it gives without moving from your home or office. In addition social media facilitates networking and engagement with other entrepreneurs from different geographical location with similar or diverse demographic profiles (Olanrewaju et al., 2020).

2.4 The 3 Stages in Entrepreneurial Networking on Social Media

Two important themes emerged from this exploration of literature: entrepreneurs use social media for networking and for marketing. Entrepreneurs consistently follow steps, formally and informally, to achieve their goals by using social media for networking and marketing. From the research conducted in this literature review, the researcher has developed the following model, which is called the 3 stages of entrepreneurial networking on social media Figure 2.1. Based on Dowla (2011) research this model outlines how entrepreneurs use social media to reach out to peers and contacts (social relations), network and seek advice (social capital) and work together (social interaction). Considering all the evidence from the literature this model has been guided from reviewing of how entrepreneurs use social media for networking.

Throughout the literature evidence has showed entrepreneurs value social media for networking and marketing and have gained valuable resources by using one tool. The model, the 3 Stages of Entrepreneurs Networking on Social Media (fig 2.1) was guided from reviewing how entrepreneurs use social media for networking and from evidence from literature. The first stage is informal where entrepreneurs gather socially in a professional and personal manner to connect (Dowla, 2011) . This is called social relationship. When entrepreneurs build a social relationship and trust, they move onto the second stage Dowla (2011), Ham et al., (2019) and Olanrewaju, *et al.* (2020) which is social capital. Literature has hinted that female entrepreneurs stay longer in the social relationship stage with the view of getting to know each other better compared to males (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). Within the second stage, i.e., building social capital, entrepreneurs start to share advice and resources with each other for the purpose to better their business and their relationship. This stage is normally semi formal. The third stage is where entrepreneurs work together i.e., social interaction. They assist each other in the producing and delivering of goods and services. This is a formal stage. The three stages can be outlined as: entrepreneurs get to know each other first, then they trust and then do business. The prime factors in this theoretical framework are; cooperation, leadership, culture, quality of third person and frequency Dowla (2011) & Ham et al., (2019). Cooperation between contacts and members in a networking group has impact on the strength and success

as frequency Dowla (2011). In networking you need to keep turning up the frequency of connection or people do not get to know you. The leadership of the networking group will determine the culture within the group (Dowla, 2011 & Ham et al., 2019). For example if the leader demonstrates a culture of talking negatively about fellow members or and not being supportive, this affects the culture of the group. While every entrepreneur has their own contacts (known as the third person) the quality of these third persons can increase the connections when networking. For example an entrepreneur who has contacts in the retail shop is very beneficial to someone looking to talk to that retailer.

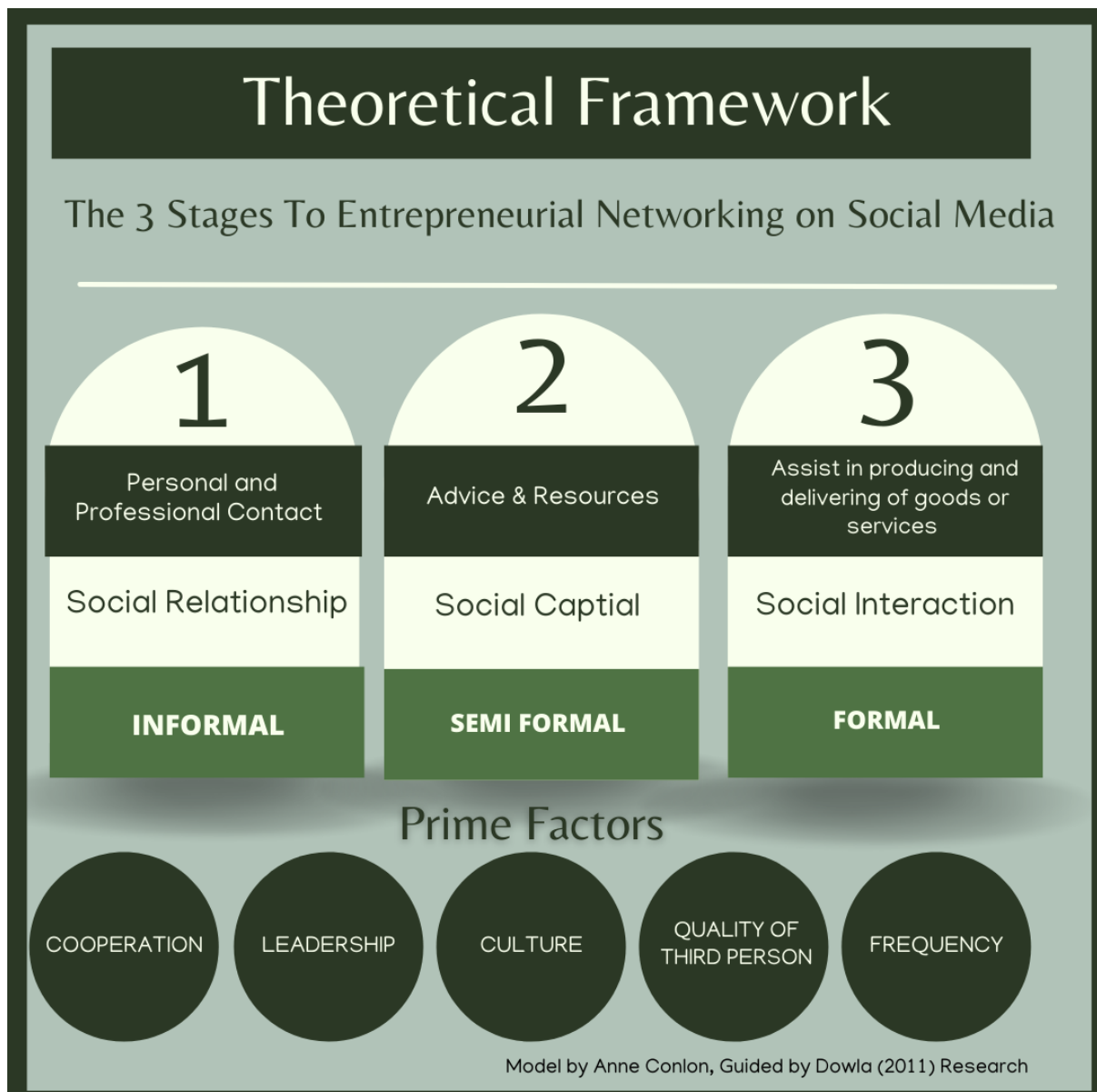


Fig: 2.1 The 3 Stages To Entrepreneurial Networking on Social Media. Model by Anne Conlon, Guided by Dowla (2011)

2.5 Entrepreneurs and Social Media

With the rise of social media usage over the past 10 years, discussed later in this chapter, social media has become a key aspect of the marketing strategy used by entrepreneurs globally. Recent research on the entrepreneurship relationship with social media suggests the use of social media, especially for start-ups, is an effective tool with a low budget needed for good results in relation to marketing (Wess, 2021). When you narrow this research to female entrepreneurs, there are mixed results with the success from a marketing aspect, where female entrepreneurs have not been as quick to introduce online shopping within their business compared to male entrepreneurs (Wess, 2021). However female entrepreneurs have used social media more as a tool to network at the start up stage reaching out to fellow entrepreneurs and were slower to use social media for marketing (Wess, 2021). However female entrepreneurs do use social media as a marketing tool.

2.6 How Entrepreneurs Use Social media as a Marketing Tool

In the new global economy, social media has become a central marketing tool for both male and female entrepreneurs. Social media has become a 'natural extension' of the communication marketing tool for female entrepreneurs which seen a shift from traditional media advertising like newspaper (Genc, M., et al, 2015). From an Irish context in 2015 Ireland was the second highest in European Union (EU) with 64% using social media in their business compared with the EU average at 39%. This was in a rise from 48% in 2013 (Central Statistics Office, 2015). Due to the cost effectiveness and flexibility of social media entrepreneurs have benefited from using these platforms to promote and sell their products and services. Social media has changed the landscape of marketing for entrepreneurs with its wide range of platforms, low cost advertising and easy to use structure (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). The approaches used by entrepreneurs are similar throughout sectors where the use of social media to advertise products or services is more targeted towards business to customers (B2C) compared to business to business (B2B). More recently attention has focused on the management of customer relations, branding, and advertising on social media which has increased visibility of products, and is a driver of sales. Prior to social media customer relationship communication was largely carried out via newspapers and magazines. However, this was one way communication method

which did not allow customer engagement. Social media has played a vital role for entrepreneurs in addressing the communication issues allowing for a two way communication with the entrepreneurs and the customer (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). Central to the entire root of social media is the concept of liking posts, messaging, promotions, information sharing, customers endorsements which prompts a two way communication – customer engagement.

Social media is defined as “.. *all media formats by which groups of users interact to produce, share, and argument information in a distributed networked and parallel process*” (Schreck and Keim, 2013, p68). It has also been referred to as “*any web-based service that allows users to articulate a network of connections and interact with that network of those connections*” (Ham et al., 2019). Social media can be seen as a social relations structure that characterises a set of actors and relations (ties or contacts) that hold these actors together (Jamali & Abolhassani, 2006). Furthermore, the social media platforms are an important tool for sharing content, emotions, opinions and facilitates engagement among users.

Recent research shows that 55.6% of business use social media accounts for exchanging information, with 11% primary using it to post information. 66.7% of businesses say to ‘some degree’ social media benefits their business with 33.3% claiming it ‘significantly benefitted’ (Susanto et al., 2021). Furthermore, for businesses wanting to build a network (customer base) they may use a Facebook closed page, or Instagram stories to build a following. In a Facebook closed page only those in the group can see the posts however business can choose this audience and post content directly targeting them (Susanto et al., 2021). Comparing Facebook closed pages to Instagram stories the audience may be wider but not focused as all the followers could see the posts (Susanto et al., 2021). The most successful brands on social media stay close to their core values and business, otherwise they are reaching an audience that may not be interested in purchasing from them. On the other hand social media allows businesses to build a customer review process show-casing their products and services with the view to increasing sales (Wess, 2021). When a customer gives positive feedback on a product or service through social media this is considered as a strong endorsement for the business. More business are now able to ask for this feedback from customers. Moreover, businesses are able to respond to questions

and complaints more quickly with the use of social media. This may reduce the waiting time for the business and customer: customer receives the information more quickly and the business resolving the enquiries more efficiently Susanto et al., (2021).

Social media is fast becoming a key instrument for entrepreneurs with 4.48 billion users (July 2021) which equates to almost 57% of the total global population (Datareportal, 2021). In 2020 social media platforms has seen a significant increase in their use. The Digital 2021 global overview report stated a growth of 13.5% in January 2021, compared to January 2020 (Kemp, 2021). On average, active social media users spent a daily average of 2 hours and 25 minutes online (Chaffey, 2021). The platforms are easy to use with no barrier to entry (apart from WIFI and equipment compared to setting up a shop with premises) and rather quick to create virtual groups among like-minded users (Shwartz-Asher, et al., 2020). The most used platforms globally are; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook Messenger (Datareportal, 2021). Social media has disrupted the way we interact, share information, express our opinions, shop and how we endorse products and services using influencers. It can work extremely fast and can create great exposure to brands compared to traditional media.

The literature review will compare other social media platforms to give context of the primary platforms. The top social media platforms used by small business are; Facebook (78%), Instagram (52%), Twitter (40%), LinkedIn (33%) globally. In the context of business Facebook was ranked the highest at 78% for small businesses to use, compared to TikTok at 14%, which has yet to gain traction for businesses. This is interesting as TikTok is very popular for users and despite being relatively new, it has over 1 billion users (Wess, 2021). The majority of TikTok users are a young audience with less disposable income (Wess, 2021). YouTube is the fastest growing market for US businesses, from the research findings here, with 48% of small businesses planning to use it due the increased usage by key demographics (Wess, 2021). When asked how to measure success in their social media, 30% considered engagement metrics regardless of no change in revenue. While small business can be under pressure to do a lot of tasks with a small staff and budget, 69% do not use any software that would save them time and resources if used (Wess, 2021).

Facebook

Facebook was launched in 2004 and has now 2.853 billion followers and is seen as the first social media platform that has been successful (Datareportal, 2021). The most popular ages of users are: between the ages of 25 to 34 with female usage at 12.5% and male usage at 18.8% with India as the country with the most global users (Chen, 2021). It is used predominantly on mobile devices (98.3%) and used by Americans (53%) to source news. Globally, two thirds of Facebook users visit local business pages at least once a week (Chen, 2021). Facebook's main revenue is from advertising (ads), accounting for \$20.7 billion in 2020, which has seen a growth of 25% compared to 2019 (Datareportal, 2021). The growth was accounted for by Facebook from the shift by retailers, during the global pandemic, to selling online and using Facebook ads to drive these sales. Facebook groups are now being used by 1.4 billion people, and because of this new features were introduced to make posting and admin monitoring simpler (Chen, 2021).

