Digital natives and information sharing on social media platforms: implications for managers

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Abstract

Digital natives are increasingly using social media platforms to share information with their peers. As such, they have become an important market segment for marketing managers who want to capture and retain them through their social media activities.

In this study, we examine how trust and ease of use of social media platforms amongst digital natives' virtual communities in South Africa influence information sharing with their peers. In addition, we focus on the mediating role of social media use intention in these peer-to-peer relationships. Further, we discuss the implications of this study for managers.

We collected data from 150 respondents in South Africa and used Smart PLS software version 2.0 for variance-based partial least squares structured equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to analyse our data. Drawing on the Use and Gratification Theory, we demonstrate that social media ease of use is a significant antecedent and tool that influences digital natives' desire to use social media for information sharing.

The insights from this study suggest that managers need to ensure that they use social media platforms that are user-friendly if they want to attract and retain digital natives.

This study makes a significant contribution to the social media use in a management context by providing practical recommendations to marketing decision-makers.

Key phrases

digital natives; ease of use; information sharing; management; social media; trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Information sharing on social media platforms amongst digital natives is rapidly increasing (Bilgihan, Kandanpully & Peng 2014:350; Mäntymäki & Riemer 2014:210). Amongst these social media platforms are Blogs, Chat Rooms, Facebook, Foursquare, Google Wave, Linkedin, MedicalMingle, MySpace, Skype, Twitter and YouTube (Castronovo & Huang 2012:123; Ku, Cheng & Zhang 2013:571; Lin, Fan & Chau 2014:595). These platforms are being leveraged off to allow individuals to create, share and seek content, as well as to communicate and collaborate with one another (Kim, Jeong & Lee 2010:219-220; Xian & Gretzel 2010:179). In addition, the platforms provide their users with a profile, a friend list, a chat option and the ability to send private or public messages, create events, post comments and receive feedback (Corritore, Kracher & Wiedenbeck 2003:741).

Undoubtedly, the increased use of social media has positioned it as a powerful source of information that has impacted on how communities create and sustain social relationships (Lin *et al.* 2014:595; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead 2010:20). As a result, research on social media networks has grown substantially.

However, most of these studies have mainly focused on exploring the determinants of knowledge sharing via employee weblogs (Lin, Hung & Chen 2009:930), news sharing in social media (Lee & Ma 2012:332), the effects of trust, security and privacy in social networking (Shin 2010:428), intentions to use social media in organizing and taking vacation trips and for tips and alert stories (Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño & Díaz-Armas 2011:641; Purcell *et al.* 2010:20), and e-loyalty through travel related online social networks (Barreda, Nusair, Bilgihan & Okumus 2013:49).

Understanding the implications of digital natives' information sharing on social media platforms is important for managers who are eager to achieve their social media objectives and to improve their marketing performance.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Despite the attention that social media has garnered from academics and practitioners, there is a scarcity of studies that investigates the issue of digital natives' information sharing on social media platforms and discuss the implications thereof for managers using the South African context. Moreover, prior research does not extensively explore the role of trust and ease of use of social media platforms as antecedents of information sharing. Furthermore, most of the studies that have attempted to investigate the relationships between the

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aforementioned variables have been conducted in developed countries (Parra-López *et al.* 2011:645; Purcell *et al.* 2010:2) or the newly developed countries of Asia (Lee & Ma 2012:331; Lin *et al.* 2009:933). Therefore, research that investigates the influence of trust and ease of use on social media users' use intention and information sharing in the context of emerging markets remains scant.

This paper seeks to fulfill the following objectives:

▪ to examine the influence of social media trust and ease of use on information sharing among the digital natives in South Africa;

▪ to present an empirical investigation of the mediating role of social media use intention in these relationships;

▪ to apply the Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) to this research context;

▪ to discuss the implications that this study has for managers who are eager on attracting and retaining digital natives through their social media activities.

We have structured the rest of our paper as follows: first we present our literature review followed by our conceptual model and hypotheses, and then, we outline our research methodology. Finally, our analysis and findings are discussed as well as research implications, limitations and directions for future research.

3.   LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1   Digital natives' virtual community

Digital natives, also known as Generation Y or the *"Net generation"* (Prensky 2001:2), tend to be technologically savvy and are consumers of social media through such online activities as text messaging, social networks, podcasts, and blogs (Duffett 2015:342; Quan-Haase & Young 2010:352; Xiang & Gretzel 2010:180-181). They are the first generation that was born in a world permeated by Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) (Mäntymäki & Riemer 2014:211).

In the United States of America (USA), digital natives are regarded as an economically robust cohort with $200 billion in annual expenditures (Djamasbi, Siegel & Tullis 2010:307).

The Oxygenz Country Report (2010:8) reveals that digital natives represent 22.9% of South Africa's total population. These individuals have grown, learnt and been exposed to the rest of the world during the first 20 years of democracy in South Africa and as a result, they tend

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to be very familiar with their human rights and the changes taking place in the society. They are creative, "utterly fluent and comfortable with computers and internet technology" (Kotler & Armstrong 2013:86).