LinkedIn

LinkedIn was launched on the 5th May 2003 and has 0.774b+ users in 2021 in over 200 countries (LinkedIn, 2021) with revenue of \$8.050b Statista (2021b). With its mission to “..connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful” hence LinkedIn's primary audience is professionals wanting to network. Its revenue comes from membership, advertising and recruitment solutions. It was taken over in 2016 by Microsoft for a reported \$26 billion (LinkedIn, 2021). New features have been added over the past 2 years like introduction of stories (hugely successful for Instagram), page updates, selling tools and a more interactive profile where the users can use a video to introduce themselves and voice control to say their names. With a rate of 46% of total social media traffic between business to business coming from LinkedIn to company's sites it is an important platforms for entrepreneurs (Lashkari, 2021).

Instagram

Instagram was launched in 2010 and has now 1.386b users (Datareportal, 2021). 90% of users follow a business on Instagram and on average, businesses post once a day on their accounts where they see, on average, a growth of followers of 1.46% monthly (Newberry, 2021a). However, the fashion industry has seen massive growth of 55%

purchases from creating a post and the ads are rating highly at 50% of users, who are more likely to buy after seeing an ad on Instagram (Newberry, 2021a). The ad reach potential is 1.16 billion which is an increase of 7.1% on 2020. Its revenue in 2020 from ads was \$18.16 billion compared to \$9.45 billion in 2019 (Newberry, 2021a).

Twitter

Twitter was launched in 2006 and has 0.397b users in July 2021 (Datareportal, 2021). With daily active usage of 192 million, a revenue of \$3.716 Billion, Twitter’s main purpose is to share what people are talking about right now (Twitter, 2021). With the digital world moving very fast Twitter is seen as a quick response to global events and opinions. The leading countries using Twitter using Statista scoring rate are: United States (73), Japan (55.55) and United Kingdom (17.55) (Statista, 2021a). On average Twitter users are following 5 businesses and 80% of them are tagging a brand in a tweet (Hahn, 2021). Twitter ads are used by businesses at 27% compared to Facebook 67%, with a reach of 5.8% of the world over age of 13 (Newberry, 2021b). Its revenue is up 15% in 2020, engagement is up 27% with cost per engagement down by 9%. The use of hashtags on Twitter is huge. For example the most used hashtag in 2020 was #COVID19 used nearly 400 million times per day compared to the second most used hashtag #BlackLivesMatter at 3.7million per day (Newberry, 2021b). The third highest #StayHome which was used in relation to staying home during the pandemic (Newberry, 2021b).

Platforms	Launched	Users	Revenue US\$ 2020	Primary Behaviour
Facebook	2004	2.853b	\$20.7b	Communicating & Discovering
LinkedIn	2003	0.774b	\$8.05b	Networking
Instagram	2010	1.386b	\$18.16b	Bonding & Discovering
Twitter	2006	0.397b	\$3.716b	Discovering & Bridging

Table 2.1 Summary of Statistics on Four Social Media Platforms

It is clear social media is having a significant impact on business revenue increases and the positive impacted during the pandemic. In line with the research objectives of this study, it was important to explore how female entrepreneurs leveraged social media in their businesses.

2.7 Behaviours Within Social Media

Researchers attribute behaviours to be more about 'intuitive understanding' instead of scientific analysis, which has led to diversity of methods used to examining behaviours (Bergner, 2011). For the purpose of this research, behaviours are "everything that is done and how it is done" in relation to social media (Bergner, 2011). Therefore the topic can best be treated as the 'action' from a business and user's perspective (Bergner, 2011). The primary behaviours from the main social media platforms explored are: Facebook - communicating and discovering, Instagram - bonding and discovering, Twitter - discovering and bridging (LinkedIn was not listed) (Mimi, 2019). From a business perspective knowing who your customers (audience) are, attracting that audience to follow you and speaking in the tone that communicates appropriately best to the audience increases the engagement and followers on every social platform. Social media engagement behaviours (SMEB) is when the user (customer/audience) engages by sharing, liking or sharing which make a successful social media platform for businesses.

Literature has defined SMEB as working (active) indicators of the engagement concept that includes endorsing, sharing and learning (Cao et al., 2021). From a user's perspective, a study by Zhao, et al., (2021) found when companies ask for opinions, at buying stage, followers respond well to this as it brings them more into the business i.e. a company on a buying trip could post an image of new stock asking for opinions. This posting could lead to customer engagement. Zhao, et al., (2021) refers to four types of content that affect the results of SMEB which are; media rich (learning content), competition, events, or support (content trustworthiness). Conversely Cao et al., (2021) argues there are two contextual factors in relation to social media which are media richness and content trustworthiness. Media richness encourages a number of levels of user's engagement being; consumption, contribution and creation and encourages the connection between engagement intention and behaviour (Cao et al., 2021). The richer the social media account is, the more likely the user is to engage and share content. Where the content is trustworthy, users are more likely to engage with the information and to contribute (consumption and contribution behaviour). However, when you examine trustworthiness it does not seem to have a significant effect on the creation behaviour or any buying results (Cao et al., 2021). When the

content is trustworthy that is where a relationship is built between engagement intention and behaviour intention. Behaviour intention has three characteristics; consumption, contribution and creation (Cao et al., 2021). The research found content that was rich in media and had content which was trustworthy, went beyond engagement and resulted in purchases (Hollebeek, et al., 2014). Social media is changing rapidly. However, in both studies (Cao et al., 2021 & Hollebeek, et al., 2014) the common thread is the practical engagement intention is a critical aspect in deciding the user's engagement activity and to have a balance between media richness and trustworthiness favours the users.

While social media is changing at a fast rate, the most up to date conclusion (Cao et al., 2021 & Zhao, et al., 2021) suggest sharing behaviours are the life blood of social media and the relationship built up between the business account and their customers (users) motivation is the key driver which determines sharing behaviour.

2.8 Social Media During the Pandemic

On 11th of March, 2020 Coronavirus diseases (Covid-19) was declared a pandemic by the WHO. In Ireland on 12th March 2020 the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD, announced the closure of schools, pre-schools and further and education settings until 29th March, 2020 (Department of Education, 2020). By 15th March, 2020 pubs were ordered to close, and then there was an unprecedented move made in modern Ireland whereby the national holiday, St. Patrick's day, was cancelled and on 27th March, 2020, Ireland went into its full first lockdown with only essential food and household goods or medical appointments and medicines to be collected. Over the next 16 months lockdowns and restrictions were common in Ireland with the purpose to manage the spread of Covid-19 in Ireland, and throughout the world restrictions were put in place.

By the end of March 2020, Ireland was in lockdown with shops, pubs, restaurants, and offices closed. People turned to social media to purchase goods and for news and reports of up-to-date information. Businesses saw this as their only option to engage with their customers and sell their products and service. Local Enterprise Offices Trading Online Voucher (TOV) was increased from 50% to 90% which encouraged

businesses to trade online or improved their trading online (Local Enterprise Office, 2020). While websites were created and updated, the funding could be used for the development and implementation of a digital marketing strategy and the purchase of online advertising. Social media became the lifeline for businesses during Covid-19. This movement introduced the evolution of the relationship between the digital business and physical business model. On one hand, the digital and physical businesses are becoming more tightly integrated, with retailers rapidly improving their digital capabilities and starting to build their value proposition for the users on their digital platform. On the other hand, those strategies put into place during the pandemic to help business during this period were not necessarily best practice (KPMG, 2021). Retailers were changing their product range, distribution and channels to markets. It can be questioned whether this was a change or an addition to their retail practices. During this period of Covid-19 and restrictions within Ireland for most businesses, the only way to do business was online or over the phone. Digital marketing became the tool of communication with social media being the driving force, therefore bringing a shift to online buying from users (Deloitte, 2021a).

Over 2020 social media trends changed as did the algorithms on the social platforms which brought more interaction among their users. Snapchat which was known for a quick video that would disappear very quickly inspired Instagram which introduced a stories option with the same feature showing videos however lasting 24 hours. This brought them to 1 billion user mark in 2020, a growth of 500 million users (Zote, 2021). The more interactive the social media channel is, the more followers and engagement are received. For example take live streaming in 2020, businesses increased their interaction by show casing their products and services online: they put their faces to the business and users reacted well to it. For small businesses in late March and early April, mostly self-employed business owners shared their stories, fears and struggles though going live or videos, which resulted in enormous support for buying local (Zote, 2021). Customers have now become used to interacting with businesses in this way without leaving their homes and this is set to continue (Zote, 2021). In addition, those using social media platforms where now global. Where the local ladies' clothes shop only sold to the local community, by using the tool of social media, they could now talk to a wider audience and deliver from the local post office. The world became accessible to small businesses.

The device used to access social media during the pandemic also changed. Before, commuters used their commuting time on their smartphones looking up social media channels. Now, at home, due to the restrictions, the chosen devices were laptops and iPad/tablets. Tablets devices saw a growth of 64% in 2020 compared to 43% in 2019 where smartphones in Ireland decreases by 1% compared to Japan growth of 7% (Deloitte, 2021b). With these changes in business, social media had to change their posts changing videos from portrait to landscape.

With 4.48 billion users social media it has become an important marketing tool for entrepreneurs to promote, sell and engage with their consumers while still cost effective. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic social media has given businesses that opportunity to communicate to their consumers in a safe and effectively way. While many businesses were closed during lockdowns, as it was deemed unsafe to trade, social media delivered a platform for promoting and selling online in a safe environment. Otherwise many businesses would have had no income and possibly not survive this period of time. In 2017, before the pandemic, Eurostat (statistical office for European Union) reported Ireland was way above any EU country for selling online with 26% compared to 16% EU (European Union) average (O'Dwyer, 2017). KPMG reported 68% of Irish consumers were shopping more online than before the pandemic with 99% stating a good quality website was most important to buying online (Savage, 2021). While Ireland was ahead of selling online in the EU 2017, now Irish consumers are buying more online as well. The favourite social media platforms reported in July 2021 were WhatsApp (21.7%) Facebook (21.5%), Instagram (19.3), Twitter 4.6% and LinkedIn 1% (Datareportal, 2021).

During Covid-19, social media has supported businesses in promoting and selling their products and services online. Over 56% of small businesses in the US are using social media for their business and have seen revenue growth despite the pandemic (Wess, 2021). Conversely there is a high level of pressure on those managing social media business accounts where they may not have had before. With up to 15 hours being spent weekly managing social media accounts, 53% felt under pressure to post (Kwon et al., 2021). In addition brand awareness was also considered a driver. Research carried out by Wess (2021) on small businesses in US findings showed 81%

of small businesses plan to invest in social media in 2021, with 74% (Ireland 2015 64% EU average 39% (Central Statistics Office, 2015)) engaging at least weekly on their social media accounts.

Data showed a change within social media within users globally and nationally for businesses. The culture of social media has seen in the past five years a divide of social media marketing and website marketing. A survey carried out in 2020 showed that “not many businesses’ had integrated their social media accounts to their websites for customer’s engagements” (Passport to Trade, 2019). The more popular feature in 2021 is for all the traffic from all social media channels to be brought to the company website where purchases can be made and traffic can be measured.

2.9 Female Entrepreneurs and their Approach to Networking

To date, some global studies have investigated female entrepreneurs use of social media within their businesses. Research found female entrepreneurs use social media for marketing (to promote, sell, brand their products/services) and personal development (networking) (Nworgu, 2020, Genc, Oksuz., 2015 & Snellman, 2020). There is limited data on female entrepreneurs' usage of social media. The lack of research carried out on female entrepreneurs has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of female entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the literature that focuses on female entrepreneurs (Nworgu, 2020, Genc, Oksuz, 2015 & Snellman, 2020) has brought to light female entrepreneurs use social media for marketing and networking. In networking situations, females use slightly different processes (steps) compared to male entrepreneurs (Olanrewaju et al., 2020).

When networking entrepreneurs get to know each other first (social relationship) (stage 1) and go on to share resources (social capital) (stage 2) followed by (stage 3) social interactions where they do business together. Females adopt a different approach where they slow stage 1 down, getting to know each, and stage 2, sharing resources which is more about trusting each other before they do business (stage 3). In contrast with earlier findings some evidence hint that male entrepreneurs move through the step of social relationship and social capital quite quickly (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). Another example of difference is when you examine networking groups among males and female entrepreneurs. Snellman’s (2020) findings show females

who receive support from other females within a formal/informal network credit the network for the success instead of taking it themselves. This is an area of significant difference compared to male entrepreneurs who take the credit for their successes themselves even when in a network setting formal or informal (Dowla, 2011). According to Snellman (2020) women would most benefit from a more gender-balanced supportive network where her success remain hers not the network's.

2.10 Irish Female Entrepreneurs

In an Irish context Treanor & Henry (2010) viewed that political culture, events and enterprise policies have had an impact on female participation in entrepreneurship with fewer females participating compared to males. In 2016 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED) reported 250,000 active enterprises in Ireland with a ratio of 1.9 males to 1 females (approx. 86,207 female entrepreneurs) with 92% employing less than 10 employees (micro business), 6.8% employing between 10-49 employees (small), 1.2% employing 50-249 employees (medium) and 0.2% employing more than 250 (large) (OCED, 2019).

Recent research carried out in Ireland on Irish female entrepreneurs by Stephens et al., (2021) during COVID-19 pandemic represents interesting results. The researcher asked the same questions in two phases which had a time lapse of four months between both phases. Surprisingly during a very difficult time in business, only a minority of respondents on average over the two phrases at 1.66% regretted setting up their own businesses. 21.67% of respondents reported being busier at that time compared to before the pandemic. When respondents were asked the question "will your business be successful again?" the results found 1.99% over the two phases, on average, answered no, which suggest Irish female entrepreneurs, from this study, believed their business will be successful again. In addition a number of female entrepreneurs changed their business offerings and others changed the way they did business.

2.11 Implications of findings from the literature on social media behaviour data for Irish female entrepreneurs

The most obvious findings emerging from this literature review found that female entrepreneurs have benefited from using social media platforms to promote and sell their products and services (Nworgu, 2020, Genc, Oksuz, 2015 & Snellman, 2020) because of its cost effectiveness, easy to use structure and flexibility. Furthermore, during the pandemic it facilitated an easy two-way communication between customers and entrepreneurs. The insights gained from the literature shows evidence of entrepreneurs using social media to network (Olanrewaju et al., 2020 & Dowla, 2011).

2.12 Conclusion

This literature review set out to explore the main issues surrounding the changing behaviours within social media for entrepreneurs with a particular focus on female entrepreneurs and during the pandemic. The literature revealed two main reasons entrepreneurs use social media which are for networking and marketing. The investigation into entrepreneurs using social media for networking has shown three entrepreneurs journey stages. The most obvious findings, in relation to marketing, to emerge from literature is the use of social media as a two-way communication tool between the entrepreneurs and their customers. In addition, the use of social media for business growth and development in the future will be evaluated.

The overall research question of the study is: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed the social media use of Irish female entrepreneurs/ founders of SMEs?*

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore the main issues surrounding the changing behaviours within social media for entrepreneurs with a particular focus on female entrepreneurs and the pandemic. The objective was to collect data from three female networking groups based in Ireland using online survey. It also collected data from stakeholders' views (Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise in the field of social media) through an online interviews to enrich the understanding of the social media behaviours. This provided the opportunity to explore the research findings, what lay beneath them and discussion into possible impediments to successful use of social media. By comparing the research findings (practice in the real world) to the literature review (theory) the study gained a richer understanding of the emerging issues surrounding changing behaviours in social media. Thus, it was able to contribute valuable and informed recommendation in relation to the changing behaviour within social media.

The data collection used was a mixed method approach with the understanding that data is richer using triangulation (Robbins et al., 2014 & Saunders et al., 2003).

Section 2 outlines the framework to the research strategy and gives a detailed account of the research that was carried out. Section 3 discusses the pilot test, outlines the feedback given by participants and the changes made. Section 4 describes the sampling approach employed in this study. Section 5 discusses the data collection; sections 6 outline the framework for data analysis. Section 7 examines the limitations of the study and section 8 discusses validity and reliability.

3.2 Research Strategy

The research design is exploratory in nature and adopted a mixed-methods approach. The research strategies employed to collect the data were ninety online survey and four interviews using a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions in both methods. Denscombe (1998) argues that a mixed method approach gives the research a 'fuller picture'. This is supported by Wragg (1980) who states that there are individual weaknesses in only quantitative and qualitative methods and concludes by confirming mixed methods results in richer research data. Furthermore, Denscombe

(2014) argues that the use of mixed methods can contribute to the validation of the research findings and advance accuracy, therefore bearing a more inclusive approach to the research.

The research was a non-experimental survey, which means that the research took place in a real life setting where the researcher could not possibly control any variables. This approach was chosen as the researcher wanted to collect data from a larger representative group of female entrepreneurs across Ireland, permitting open-ended and closed-ended questions to be asked electronically (Kalaian, 2011).

The primary research method, the survey, was administered online using Microsoft Forms. This was cost effective and very productive in relation to time and it was safe to carry out during a pandemic. Based on the research objectives of this study, the survey method was deemed appropriate for collecting data around beliefs, opinions, behaviours and attitudes (Albudaiwi, 2018). Survey research is a systematic research method composed of open-ended and closed-ended questions where individual factual information can be collected electronically (Ballou, 2011 & Kalaian, 2011). The main reason for using this method was the flexibility of a survey allowing the researcher to ask many questions giving options for answering from single answer, to multichoice, which can provide the researcher with extra data (Biggam, 2017).

The secondary research method was the semi-structured interviews. After the survey was completed, four interviews were carried out with four Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise in Ireland on each of the social media platforms which are the focus of the study: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. The interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to check some of the survey research findings with Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise in a particular social media field and to go deeper with the data (Biggam, 2017). The interviews were informal and those who were interviewed were given the questions in advance. Two of the interviewee Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise had published material in the public domain and the other two have a number of popular platforms discussing and showing evidence of expertise. The interview guide included mainly open-ended questions around the respondents' use of social media and aimed to probe on the most relevant findings from the survey data.

3.3 The Pilot Test

Before the research took place, a pilot test was carried out using an electronic survey, via Microsoft Forms between 8th and 15th June 2021. The survey was posted within a closed Facebook page on the 8th June and reposted on the 11th June 2021 and was open for seven days. There were only three responses by the 12th June. The researcher subsequently emailed the survey link directly to twenty female entrepreneurs personally known to her. After the email was delivered on the 12th June, 2021 another eight responses came in.

The reason for this strategy of a pilot test was to test the survey design, collect feedback on questions, and understand where improvement was needed before the actual survey went live. After the pilot test survey was closed, the researcher emailed the respondents for feedback on their experience of completing the survey. The main feedback obtained was extremely important in updating the final version of the survey. The benefit of this strategic approach was to test the survey process in design, to receive feedback on the questions, and to understand where improvement was needed before the actual survey went live. None of the pilot test data findings are included in the actual research findings so no duplicating of data between pilot test and live field study could occur.

In summary, the feedback from the pilot test included the following points: the participants form was very long, the consent form had too many similar questions, questions were easy understood and the average time to complete was 6 mins. Some respondents also suggested the invitation to complete the survey should be in the form of a video, posted on Facebook, as opposed to a text, which may not be read.

The feedback mentioned that the restrictions in Ireland had been lifted and work for the participants was very busy, which led to less time on social media groups and more time focused on immediate business demands. For example, one respondent noted, *“Only that you emailed it Anne and I wouldn’t have done it”*. Nine participants felt the information form and consent form was doubling up on the same content and they were too long, as illustrated by the following quotes

“God no. I won’t have time to read that. I knew you wouldn’t send me anything that would be tricky. I trust you!”

“That was very heavy text. No one will read that. They probably will exit at that point. Take it out Anne”.

“There’s a lot of the same information in both forms, is that a mistake?”

Six participants suggested using a video instead of text in the post as they found people pay more attention to a video than reading text. Also, it was suggested that when participants in the group see a face, they would be more likely to take part. As the questions were easily understood and didn’t take too long, they were not changed. The only suggestion from the pilot study was that the question “what time of the day do you normally post?” would benefit from a multi choice answer, as opposed just one answer option. This was changed in the survey.

To solve the issues with the participants information sheet and consent form the researcher changed the survey under academic supervision and gave a summary of the participants information (appendix D) with an option to read the full text (appendix E). The first option was to read the summary of the participant information sheet, click that you had read it and then move forward to the consent form. Option two was to click through to read the full version of the participant information sheet, click that you have read it and then move to the consent form. The question was, *“Would you like to access the Detailed Participant Information Sheet? Choose No to go directly to Consent.”*

The researcher also considered the recommendation of using a personal video and took this on board to promote the research.

3.4 Sampling

The sampling approach was purposive. Since the population of interests is Irish female entrepreneurs/founders, the sampling frame will consist of three Irish women-in-business networks.

The three groups have around sixteen hundred members however there are a large number with membership in more than one network hence the true estimated are closer to members 700 in total. The networks communicate through closed Facebook pages, which provided a suitable platform to promote the study, by sharing the Participant Information Sheet and inviting members in each network to complete the survey questions. The researcher is a paid-up member of each group, and membership privileges include the right to post surveys and/or promotional materials on these pages. From a sampling perspective, there is a risk that some female entrepreneurs are members of more than one of these groups and the true sampling frame may not include 700 individuals. Participants were asked to fill out the survey once only.

The interviewees were also selected based on purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were that (1) the interviewees are Irish female entrepreneurs and (2) had significant expertise social media on at least one of the four platforms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter, meaning (a) they are well published in this domain and/or (b) they have received specific digital marketing / social media awards and/or (c) they are sought after to provide training in a specific social media platform to other entrepreneurs or business professionals. A list of 8-12 potential interviewees were drawn and initially the first four potential interviewees were contacted by email, which included the Participant Information Sheet (appendix E) Informed Consent Form (appendix H) and the interview guide (appendix I). In addition, potential participants were also be invited to make contact should they wish to discuss the project further, prior to making a final decision. If any of the first four potential interviewees refused to participate, the next potential participant/s were contacted until the desired number of 4 interviews were completed.

3.5 Data Collection

After the changes were made following the pilot test, the survey was posted within the three closed Facebook pages. The first post consisted of a one minute video from the researcher explaining the research, the process and how to take part in the research and the selection the criteria.. The first post was posted on Wednesday 30th June, 2021 from 12pm – 12.30pm. The second post was posted on a very wet Sunday 4th July, 2021 between 12.30pm -1pm, with the graphic outlining the research title in black with a yellow background. When comments were made saying survey completed or any other comments of good wishes, the researcher commented on these thanking the members. The survey finished date was Friday, 9th July, 2021 at 12 midnight.

The interviews were carried out between 15th July and 23rd July 2021. All these interviews were carried on Microsoft Teams, recorded and transcribed.

3.5.1 The survey

As outlined in section 3 when participants clicked through to take part in the research, they were asked to read the 'Participant Information Sheet - summary Appendix D which also gave them the option to read the full text of the 'Participants Information Sheet' appendix E. They also had the option to read the Informed Consent Form Survey in a summary version (appendix F) or opt to read the full text (appendix G). If members decided to participate in the study, once consent was obtained, a link took respondents to the survey (for more information, please refer to Appendix C).

The survey was designed using Microsoft Forms. In total, there were 110 responses. Out of these, 90 responses fitted the respondent selection criteria, following the data cleaning process which excluded anyone not female, not living in Ireland and who was not a founder/entrepreneur or leading an organization. Analytics from Microsoft Forms shows it took on average 07.55 minutes to complete.

Research Instrument – the Questionnaire

The first three questions were criteria sampling questions which meant if a participant had answered 'no', then they would receive this message, "*End of Form - thank you for participating*".

The criteria sampling questions were:

Are you female?

Are you an entrepreneur or founder of a business?

Is your business based in Ireland?

As this research was based upon female entrepreneurs or founders, who are based in Ireland, all participants who were outside of this geographical area were excluded from taking part in the survey. The online survey contained 23 questions. The first part of the survey aimed to explore what social media behaviour Irish female entrepreneurs had before the pandemic. The following sections contained specific questions around if this behaviour changed or not and how it changed or not. The subsequent section included questions focusing on what drove changes and how these changes, if any, impacted the business. The last section asked what about any lessons learned during this time.

3.5.2 The interviews

Four interviews were carried out remotely using Microsoft Teams. The interviewees profiles are outlined on Table 3.1. All interviewees were emailed the Participant Information Sheet (full text) (appendix E) and Interview Guide (appendix I) and asked to sign the consent form (interview) (appendix H). It was envisioned that the interviews would be 30-60 minutes long and actual interview lengths are included in Table 3.1. The interviews were recorded and the audio file of the recordings was saved. These audio files were then transcribed and upon final transcription, the audio files were deleted. The interviews were arranged by phone and an invitation to Teams sent via the researcher's email at Atlantic Technology University. All interviewees were asked the same questions and these can be seen in Table 3.2.

	Age range	Gender	Years in Business	Sector	Expertise	Length of interview
Interviewee 1	45-49	Female	12	Social Media	Social media	33 mins
Interviewee 2	40-45	Female	16	Retail	Retail and Instagram	42 mins
Interviewee 3	35-39	Female	6	Social Media	LinkedIn	56 mins
Interviewee 4	50-54	Female	20+	Social Media	Twitter	34 mins

Table 3.1 Interviewees' profiles

	Question	Types	Objective
Q. 1	Reflecting on the events of the last year, since March 2020, what do you think is happening in the social media landscape in Ireland, from the perspective of small and medium businesses? Why? How? Give example	Behaviour question	Objective 1 & 3
Q. 2	What do you think caused these changes, if any? Examples	Experience question	Objective 2
Q. 3	Do you think there was an impact on business performance? Why? How? Explain?	Context question	Objective 4
Q. 4	Based on your experience and industry observations since March 2020, what would you advise other business owners to do in relation to social media management for their business? Why? How?	Evaluative/opinion	Objective 5
Q. 5	What do you think will happen when we return to normal? Why? How?	Context question	Objective 5

Table 3.2 Interview questions

The five interview questions were open-ended with a mix of behaviour, experience, context and evaluating questions addressing all five objectives of the study.

These methods (online survey and interviews) allowed flexibility where 23 questions were asked giving options for answering from single or multichoice which give the researcher extra data when needed (Biggam, 2017). The purpose of the interview is to go deeper and to check the research findings with experts (Biggam, 2017). The online interviews were informal and the interviewees were given the questions in advance.

3.6 Data Analysis

For the closed-ended questions in the survey, data was analysed by using the analytical tools available in Microsoft Forms. The data collected through open-ended questions in the survey and the data from the interviews was analysed through thematic analysis, following the systematic approach developed by Braun & Clark (2006). Braun & Clark (2006) thematic analysis has 6 phases: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. When a question was followed by a large text box, the data findings were exported to a Microsoft word document for

coding and then analysed under a number of headings led by the research finding data (Appendix J, K & L). Where common phrases and words were found in answers, these words or phrases formed headings under which the data was analysed. Both the survey and interviews' data findings for data analysing was the same. The interviews were carried out within two weeks of the survey completions as the research findings were fresh in the researcher's head and took place during a popular summer holiday time in Ireland.

3.7 Limitations

The survey was posted at the end of the June when the schools were closed in Ireland. On top of this, restrictions in Ireland were lifting after a six months. This resulted in people taking time off work, businesses opening up and getting busier and a general feeling of getting back to normal. With social media and online events being the most used form of communication for this period of time, people then moved away from interacting online compared to previous months. Some posted that they were taking the summer off social media, or an extended break away from social media. Despite these new developments ninety eligible responses were received. While the researcher is not in a position to repeat the process to compare and show evidence, this knowledge is coming from years of working with female entrepreneurs and networks.

There were limitations to this research. The results cannot be generalised in the research community or generalised to represent female entrepreneurs in Ireland. Similarly, although four of the Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise in their field were interviewed they give a detailed account of their professional experience, choosing more Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise may have led to different results. Furthermore the online survey can only capture the results from that specific moment when participants are answering the questions. Asking at a different time may have led to a different result depending on what was happening before and during completing the online survey. The data was self-reported by the participants and could suffer from biases.

Ethical approval was given for distributing the survey to the three networking groups only and this confined the researcher to that sampling frame, preventing access to the survey to any other female entrepreneurs who were not part of these networks. On reflection, the three networking groups should have been the foundation of the survey but allowing the researcher to post on general platforms/direct emails and to encourage other entrepreneurs and founders within the groups to share as well may have improved the response rate, and potentially increase the accuracy of the data.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

The main purpose of using a scientific approach is to obtain reliable and valid data. The reliability of the research addressed the issue of how dependable a researcher is in obtaining the same results when the measurement is carried out a number of times (Proctor, 2005). To capture the audience at the same time, experiencing the same restrictions in relation to the pandemic, the researcher posted at the same time the online survey to the three groups. The reason in doing so was to ensure as much as possible the population would be going through the same experiences. Validity measures if the instrument collecting the data is creditable and can show clear evidence. The use of two different data collection methods to triangulate the results were used (survey and interviews). The data collection method was based on a tried and tested research strategy, and was deemed appropriate for the research and approved by the Ethics Committee from Atlantic Technological University School of Business. The choices the researcher made are backed up with evidence from literature and years of experience working within the space of social media, networks and female entrepreneurs. Therefore deemed appropriate and trustworthy.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research methodology which was a mixed-methods approach. The primary research method is an survey administered online and the secondary research method is the semi-structure interview. The sampling approach is purposive. Since the population of interests is Irish female entrepreneurs/founders, the sampling frame consisted of three Irish Women-in-Business Networks.

Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings from the research which explored changing behaviours within social media during a pandemic: A study of Irish female entrepreneurs. Objectives 1, 2, 3, and 4 will be addressed in the chapter with presenting the if there was a change, what was the specific change, what drove the change and the impact of change or lack of change to businesses. The findings will include results from 90 survey responses of Irish females entrepreneurs and four interviews with Irish entrepreneurs with significant expertise across the four social media platforms; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. In addition, this chapter will discuss the research findings alongside the literature.

4.2 Findings: Survey

While there was a total of 90 completed survey responses, not every respondent answered every question, hence the number of responses changes throughout the data analysis. In addition a number of questions allowed participants to choose more than one options which resulted in greater than 90 responses for some questions.

4.3 Main Social Media Platforms used by Participating Entrepreneurs

In order to address the objectives the research first established what social media platforms Irish female entrepreneur/founder were using in their businesses. The results showed Facebook 78, Instagram 61, LinkedIn 61, Twitter 51 and other 9. The participants (entrepreneurs) were then asked then which social media platform was their main channel: the results showed: Facebook (32) followed by Instagram (29), LinkedIn (19), Twitter (7) and other (1). Globally the top social media platforms used by small business are; Facebook (78%), Instagram (52%), Twitter (40%), LinkedIn (33%) (Datareportal, 2021). The findings and literature concur that Facebook, Instagram are the top main platform entrepreneurs and businesses are using as their main social media channel. Slight differences noted between Twitter and LinkedIn with literature citing Twitter usage being greater than LinkedIn and findings the opposite. Tiktok which is a relatively new social media app was only mentioned once in the whole research survey. Clubhouse was mentioned five times in the survey and this seems to be a growing platform among female entrepreneurs.

4.4 Summary of Research Findings

The online survey and interviews found 14 main findings in relation to female entrepreneur social media behaviours:

Research Objective 1 & 3: change in behaviour and what specific change

1. An increased level of social media interaction during the pandemic
2. The rate of posting increased during the pandemic
3. While posting times changed from pre-pandemic posting behaviours, one still remained popular 5pm -10pm
4. The use of videos grew by 19.5% and the rate of going live grew by 13.3%
5. There was a shift from selling products/service to supporting each other
6. Competitions and special offers declined slightly
7. Followers and interactions grew on the platforms LinkedIn and Instagram
8. Increase of closed groups on Facebook

Research Objective 2: driver of change or lack of

9. There was a demand to connect with each other
10. The pandemic-related loss of face to face sales drove the need to sell online and this was the primary reason that drove change
11. The need for more branding, engagement, and having more time was the secondly reason for driving change

Research Objective 4: Impact of change

12. The positive impact for business were more followers, views, interactions and revenue.

Research Objective 5: Formulating Recommendations

13. Formulate social media recommendations from entrepreneurs based on participant experience during the pandemic
14. Networking is an effective tool for entrepreneurs

4.4.1 Research Objective 1 & 3 Finding: change in behaviour and what specific change

Increase level of social media interaction during the pandemic

Survey question 6,7,8, and 9 asked for information in relation to research objective 1 and 2 (identify change, if any, and explore the specific change). Table 4.1 shows an overview of the results of the business interaction on social media before Covid-19 and after 2020-2021. What stands out is the change between entrepreneurs rating their social media before the pandemic as 'fair' and after an increase of entrepreneurs rating to 'very good'. When you review the rate of posting during the pandemic (table 4.2) it is not surprisingly that this has also increased. Both these findings support each other and probably hand in hand reinforced one another. Globally social media grew by 13.5%, reported in January 2021 compared to January 2020 Kemp (2021) which concurs with the findings. Datareportal (2021) reported 57% of the total global population is a user on a social media platform therefore social media is fast becoming a key instrument to entrepreneurs and the findings support this. Chaffey (2021) states 2 hours and 25 minutes is the on average daily time spent on social media for the end user.

Rate	Before Covid-19	12 months on	Change of interactions
Poor	16	13	-3
Fair	26	16	-10
Good	31	30	-1
Very Good	13	23	10
Excellent	2	6	4
Total	88	88	

Table 4.1 Results from business interaction on social media before Covid-19 and after, 12 months on

The rate of posting increase during the pandemic

In relation to research objective 3 table 4.2 illustrates the specific breakdown of behaviour change in posting, before Covid-19 and twelve months on, 2020-2021. On closer inspection (table 4.2) it shows a shift from posting more regularly which is a big behaviour change. The participants increased posting 'a few times a day' and decreased postings weekly. A key driver could have been the extra posting of

entrepreneurs did to their social media platforms. With the increase of posting extra content had to be created and in some cases this changed from selling to supporting and the use of more videos. So not only did the posting increase the method used to post changed too, which will be discussed later in findings.

Rate	Before Covid-19	12 months on	Change in Responses
A few times a day	3	13	10
Daily	22	20	-2
Every second day	17	21	4
Weekly	33	21	-12
Other	11	12	1
Total responses	86	87	

Table 4.2 Behaviour changes of posting before and 12 months from Covid-19

While posting times changed from pre-pandemic posting behaviours, one still remained popular 5pm – 10pm

As these questions had a multiple optional answers choice there are more responses that participants. It address objective 3 – specific change of behaviour. It can be seen from the data in table 4.3, that 5pm to 10pm remains the most popular time for posting. From the table 4.3 it can be seen that by far the greatest change is 9am – 1pm. Interestingly this is during traditional Irish working hours. In addition, the literature reported devices usage also changed. If you consider users traveling to work on public transport possibly using their mobile phone to access social media and now working from home the device could also change. Tablet devices users saw a growth of 64% in 2020 compared to 43% in 2019 (Deloitte, 2021b). With these changes in business, social media had to change their posts changing videos from portrait to landscape.

Time range	Before Covid-19	12 months on	Change
7am - 9am	12	17	-5
9am - 1pm	18	29	11
1pm - 5pm	13	20	7
5pm - 10pm	40	43	3
10pm - 7am	4	3	-1
Total responses	87	112	

Table 4.3 Posting times before Covid-19 and 12 months on

The use of videos grew by 19.5% and the going live rate grew by 13.3%

Literature and research findings concur that videos and live appearances have seen growth from January to December 2021 period which answers objective 1 (was there change and objective 3 (specific change of behaviour). The most striking findings from Table 4.4 is the growth in video usages at (19.5%) and going live at (13.3%) used by entrepreneurs. Interviewee 1 also discussed both video and lives seeing a huge growth over the 12 months period among Irish business entrepreneurs and globally. Literature reported a change in Instagram where they introduced stories where a video could be viewed up to 24 hours. This change brought Instagram to the 1 billion user mark in 2020, a growth of 500 million users (Zote, 2021). In addition businesses increased their interaction by showcasing their products and services online using live streaming in 2020 (Zote, 2021). Interviewee 2 similarly reported the huge success going live on Instagram made to business. They discussed customers responded well to seeing the face of the business interacting with them (customers) which possibility encouraged them to buy from the business more. For small businesses in late March and early April, mostly self-employed business owners shared their stories, fears and struggles though live or videos, which resulted in enormous support for buying local (Zote, 2021). Customers have now gotten used to interacting with businesses in this way without leaving their homes and this is set to continue (Zote, 2021).

Interviewee 1 further reported short videos and going 'live' was hugely popular and the content normally found on Tick Tock came through on Facebook where it performed well. The message needed to be extremely clear and delivered spontaneously, for approximately 15 or 30 seconds.

Tools	Before Covid-19	12 months on	Change
Video	50.60%	70.10%	19.50%
Live	24.20%	37.50%	13.30%
Special Offer	43.30%	39.40%	-3.90%
Competitions	30.30%	24.60%	-5.70%
Other	35.50%	44.40%	8.90%

Table 4.4 Tools used before Covid-19 and 12 months on

There was a shift from selling to supporting each other

The shift from just selling products, for some companies, to helping/supporting people (and some customer) demonstrated their skills and knowledge grew during the pandemic. This data answers objective 1 (was there change) & 3 (specific change of behaviour). Zote (2021) stated through live streaming and videos entrepreneurs shared their fears and struggles of the pandemic with their customers and potential customers. In addition some shared knowledge to help other business owners and their audiences and encouraged to shop local (Zote, 2021). This concurs with the research findings. Furthermore the findings showed the possibility of gaining business from helping/supporting instead of just focusing on selling. For those who made this shift, they had seen an increase of new followers, good engagement and in some cases more revenue. Interviewee 4 discussed Twitter moving into supporting mode where help was offered and became the normal. Furthermore Twitter was seen, in the past, as a quick time supporter with answers (someone tweets a questions and it is answered very quickly by another) and these responses grew during the pandemic.

Competitions and special offers declined slightly

An interesting finding related to special offers: special offers (3.9%) and competitions (5.7%) showed a small percentage decline during the 12 months (objective 3). The companies whose business flourished during the pandemic did not need to give special offers to run competitions. Conversely, the businesses struggling for sales could not afford the cost associated with a giveaway. Competitions and special offers fall under content trustworthiness and seen as positive engagement among customers (Cao et al., 2021) compared to learning content like giving tips. While the research findings found a slight decrease of special offers and competitions this might have been a missed opportunity by entrepreneurs to build a relationship and engage more with their customer (who had more time available) during the pandemic. When the content is trustworthily that is where a relationship is built between engagement intention and behaviour intention (Cao et al., 2021)

Followers and interactions grew on LinkedIn and Instagram grow from most business

Findings shows Irish female entrepreneurs have experienced a specific behaviour change with (objective 3) growth in their social media platform Instagram (92%) and LinkedIn (83%) (Facebook 77% and Twitter 64%) during the 12 months period. When asked what drove these changes the drivers were; more interaction, richer content, more people online and consistently posting (table 4.5). While the findings showed huge growth among Instagram and LinkedIn, Facebook is the top social media platforms used by small business followed by Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn on a global stage (Wess, 2021).

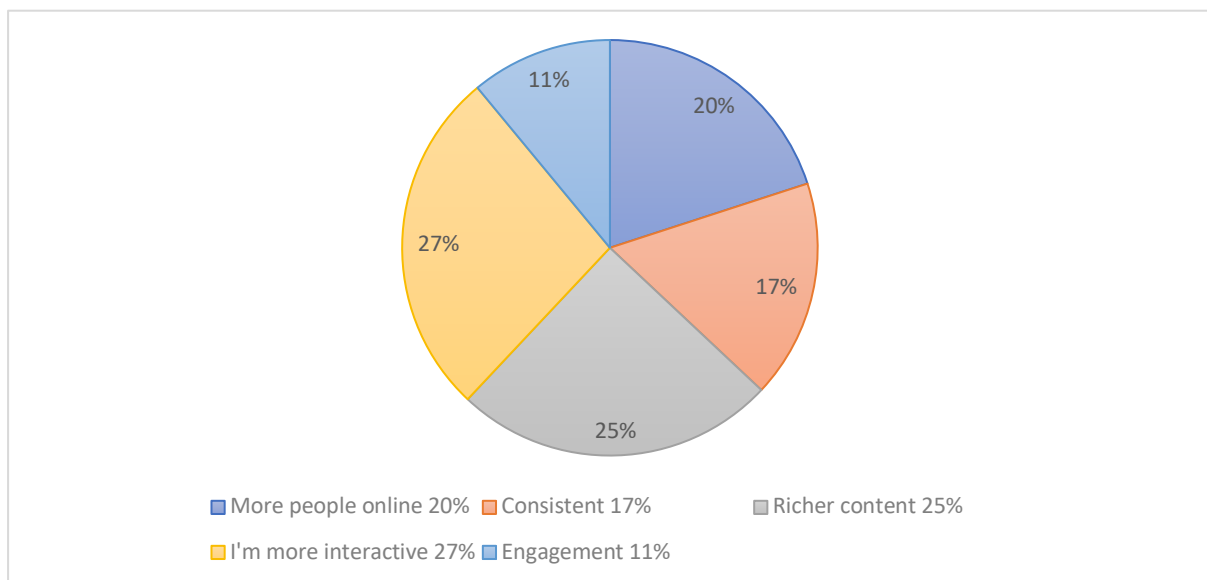


Table 4.5 Drivers of change behaviours

Increase of closed groups on Facebook

In relation to research objectives 1,2 & 3 which was to identify if there was any change of behaviour and if so, what drove the change. Participants were asked if they set up a closed page within the 12 months of March 2020 – March 2021. 18 responded by saying yes, 70 said no. Digging deeper, in this multi choice question, to see what factors drove or pre-empted this change a very large proportion (71%) of responses choose 'promote your products and services'. 61% choose 'live talks' that is talking live to those in the groups where an interaction could be a two-way communication tool. 44% choose 'offer support from you to your customers' and 35% 'community of support'. Community and customer depending on the business could be seen as the

same. 61% choose 'notices from the business'. Interviewee 1 reported there was 'more demand' for live content and the brands that embraced it were more successful in their social media strategy. In addition interviewee 1 discussed how Facebook live broadcasts increased by 26 points during the first 3 months of Covid-19 affecting the world. Susanto (2021) states closed groups on Facebook are good as the customers who are members are interested in the business's product or service. However the customer either has to request to become a member or the business request them to become a member which can led to a limited catchment audience.

4.4.2 Research Objective 2: Driver of change or lack of

There was a demand to connect with each other

Interviewee 3 reported the need to connect drove the change of behaviour (objective 3) among entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs needed human connection and to be among their people was great during the restrictions. Social relations and social capital through networking supported this:

"So people were connecting on line and you go where your people are and if you are a business owner or professional that was LinkedIn I think".

The findings from the interviews showed the strong need for people to connect. Interviewee 3 listed the following points:

1. The need for people to connect since Covid-19 and during lockdown with networking event cancelled like Chambers
2. To build their network (step 1 & 2 in the 3 Stages of Entrepreneurial Networking on Social Media)
3. LinkedIn became a friendlier place for business and professionals
4. LinkedIn, the company, made changes like adding features which made it more user friendly
5. It's a space for professional, like-minded people to discuss and connect
6. It's became really interesting space for professionals to share and get to know each other.

The study supports evidence throughout: the need for connection was very strong. Furthermore interviewee 2 also reported live appearances on Instagram, their main platform as essential:

“Using Instagram gave our customers an opportunity to kind of just reconnect with ourselves as business owners because that wasn't there. That's the biggest feedback I got from customers. when COVID hit we were like front and centre of the business as opposed to hiring staff to do the Instagram like we did everything.”

Interviewee 4 found Twitter was a place for people to reach out and connect:

“people are definitely helping small businesses owners more. There's definitely more of a movement towards helping the Irish business owner as well on Twitter and that's what I saw.”

Olanrewaju, et al., (2020) argues social media facilitates networking and engagement with other entrepreneurs from different geographical locations with similar or diverse demographic profiles: social media supports connecting people globally. Social media has played a vital role for entrepreneurs in addressing the communication issues allowing for a two way communication with the entrepreneurs and the customer (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). The platforms are easy to use and rather quick to create virtual groups among like-minded users (Shwartz-Asher, et al., 2020).

The pandemic-related loss of face to face sales drove the need to sell online and this was the primary reason that drove change

Entrepreneurs were asked what drove the changes of behaviour (objective 3) and selling online was the highest score. This is not surprising as online became a very popular space and for most businesses and the only space they could trade. Chen (2021) argued Facebook's growth in revenue of 25% was accounted for with the shift by retailers, during the global pandemic, to selling online while using Facebook ads to drive these sales. 56% of small businesses during the pandemic in the US saw revenue growth using social media platforms (Wess, 2021). Before the pandemic Ireland was above the EU average (16%) for selling online at a rate of 26% (O'Dwyer,

2017). The Local Enterprise Office (2020) increased the Trading Online Voucher (voucher given to business to develop a new/existing ecommerce website, digital advertising, videos and photographs) from 50% to 90%. Social media became the lifeline for businesses during Covid-19 hence digital marketing became the effective tool two-way communication tool bringing a shift to online buying from users (Deloitte, 2021a).

The need for more branding, engagement, having more time was the secondly reason for driving change

The increase in brand awareness and engagement with their customers with having more time to work on social media was the second reason behind driving growth (objective 3). Interviewees 1,3 4 concurred with this findings reporting it was the only way to selling during the restrictions. Table 4.6 shows a detail account of the findings. Kwon et al., (2021) agrees that brand awareness was also considered a driver for using social media platforms. However Cao et al., (2021) & Ham et al., (2019) disagrees that engagement is a key driver of using social media, listing sharing as the key driver. While Jamali & Abolhassani, (2006) argues engagement is seen as an important tool for on social media as does Olanrewaju et al., (2020) stating Social media is a two-way communication supporting interactions. This concurs with these research findings.

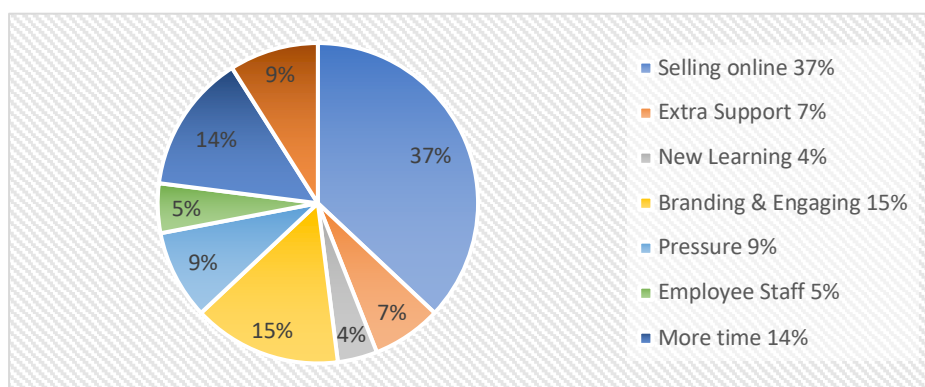


Table 4.6 Results on what drove change in social media behaviours

4.4.3 Research Objective 4: Impact on businesses

The positive impact for business were more followers, views, interactions and in revenue

Entrepreneurs were asked to rate what impact the changes made on their social media usage since March 2020. The results showed a positive impact on all aspect of social media with increase followers, views and interaction taking the top 3 positions (table 4.7 for full breakdown of results). Both Cao et al., 2021 & Ham et al., 2019 disagrees with these finding citing sharing of content has the most impact for businesses. Furthermore Ham et al., (2019) argues participation and sharing of information from users on social media is the key driving instrument for businesses' success. While sharing on social media did not rank in the findings' top three there is certainly a huge increase of sharing at 76% from the findings. Social media is a two-way communication where at the root of it is the concept of liking posts, messaging, promotions, information sharing, customers endorsements– customer engagement (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). In relation to more revenue over 56% of small businesses in the US are using social media for their business and have seen revenue growth despite the pandemic (Wess, 2021). Therefore these findings show an increase of 21% compared to US small businesses increase of revenue.

Impact	More	Less
Visitors to website	74%	26%
Engagement	76%	24%
Sharing	76%	24%
Revenue	77%	23%
Interaction	78%	22%
Views	81%	19%
Followers	87%	17%

Table 4.7 Impact of changed behaviours

Interviewees 3 when asked about the impact of the changes to businesses performance said,

“I think businesses who have embraced LinkedIn and have taken the time to learn how it works have been very pleasantly surprised. How much easier it is to actually get contracts and clients through using LinkedIn an so?”... “People who are actually good at this LinkedIn thing are getting business as a result.....

“The thing about LinkedIn is that the people on there have money to spend.”

In contrast interviewee 2 reported while their Instagram stories were ‘most powerful’ they believed the shift will come back to shops on street which add credibility.

“Everyone is opening stores up on their social media pages selling from their platforms. But the one edge that we would have against other, you know is an actual presence on the street and that kind of gives you credibility..... If you're shopping with someone online, they can really close up shop and be gone within hours.”

4.4.4 Research Objective 5: Formulating Recommendations

Formulate social media recommendations from entrepreneurs based on participant experience during the pandemic

Research objective 5 examines the learning during the pandemic and this learning forms the recommendations for future business performance. This objective was addressed within research questions with 21 and 22 by asking what learning was achieved during this period of time. A common thread within the responses shows a business that knows its target market, and matches this target to platforms has certainly seen an impact of more active and engagements. However, this does not mean more sales revenue for the business. It is more about the impact of followers and the interactions that showcases their expertise. 17 responded stating their best impact was being consistent within their social medial platforms. 13 stated they learnt what content works best for their business which had a positive impact. 10 mentioned they were not using social media to sell their product or service, more about being seen which impacted on their brand awareness. All responded mentioned they developed skills (findings for objective 3) during this period of time to be really effective in their social media platform in turn impacted on their business. In addition, 3 other respondents said they had learnt about different tools that were available to them and they used these to increase their following. There was a number who said the new followers meant they are doing something right was their best learning which impacted the business. Others responses were ; being authentic, ads, selling online, social media management, posting the links to websites, some do not know what worked,

others said blogs, re-posting, recognition and branding, and finally, employing a person to manage social media.

82% of those responded stated their business was in a better place now than before Covid-19. Incidentally, Stephens et al (2021) research states 21.67% of Irish female entrepreneurs are busier now compared to before the pandemic. The responses (table 4.8) showed 19 had business or sales growth, 11 felt they made the most of the opportunity, 9 defined their target market, 6 changed their market - for example growth in business internationally/USA, three said they felt their well-being had improved. There was a number of single responses which consisted of; support, branding, confidence, sustainability, understanding social media much better, connections, YouTube, referrals, Google my business, price increase and networking.

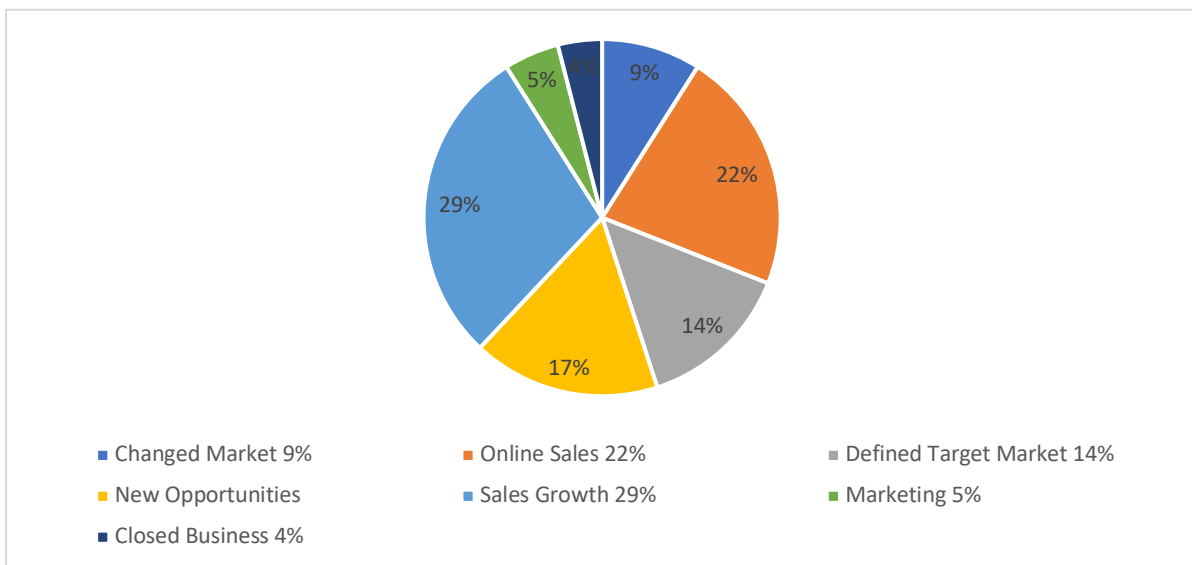


Table 4.8 Breakdown of how businesses have improved in 12 months

In general, the respondents reported that depending on your business type, one platform is much better than using three platforms and diluting the message across a number of platforms. It takes a lot of time to create and post content on social media. It is questionable if when we return to normal, there will be time for business owners to be able to create this volume of content.

Interviewee 3 advised to “*Pick your platform, find out who is your audience, who do you want to sell to?*”

Literature has shown networking is an effective tool for entrepreneurs (Dowla (2011), Ham et al., (2019), Olanrewaju et al., (2020). Research findings has also shown evidence that networking on social media is an effective method for entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs were reaching out to each other for help and advice on Twitter and LinkedIn (social relationship – stage 1 of The 3 stages of Entrepreneurial Networking on Social Media). Both interviewees 3 and 4 discussed how supportive both platforms were with LinkedIn becoming more kinder. Some entrepreneurs within the networks started giving advice and resources to each other by delivering free webinars, having one to one calls and sharing experiences to support each other (stage 2 – social capital). A number of entrepreneurs started doing business with each other by purchasing products or services and introducing them to people who were interested in doing business with them (social interaction – stage 3). The model 3 stages of Entrepreneurial Networking on Social Media was tested throughout the research and evidence has supported the model.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the study and mapped back to the literature. The findings showed that behavioural change occurred (objective 1): an increase level of social media interaction (literature agreed, We are Social (2021)) and the rate of posting increased (nothing found in literature to support this). These finding are not surprising when you consider online was the only method to purchase, for a lot of businesses, during lockdowns. It has created a shift in behaviour from purchasing in store to online and it will be interesting to see if this behaviour continues in the future.

Objectives 2 showed what drove change was mostly selling online and literature concord with this finding (Chen (2021), Wess, (2021), Local Enterprise Office, (2020), Deloitte, (2021a). This finding was not unexpected when you consider the degree of the Covid-19 lockdowns and fears for shopper to travel outside their homes. Engagement also drove change and literature disagreed with this findings (Cao, D., et al. 2021 & Ham et al., 2019) . The need for businesses to brand themselves which, Kwon et at, (2021) agreed also drove change. It is interesting that branding was rated

so high during a crisis. While branding does impact on buying, during a crisis one would think the focus from branding would shift to selling. However for those businesses not trading or trading at a low rate the spare time was spent on branding which will be beneficial in the future. In addition, the increase of followers and views also drove change (Jamali & Abolhassani, 2006). It would be worth exploring in 6 months' time to see if the increase of followers remind loyal or was it an impulse follower bored during lockdown.

Objective 3 showed specific changes of: posting times (devices changed due to low commuting to work that impacted on posting time Deloitte (2021b) agreed), The use of videos and going live grew, a shift from selling to support Zote (2021) agreed with both findings. While going live and specially videos were very popular during 2020-2021 comparing these methods over the coming year would add to literature and future digital marketing plans. Competitions and special offers declined during the pandemic, literature disagreed with this findings Cao et al., (2021). While not within the scope of this research, competitions and special offers in 2022 seem to be increasing since the announcement of ending restrictions due to Covid-19. Followers and interaction grew on LinkedIn and Instagram. There was no evidence either way in literature on this finding. The findings found an increase of Facebook closed page for businesses and literature Susanto, (2021) agreed with this finding. There was a demand for entrepreneurs to connect with each other and literature stated the need for global connections during the pandemic (Olanrewaju, *et al.*, 2020). Literature also stated the platform was easy to use for networking too (Shwartz-Asher, et al, 2020). Objective 4 explored what impacted change, if any, had for the entrepreneurs business's. The findings showed more interactions (Olanrewaju et al., 2020) and more revenue (Wess, 2021) with literature concurring with this. Objective 5 showed the learning from the pandemic which includes: choosing a social media platform that matches your audience and to focus only on one platform, be consistent, work out what is your best content to post, use social media for brand awareness and use social media to sell online. Table 13 gives a summary of research finding alongside the literature which shows predominately the research findings and literature concur with each other.

This research has uncovered significant findings which can influence digital marketing plans and add to literature. Evidence has shown social media is an effective tool for entrepreneurs to network and as a marketing tool. The contribution of this study has confirmed behaviours on social media has changed during the pandemic Covid-19 and most of these changes has impacted on businesses in a positive way i.e. increase of revenue, followers, video, live, contacts and learning. These findings contribute to our understanding of the changing behaviours within social media and provides insights to the impact of these changes within the business setting. There is evidence to show the model, 3 stages to entrepreneurial networking on social media, has significant value to entrepreneurs and literature. The findings provided insights into how entrepreneurs get to know each other (social relationship), share (social capital) and do business (social interaction).

Research Findings				
Research Objective 1 & 3	Findings	Literature	Literature via Findings	Source
Objective 1 - change of behaviour, if any	Increases level of social media interaction	Globally social media grew by 13.5% compared to 2020 which led to more interaction.	Agrees	We are Social (2021)
	Rate of posting increased	None found to date		
Objective 3 - specific change	Posting times	Devices changed due to low commuting to work which seen a change of times for users been on social media	Agrees	Deloitte (2021b)
	Use of video and going live grew	Use of live streaming grow and customer seen face behind the business which encouraged online selling	Agrees	Zote (2021)
	Shift from selling to supporting	Through live/videos entrepreneurs shared their fears and struggles instead of selling. This in resulted into shopping local	Agrees	Zote (2021)
	Competitions and special offers declined slightly	Known as content trustworthiness seen as a positive engagement among customers	Disagrees	Cao et al., (2021)
	Followers and interactions grew on the platforms LinkedIn and Instagram	None found to date		
	Increase of closed groups on Facebook	Closed groups on Facebook are good as the customers who are members interested in the product/service business is selling . However you need to know them to include which can limited your catchment	Agrees	Susanto, (2021)
	Demand to connect with each other	Social media connection globally	Agrees	Olanrewaju, <i>et al.</i> (2020)

		Social media platform easy to network on	Agrees	Shwartz-Asher, et al (2020)
Research Objective 2				
Drive of change or lack of	Selling online	Facebook revenue grew by 25%	Agrees	Chen (2021)
		US 56% small businesses using social media to sell	Agrees	Wess, (2021)
		Trading online voucher supporting businesses to sell online increased from 50% to 90% which encouraged businesses to trade online or improved their trading online	Agrees	Local Enterprise Office, (2020)
		Digital marketing became the tool of communication with social media being the driving force, therefore bringing a shift to online buying from users	Agrees	Deloitte, (2021a)
	Engagement	Suggests key driver is sharing content not more engagement	Disagrees	Cao et al., 2021 & Ham et al., (2019)
	More branding	Brand awareness was also considered a driver	Agrees	Kwon et at., 2021
	More followers, views & engagements	States engagement as an important tool for facilitating engagement	Agrees	Jamali & Abolhassani, (2006)
Research Objective 4				
Impact of change	More interactions	Social media as a two-way communication supporting interactions and agrees with findings	Agrees	Olanrewaju et al., (2020)
	More revenue	Over 56% of small businesses in the US are using social media for their business and have seen revenue growth despite the pandemic	Agrees	Wess, 2021

Table 4.10 Summary of research findings and literature

Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the changing behaviors within social media during the pandemic in relation to Irish Female Entrepreneurs. The aim of the research was to explore current social media use of female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs from a business perspective. The research aimed to uncover if the Covid-19 crisis brought any changes in the social media use of female entrepreneurs, what specific behaviours changed (if any) and to assess the impact of current practice on business performance. The social media platforms investigated were: LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

The specific research objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify if there was a change of behaviour
2. Identify the factors that drove or pre-empted changes
3. Explore the specific changed behaviours (if any)
4. Evaluate the impact of changes/or lack of changes on business performance
5. Formulate recommendations on social media use for future business growth and development

Two important themes emerged from this research: entrepreneurs use social media for networking (professional development and based on findings emotional support) and marketing. While the literature explored what was happening in social media for entrepreneurs before, during and after the pandemic (with limited literature after the pandemic due to the timeline) evidence showed from the research findings how Irish female entrepreneurs pivoted their businesses to survive and thrive during one of, if not the most, challenging obstacle in their business to date.

This chapter will present the final conclusions of the study and key recommendations.

5.2 Summary of the Main Findings

Summary of the main findings will be presented aligned to the research objectives.

5.2.1 Research Objective 1 & 3: Change of behaviour & specific change

This study showed a change of behaviour did occur within social media during the pandemic. The specific changes of behaviour were; increase levels of interaction, posting rate, posting times, the use of videos and going live on pages grew, a shift from selling to educating customers, increase of followers on LinkedIn and Instagram and competitions declined. While it is too early to tell if these changes will still be present in businesses within 12 months, these changes have impacted on businesses in a positive way during the pandemic.

5.2.2 Research Objective 2: Factors that drove or pre-empted changes

The primary main factors that drove change during the pandemic were the need to connect with people, new and existing, and to sell online. The findings reported here shed new light on this need to connect at a deeper and more open level of communication among entrepreneurs. The barriers which was previously felt in reaching out to people inside, and specially outside, their networks was seen to disappear. LinkedIn became a “kinder” platform for entrepreneurs to connect, where the sharing of knowledge and experience was rapidly expanding. In addition, the loss of face to face sales drove the change for entrepreneurs to sell online which was not surprising. The insights gained from this study show evidence of entrepreneurs using social media to sell products and services who never had, nor did not push sales previously online before the pandemic. Entrepreneurs reported huge learning in the process of setting up an online business, through social media and/or websites, which were largely supported financially by the Local Enterprises Offices Trading online Vouchers.

The secondary factor that drove change during the pandemic were the need for brand awareness, more engagement, more followers, more views and more interactions. Entrepreneurs approach to these changes, it was suggested, was made easier due to the free time while in lockdown and not traveling for work or family life.

5.2.3 Research Objective 4: Impact of change or lack of change

The most obvious finding to emerge in relation to the impact of change during the pandemic was the research finding which reported 82% of Irish female entrepreneurs stated their business to be in a better place now than before the pandemic. This was due to: increase of revenue, more opportunities available, target market (customer) defined and some entrepreneurs changed markets for their businesses. This research finding is surprising as during one of the most challenging time for businesses, Irish female entrepreneurs reported their businesses was flourishing.

Another significant finding that emerged from the research was the need for businesses to choose a platform suitable to target their customers and potential customers. This target approach focuses businesses' on their customer personas otherwise the posts, while taking time to design, have less of an impact. By using a platform which the targeted customers use businesses can see an impact of more active and engagements from their customers.

5.2.4 Research Objective 5: Recommendations on social media use for future business growth and development

The key research findings has led to the following recommendation:

1. Knowing your audience (customer) is vital and matching to a target social media platform provides more of an impact for activity and engagements. Focus on executing well on one platform is much better than using three platforms which could dilute the message across a number of platforms.
2. Social media can increase brand awareness
3. Being consistent when post
4. Social media is an effective tool for selling online
5. Measure which content works best, and use as a learning tool
6. Entrepreneurs can use social media effectively for networking, social relations and social interactions.

5.3 Further Research

There is a gap in literature on Irish female entrepreneurs and in relation to social media. However, this provides vast potential for future research which would bridge the gap in literature. The following warrants further exploration:

1. A broader study to include an gender comparison so the knowledge and experiences can be shared across industry sectors
2. To expand the research to include across more social media platforms
3. Explore the impacted of the pandemic on social media within 24 months with the view in comparing the results with these research findings.
4. To examine how entrepreneurs network and compare the findings to the theoretical framework put forward in this research.

Several questions still remain to be answered in relation to how businesses will use what they learnt during the pandemic in social media. In addition while funding has been given to entrepreneurs to support online selling with new ecommerce websites it remains to be seen if entrepreneurs can develop the capabilities to harness an know ecommerce website to sell in the future. The question on how entrepreneurs network in Ireland and further afield and specially females warrants further research.

5.4 Contribution to Research to Social Media and Entrepreneurs

This study has the potential to make an important contribution to Irish female entrepreneurs in relation to social media and in doing so bridge the literature gap. Significantly, this research highlights the successes Irish female entrepreneurs have experienced and the challenges still present. While the study only explored four social media platforms and how it impacted on businesses, there are additional considerations such as external factors such technology and digital enablement equipment each Irish female entrepreneurs had in their business's and the WIFI availability. Further research is warranted and possibly open a discussion on issues around technology (infrastructure, capabilities etc) which may be a barrier for Irish female entrepreneurs to reach a global platform. Conversely even with this barrier this research has uncovered social media is an effective tool for entrepreneurs both for networking and marketing. This research contributes to existing knowledge of social media by providing evidence of how the behaviours have changed and how this

has impacted on businesses. Twitter (supportive) and LinkedIn (kinder) changed their behaviours which may suited female entrepreneurs more. There was a high use of videos and going live, which puts the entrepreneurs in front of their customer and again this may suit female entrepreneurs more. For those who embraced these two behaviours changes have seen growth and positive changes within their businesses.

In light of these findings it would be interesting to compare the model 3Stages to Entrepreneurial Networking on Social Media within a male and female entrepreneurial environment to test the model. It would be important to distinguish between males and females entrepreneurs findings and compare the findings. Several questions still remain to be answered one being if entrepreneurs have the knowledge and time to update their new ecommerce website, which was part funded by Local Enterprise Office Trading Online voucher, and keep the high levels of interaction on social media or will this become another cost for the business. Another interesting question remains unanswered, will customers continue purchasing online or will they return to the retail when it is safe to do so (in relation to Covid-19). This issue remains intriguing, one which could be usefully explored in further research.

5.5 Limitations

Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some insight into Irish female entrepreneurs' businesses in relation to social media, during a time of significant global change. Although the current study is based on a small sample of Irish female entrepreneurs the findings suggest there are mixed results on the successes on social media depending on business product/service. It would be interesting to explore the factors that supported the more successful Irish female entrepreneurs and such insights could be used to understand the less successful strategies seen. To enhance this research even more it would be interesting to widen the population to Irish female entrepreneurs who are not just part of a network.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The Participant Information Sheet (pilot text)

Participant Information Sheet (pilot text)

Research (working) Title: An Exploration into changing behaviours within social media during the pandemic. A study of Irish Female Entrepreneurs.

Researcher: Anne Conlon

Supervisors: Dr Gabriela Gliga and Dr Janine McGinn

Research Disclosure: This research has not been commissioned by any organisation or agency and the research findings will primarily be presented to Atlantic Technology University examiners. The final thesis will be published in the public domain with the Atlantic Technology University Library and the research findings may also be disseminated via academic routes such as conferences or academic research papers. The researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are invited to take part in the study by completing a survey and potentially these findings might be mentioned at other speaking events.

Introduction to the Study: The purpose of this research is to explore current social media use of female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs. The social media channels being investigated are: LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The study aims to uncover if the Covid 19 crisis brought any changes in the social media use of female entrepreneurs, what specific behaviours changed (if any) and to assess the impact of current practice on business performance.

The specific **research objectives** of the study are to:

1. Identify if there was a change of behaviour
2. Identify the factors that drove or pre-empted changes
3. Explore the specific changed behaviours (if any)

4. Evaluate the impact of changes/or lack of changes on business performance
5. Formulate recommendations on social media use for future business growth and development

What is expected of participants?

The role of each participants will be to: read this document (Participant Information Sheet), consent to taking part in the study by completing the Informed Consent Form and answer the survey questions, which will take approximately 10 minutes.

Compensation and benefits

There is no compensation offered to any of the participants. This study is covered by standard institutional indemnity insurance and nothing will restrict or curtail the participants' rights.

While there are no direct benefits for the research participants taking part in the study, the researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of the three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are invited to take part in the. Consequently, the research participants may benefit from insights into the use of social media platforms by female entrepreneurs/ founders in Ireland.

Risks

We do not anticipate any risks in participating in this research study. Data from this research will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be available to anyone but me, my academic supervisors and external examiner and reported only as a collective combined total. The data collected will not be shared for commercial purposes. The data files will be password protected, held in a secure environment and all digital records will be deleted once the MSc. examination process is complete, in accordance with Atlantic Technology University Data Protection Policy.

Should you experience any distress arising from participating in this research, please contact Anne Conlon, at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie or, should you wish, my supervisor Dr Gabriela Gliga at gabriela.gliga@gmit.ie.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawing / Stopping the Study:

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from completion of the study without explanation.

Survey: You the right to withdraw at any point during survey completion and you can stop the survey at any time. After completing the survey, you will be presented with the option: **SUBMIT MY ANSWERS**. Since all answers are anonymised, once you answers are submitted, withdrawal is no longer possible, as no individual answers can be traced to any respondent.

Interviews: If you wish to withdraw, please contact the researcher, Anne Conlon, at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie, within one month of initial participation. Once the data analysis phase of research has commenced, it is no longer possible to withdraw.

Confidentiality

No identifying factors relating to participants will be in evidence in the final thesis report and/or any disseminated research (i.e. conference papers and/or presentations, publications, etc.). All data will be anonymised; no names or contact details will be asked in this study.

Exclusion from participation

As the research focuses on a specific group: female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs, the study will exclude all other participants.

Survey:

Please only complete the survey if you are a female entrepreneur/founder of Irish SMEs.

The link to the survey is shared on three different closed Facebook groups and consequently you might see the invitation to complete the survey more than once.

Please only complete this survey only once.

Permission

This research has been assessed and has received approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee, Atlantic Technology University.

Further Information

If you require any further information or have any questions about the study, your participation in the study and your rights, please contact me, Anne Conlon at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie / 087 2466896 or my supervisor, Gabriela Gliga at gabriela.gliga@gmit.ie.

Consent

If, after reading this Participant Information Sheet you are happy to proceed, please complete and the Consent Form and you will then be taken to the survey questions.

PLEASE CLICK HERE TO ACCESS THE CONSENT FORM

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form (Survey)

My name is Anne Conlon and I am a student in Atlantic Technology University, studying a Masters in Science Digital Media and Marketing. This study is conducted according to the ethical guidelines set out by Galway Mayo Institute of Technology.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may decline to take part or leave blank any questions you do not wish to answer. Your answers will remain confidential. Data from this research will not be available to anyone but me, my academic supervisors and external examiner and reported only as a collective combined total.

By consenting to participate in this online survey, you are also consenting to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format.

The data will be held in an anonymous format until this research project is completed and the MSc. examination process is complete (a maximum of 9 months).

Research Disclosure: This research has not been commissioned by any organisation or agency and the research findings will primarily be presented to Galway Mayo Institute of Technology examiners. The final thesis will be published in the public domain with the Atlantic Technology University Library and the research findings may also be disseminated via academic routes such as conferences or academic research papers. The researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of the three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are invited to take part in the study and potentially these findings might be mentioned at other speaking events.

I Anne Conlon am a student on the Master of Science in Digital Media and Marketing 2021 programme, which I am doing on part-time basis to further my knowledge and experience in this area. I undertake to retain confidentiality of all data emergent from this research and I guarantee that I will not use any information disclosed to me by participants in this research for any purpose other than to further the research objectives stated in the Participant Information Sheet.

Thank you for your time.

Anne Conlon

Please tick the relevant boxes as appropriate:

I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* about this research study.

Yes No

I understand that taking part in this research study is voluntary.

Yes No

I understand that I can withdraw or stop the completion of the survey at any point, before submitting my answers.

Yes No

I understand that not participating or withdrawing will not affect my legal rights.

Yes No

I consent to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format, as specified above.

Yes No

I am aware of who to contact if I have queries/concerns about my participation in this study. Yes No

I consent to take part in this research study.

Yes No

[PLEASE CLICK HERE TO COMPLETE THE SURVEY](#)

Please tick the relevant boxes as appropriate:

I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* about this research study.

Yes No

I understand that taking part in this research study is voluntary.

Yes No

I understand that I can leave any questions unanswered and I can stop the interview at any point.

Yes No

I understand I can withdraw from the study within one month of initial participation.

Yes No

I understand that not participating or withdrawing will not affect my legal rights.

Yes No

I consent to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format, as specified above.

Yes No

I am aware of who to contact if I have queries/concerns about my participation in this study. Yes No

I consent to take part in this research study.

Yes No

Signature of Research Participant: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Survey Questions

Survey Questions

1. Are you female? Yes No

2. Are you an entrepreneur or founder of a business? Yes No

3. Is your business based in Ireland? Yes No

4. In relation to your business social media platforms, which social media channels does your business use? (Multi choice answers)
Facebook
Instagram
LinkedIn
Twitter
Other (please specify)

5. Which of these is your main social media platform? (1 choice answer)
Facebook
Instagram
LinkedIn
Twitter
Other (please specify)

6. How would you rate your business interaction on social media before the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic (March 2020)?
Poor, Fair, Good, Very good, Excellent

7.

<u>Posts</u>	<u>Time</u>
A few times a day	7am – 9am
Daily	9am – 1pm
Every second day	1pm – 5pm
Weekly	5pm – 10pm
Other (open box)	10pm – 7am

Did you:

Use videos?	Yes	No
Use 'Live' on any social media platforms	Yes	No
Post special offers?	Yes	No
Post competitions?	Yes	No
Other (please specify)		

8. How would you rate your business' interaction on social media one year on from the start of Covid 19 pandemic (April - May 2021)?

Poor, Fair, Good, Very good, Excellent

9. Now, a year on from the start of the Covid 19 pandemic, what are your behaviours around your main social media platform?

<u>Posts</u>	<u>Time</u>
A few times a day	7am – 9am
Daily	9am – 1pm
Every second day	1pm – 5pm
Weekly	5pm – 10pm
Other (open box)	10pm – 7am

Do you:

Use videos?	Yes	No
Use 'Live' on any social media platforms?	Yes	No
Post special offers?	Yes	No
Post competitions?	Yes	No
Other (please specify)		

10. What drove these changes, if any? (open box)

11. What impact did the changes make on your social media since March 2020?

(multi choice answers)

More:

Revenue

Engagement

Followers

Sharing

Interaction

Visitors to website

Views

Less

Revenue

Engagement

Followers

Sharing

Interaction

Visitors to website

Views

Any other changes? (open box)

12. Did you set up a closed page for your customers in the past yes (since March 2020?)

Yes

No

13. If yes, what is the purpose of this page? (Multi answers)

Promote your products and services

Offer support from you to your customers

Community of support

Notices from the business

Live talks

Other (please specify)

14. Looking back, since the start of the Covid 19 pandemic (since March 2020) has the number of your social media followers grown?

Facebook

Yes

No

Instagram

Yes

No

LinkedIn

Yes

No

Twitter

Yes

No

What do you think drove this? (open comment box)

15. Is the content you share on each social media platform different? Yes No

Please explain your answer. (open comment box)

16. Do you run competitions on your

Facebook Yes No

Instagram Yes No

LinkedIn Yes No

Twitter Yes No

17. If you answered yes to Q 17, does it increase your followers on...

Facebook Yes No

Instagram Yes No

LinkedIn Yes No

Twitter Yes No

18. Has the best time of day to post changed during the Covid pandemic?

Yes No

19. If yes, what way did it change? (open comment box)

20. Have you noticed if the weather changes your interaction with your posts or stories?

Yes No

Please explain your answer. (open comment box)

21. What would you consider to be the best learning in relation to your business' social media activity in the past year (since March 2020) (open comment box)?

22. Is your business in a better place now than in March 2020?

Yes No

Please explain your answer. (open comment box)

23. Please feel free to add any other comments here in relation to any potential changes in your social media use (if any) and the impact your current practice has on your business performance (open comment box).

SUBMIT MY ANSWERS

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet – summary

Participant Information Sheet

I am Anne Conlon and I'm studying a Masters in Digital Media and Marketing in Atlantic Technology University. I'm carrying out research on the current social media use of female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs. The study aims to explore if the Covid 19 pandemic brought any changes in the way female entrepreneurs use their business social media accounts, what specific behaviours changed (if any) and to assess the impact of current practice on business performance.

The full title of the research is: *An Exploration into changing behaviours within social media during the pandemic. A study of Irish Female Entrepreneurs*. My Supervisors are Dr Gabriela Gliga and Dr Janine McGinn.

If you are interested in taking part, please complete the Informed Consent Form below and answer the survey questions, which will take approximately 6 minutes. Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from completing of the survey without explanation. No identifying factors relating to participants will be in evidence in the final thesis report and/or any disseminated research (i.e. conference papers and/or presentations, publications, etc.). All data will be anonymised; no names or contact details will be asked in this study. This research has been assessed and has received approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee, Atlantic Technology University.

If you would like to read more about this research and your participation in the study, you can access a detailed Participant Information Sheet [here](#).

If you require any further information or have any questions about the study, your participation in the study and your rights, please contact me, Anne Conlon at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie / 087 2466896 or my supervisor, Gabriela Gliga at gabriela.gliga@gmit.ie.

PLEASE CLICK HERE TO ACCESS THE CONSENT FORM

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet – full text

Participant Information Sheet

(when someone clicks through to long version)

Research (working) Title: An Exploration into changing behaviours within social media during the pandemic. A study of Irish Female Entrepreneurs.

Researcher: Anne Conlon

Supervisors: Dr Gabriela Gliga and Dr Janine McGinn

Research Disclosure: This research has not been commissioned by any organisation or agency and the research findings will primarily be presented to Galway Mayo Institute of Technology examiners. The final thesis will be published in the public domain with the Atlantic Technology University Library and the research findings may also be disseminated via academic routes such as conferences or academic research papers. The researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are invited to take part in the study by completing a survey and potentially these findings might be mentioned at other speaking events.

Introduction to the Study: The purpose of this research is to explore current social media use of female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs. The social media channels being investigated are: LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The study aims to uncover if the Covid 19 crisis brought any changes in the social media use of female entrepreneurs, what specific behaviours changed (if any) and to assess the impact of current practice on business performance.

The specific **research objectives** of the study are to:

1. Identify if there was a change of behaviour
2. Identify the factors that drove or pre-empted changes

3. Explore the specific changed behaviours (if any)
4. Evaluate the impact of changes/or lack of changes on business performance
5. Formulate recommendations on social media use for future business growth and development

What is expected of participants?

The role of each participants will be to: read this document (Participant Information Sheet), consent to taking part in the study by completing the Informed Consent Form and answer the survey questions, which will take approximately 10 minutes.

Compensation and benefits

There is no compensation offered to any of the participants. This study is covered by standard institutional indemnity insurance and nothing will restrict or curtail the participants' rights.

While there are no direct benefits for the research participants taking part in the study, the researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of the three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are invited to take part in the. Consequently, the research participants may benefit from insights into the use of social media platforms by female entrepreneurs/ founders in Ireland.

Risks

We do not anticipate any risks in participating in this research study. Data from this research will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be available to anyone but me, my academic supervisors and external examiner and reported only as a collective combined total. The data collected will not be shared for commercial purposes. The data files will be password protected, held in a secure environment and all digital records will be deleted once the MSc. examination process is complete, in accordance with Atlantic Technology University Data Protection Policy.

Should you experience any distress arising from participating in this research, please contact Anne Conlon, at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie or, should you wish, my supervisor Dr. Gabriela Gliga at gabriela.gliga@gmit.ie.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawing / Stopping the Study:

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from completion of the study without explanation.

Survey: You the right to withdraw at any point during survey completion and you can stop the survey at any time. After completing the survey, you will be presented with the option: **SUBMIT MY ANSWERS**. Since all answers are anonymised, once you answers are submitted, withdrawal is no longer possible, as no individual answers can be traced to any respondent.

Interviews: If you wish to withdraw, please contact the researcher, Anne Conlon, at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie, within one month of initial participation. Once the data analysis phase of research has commenced, it is no longer possible to withdraw.

Confidentiality

No identifying factors relating to participants will be in evidence in the final thesis report and/or any disseminated research (i.e. conference papers and/or presentations, publications, etc.). All data will be anonymised; no names or contact details will be asked in this study.

Exclusion from participation

As the research focuses on a specific group: female entrepreneurs/founders of Irish SMEs, the study will exclude all other participants.

Survey:

Please only complete the survey if you are a female entrepreneur/founder of Irish SMEs.

The link to the survey is shared on three different closed Facebook groups and consequently you might see the invitation to complete the survey more than once.

Please only complete this survey only once.

Permission

This research has been assessed and has received approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee, Atlantic Technology University.

Further Information

If you require any further information or have any questions about the study, your participation in the study and your rights, please contact me, Anne Conlon at anne.conlon@research.gmit.ie / 087 2466896 or my supervisor, Dr Gabriela Gliga at gabriela.gliga@gmit.ie.

Consent

If, after reading this Participant Information Sheet you are happy to proceed, please complete and the Consent Form and you will then be taken to the survey questions.

PLEASE CLICK HERE TO ACCESS THE CONSENT FORM

Appendix F: Informed Consent Form (Survey) – summary

Informed Consent Form

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may decline to take part or leave blank any questions you do not wish to answer. Your answers will remain confidential. Data from this research will not be available to anyone but me, my academic supervisors and external examiner and reported only as a collective combined total. By consenting to participate in this online survey, you are also consenting to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format. The data will be held in an anonymous format until this research project is completed and the MSc. examination process is complete (a maximum of 9 months).

I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* about this research study.

I understand that taking part in this research study is voluntary, that I can withdraw or stop the completion of the survey at any point, before submitting my answers, that not participating or withdrawing will not affect my legal rights. I consent to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format, as specified above. I am aware of who to contact if I have queries/concerns about my participation in this study.

Yes/No

Appendix G: Informed Consent Form (Survey) – full text

Informed Consent Form (Survey)

My name is Anne Conlon and I am a student in Atlantic Technology University, studying a Masters in Science Digital Media and Marketing. This study is conducted according to the ethical guidelines set out by Galway Mayo Institute of Technology.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may decline to take part or leave blank any questions you do not wish to answer. Your answers will remain confidential. Data from this research will not be available to anyone but me, my academic supervisors and external examiner and reported only as a collective combined total.

By consenting to participate in this online survey, you are also consenting to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format.

The data will be held in an anonymous format until this research project is completed and the MSc. examination process is complete (a maximum of 9 months).

Research Disclosure: This research has not been commissioned by any organisation or agency and the research findings will primarily be presented to Galway Mayo Institute of Technology examiners. The final thesis will be published in the public domain with the Atlantic Technology University Library and the research findings may also be disseminated via academic routes such as conferences or academic research papers. The researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of the three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are invited to take part in the study and potentially these findings might be mentioned at other speaking events.

I Anne Conlon am a student on the Master of Science in Digital Media and Marketing 2021 programme, which I am doing on part-time basis to further my

knowledge and experience in this area. I undertake to retain confidentiality of all data emergent from this research and I guarantee that I will not use any information disclosed to me by participants in this research for any purpose other than to further the research objectives stated in the Participant Information Sheet.

Thank you for your time.

Anne Conlon

Please tick the relevant boxes as appropriate:

I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* about this research study.

Yes No

I understand that taking part in this research study is voluntary.

Yes No

I understand that I can withdraw or stop the completion of the survey at any point, before submitting my answers.

Yes No

I understand that not participating or withdrawing will not affect my legal rights.

Yes No

I consent to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format, as specified above.

Yes No

I am aware of who to contact if I have queries/concerns about my participation in this study. Yes No

I consent to take part in this research study.

Yes No

[PLEASE CLICK HERE TO COMPLETE THE SURVEY](#)

Appendix H: Informed Consent Form (Interview)

Informed Consent Form (Interview)

My name is Anne Conlon and I am a student in Atlantic Technology University, studying a Masters in Science Digital Media and Marketing. This study is conducted according to the ethical guidelines set out by Galway Mayo Institute of Technology.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may decline to take part or leave any questions answered. Your answers will remain confidential. Data from this research will not be available to anyone but me, my academic supervisors and external examiner and reported only as a collective combined total.

By consenting to participate in this interview, you are also consenting to the possible publication of this combined data in an anonymous format.

The data will be held in an anonymous format until this research project is completed and the MSc. examination process is complete (a maximum of 9 months).

Research Disclosure: This research has not been commissioned by any organisation or agency and the research findings will primarily be presented to Galway Mayo Institute of Technology examiners. The final thesis will be published in the public domain with the Atlantic Technology University Library and the research findings may also be disseminated via academic routes such as conferences or academic research papers. The researcher will share a summary of the main findings on the closed Facebook pages of three Women-in-Business Networks, whose members are also invited to take part in the study by completing a survey and potentially these findings might be mentioned at other speaking events.

I Anne Conlon am a student on the Master of Science in Digital Media and Marketing 2021 programme, which I am doing on part-time basis to further my knowledge and experience in this area. I undertake to retain confidentiality of all data emergent from this research and I guarantee that I will not use any information disclosed to me by participants in this research for any purpose other than to further the research objectives stated in the Participant Information Sheet.

Thank you for your time.

Anne Conlon

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

The interview will be open and will ask respondents to discuss their own experience and observations around social media business behaviours in the last year, since March 2020.

Q1. Reflecting on the events of the last year, since March 2020, what do you think is happening in the social media landscape in Ireland, from the perspective of small and medium businesses?

Why?

How?

Probe:

Can you give me examples of....? / Can you explain...?

Q2. What do you think caused these changes, if any?

Probe:

Can you give me examples of....? / Can you explain...?

Q3. Do you think there was an impact on business performance?

Why?

How?

Probe:

Can you give me examples of....? / Can you explain...?

Q4. Based on your experience and industry observations since March 2020, what would you advise other business owners to do in relation to social media management for their business?

Why?

How?

Probe:

Can you give me examples of....? / Can you explain...?

Q5. What do you think will happen when we return to normal?

Why?

How?

NOTE: *Other similar questions might probe findings from the survey data.*

Appendix J: Example 1 of Data Collection on Microsoft Word

What drove these changes, if any?
No major changes - my business was already online
I was worn out and stressed so chose to engage less as needing to post daily was creating stress.
More time
Fatigue. I am online for far more hours than before the pandemic, so I have less time to offer
Felt we needed to provide extra support to people
LinkedIn became a more social place
Progression of my business and social media has become an even bigger aspect of business
Time to focus online, less need to travel
I wasn't getting out & about, this is my shop window
My business stalled, I had to pivot. I took my work online and created a new website and the associated SM needed to support that.
I learned more about social through LEO courses and watching other businesses
Social media algorithm change, It seems impossible to get noticed And... social media fatigue

Appendix K: Example 2 of Data Collection on Microsoft Word

What do you think drove this?
More people online, embracing non face to face interaction
People browsing more
I had the free time to spend on it , plus I got training from Leo and women in business coffee mornings , Instagram training from moss marketing and support from other local business women.
People are spending more time online in general.
More people online
People had more time..less distractions. More people on their screens.
Followers naturally increase over time if you are consistent and posting the correct content
More on line shopping
Regular instagram posting
More interaction from me, more people on line
More people online
My increased engagement and my increased online presence and visibility
Being active and interacting on the platform
More interaction by myself on these platforms
The increase is not really significant and has little to do with business
Constant engagement
My improved social media presence, people exercising more and finding physical issues they hadn't realised existed and needing treatment for them so lots of people using SM to source this.
A mixture of more thoughtful engagement on my part and the fact that people had more time to engage with the content due to the pandemic.
Renovation photos
Not sure , I think while my engagement has been less it's been very authentic
INTERESTING / RELEVANT CONTENT
Sharing and engagement

Appendix L: Example 3 of Data Collection on Microsoft Word

Please explain your answer.
I tailor the same message to the 'vibe' of each platform
I just posted what I felt relevant at the time
It's more client focused and awareness of how difficult times we are in and more supportive
The content is not different but the message to explain it / introduction might be. This is to suit the different audiences each type of social media draws.
LinkedIn is more professional and targeted at business. Fb, Instagram, twitter is more for the everyday person
Each social media is a different target market so content needs to be different to deliver message and CTA.
Tailored for each audience - Instagram is more engagement focused and LinkedIn would be more education and promotional.
Both platforms are directed at selling one product.
Tailored for each platform
Twitter personal - LinkedIn business
The content is the same but the wording changes to suit
Not massively but I do edit the text to ensure the context is correct for the platform being used. I also may post something on one but not post it on another. That said most of what I share is similar enough in messaging.
Different audience on each platform. I write in a slightly different tone. Pictures and grid v important on Instagram. Not so much on others.
I engage in chats on twitter
I try to change content and do a lot of my own posts designed on Canva.
People like to see videos and see you as a person not only a business
My IG and FB are linked so whatever goes on IG automatically posts to FB too. My main client base use IG so that is my main focus.