In addition, it has been shown that digital natives in South Africa prefer Facebook and Black Berry Messenger (BBM) as social media platforms compared to others. Although Mxit tends to be popular in this market segment, the digital natives' loyalty toward this social media platform is low. For example, digital natives in South Africa spend less than one hour a day on Mxit compared with up to five hours a day on Facebook (Saunders 2011:1).

In recent years, the use of social media platforms by digital natives has been continuously increasing and social media platforms have emerged as innovative relationship-building tools in both developed and emerging markets (Bilgihan *et al.* 2014:350; Dateling & Bick 2013:54; Zhang & Mao 2008:788). Due to the critical role that social media platforms are playing, issues such as trust have become relevant in determining the users' desire to use these platforms and share information with other social media users (Fogel & Nehmad 2009:154; Corritore *et al.* 2003:737).

3.2 Social media trust

Corritore *et al.* (2003:740) define online trust as "an attitude of confident expectation in an online situation of risk that one's vulnerabilities will not be exploited". In this study trust means that social media platform users can take risks without being taken advantage of by other virtual community members.

Hsu, Ju, Yen & Chang (2007:157) assert that in a virtual community, trust is built upon obtainable economic benefit In addition, they identify other factors such as the maturity of the community, infrastructure and sound managerial mechanisms as important in building trusted personal and commercial relationships in virtual communities. According to Cyr, Hassanein, Head & Ivanov (2007:46), in a virtual community, trust is vital to the exchange of information amongst members and it tends to be dependent on shared values and effective communication.

3.3 Social media ease of use

The word "ease" is defined as "freedom from difficulty or great effort" (Choi & Totten 2012:1526). Social media ease of use explains the user's perception of the amount of effort required to utilize the social media platform or the extent to which a user believes that using a social media platform will be effortless (Teo, Luan & Sing 2008:267).

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Mpinganjira (2014:607) found that online platforms that allow for ease of navigation tend to positively influence customer's level of shopping enjoyment. In their study on the acceptance of mobile SMS advertising by young Chinese consumers, Zhang & Mao (2008:790) suggest that virtual community members' perceptions of ease of use of advertising messages were positively related to their engagement in the actions implied by the messages.

3.4   Social media use intention

The extant literature on the Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) tends to support the rationale that use intention leads to the actual use of technologies (for example, Teo *et al*. 2008:267; Zhan & Mao 2008:789; Fusilier & Durlabhji 2005:234; Dasgupta, Granger & MCGarry 2000:89). The validity of this claim has subsequently been tested in social media context by Lee & Ma (2012:336). Following the supporting empirical evidence from Lee & Ma (2012:336), this study therefore utilizes "social media use intention" as a dependent construct. In addition, Teo *et al.* (2008:268) assert that use intention is also a practical measure of the actual use.

However, despite the growing research on social media, little is still known about the digital native virtual community's motivation to use social media in South Africa. Therefore, an investigation of the extent to which the social media use intention actually impacts on digital natives' information sharing with their peers in South Africa is warranted.

3.5   Social media information sharing

An essential part of being involved in social media is to receive or disseminate information (Wasko & Faraj 2000:162). Receiving information is simply reading the ongoing conversation in the community whilst disseminating information means posting conversation, either in direct response to another member's post or simply starting a new topic in the community by posting new commentaries.

We define information sharing as the degree to which digital natives' virtual community has access to one another's information considered of mutual and beneficial interest (Bonds-Raacke & Raccke 2010:170). This information includes sharing each other's profile information such as photos, contact details and discussions on topical or current issues of interest to the parties (Lee & Ma 2012:334).

4. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Use and Gratification Theory (UGT)

The Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) is rooted in the communications literature and is based on the premise that people tend to search for those media that will help them achieve ultimate gratification (Whiting & Williams 2013:367). It explains what social and psychological needs motivate audiences to select particular media channels and content choices, as well as the subsequent attitudinal and behavioural effects (Diddi & LaRose 2006:195; Quan-Haase & Young 2010:352). Because of its origins in communications, UGT is considered as one of the most effective theories for identifying motivations underlying media use in mass communication studies (LaRose & Eastin 2004:360).

The theory argues that people are aware of their social and psychological needs, and actively seek the particular media that fulfill their communicational purposes (Armstrong & McAdams 2009:440). Current studies on social media platforms have used the UGT to better understand the extent to which users expect various needs and desires to be fulfilled by use of Facebook (for example, Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008:170; Bumgarner 2007:2), and also to explore the drivers of members' continued use intention toward these social media platforms (Ku *et al.* 2013:573).

In this study, we focus on the gratification sought and the consequence of the gratification obtained (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008:170). Gratification sought refers to the users' expectations of gratifications from a social media platform use before they have actually used it (Quan-Haase & Young 2010:351). For instance, the ease of use of the social media platform and the trust the users have in it. Gratification obtained refers to users' experience of gratifications when using a particular social media platform (Lee & Ma 2012:332-333).

Drawing from the Use and Gratification Theory and social media literature, we propose a conceptual model that empirically tests the interrelationships between social media trust, ease of use, use intention and social media information sharing. In this conceptualized model, social media trust and social media ease of use are the predictors while social media use intention is the mediator. Social media information sharing is the sole outcome variable. Figure 1 depicts this conceptualised research model. The hypothesised relationships between the research constructs will be discussed thereafter.
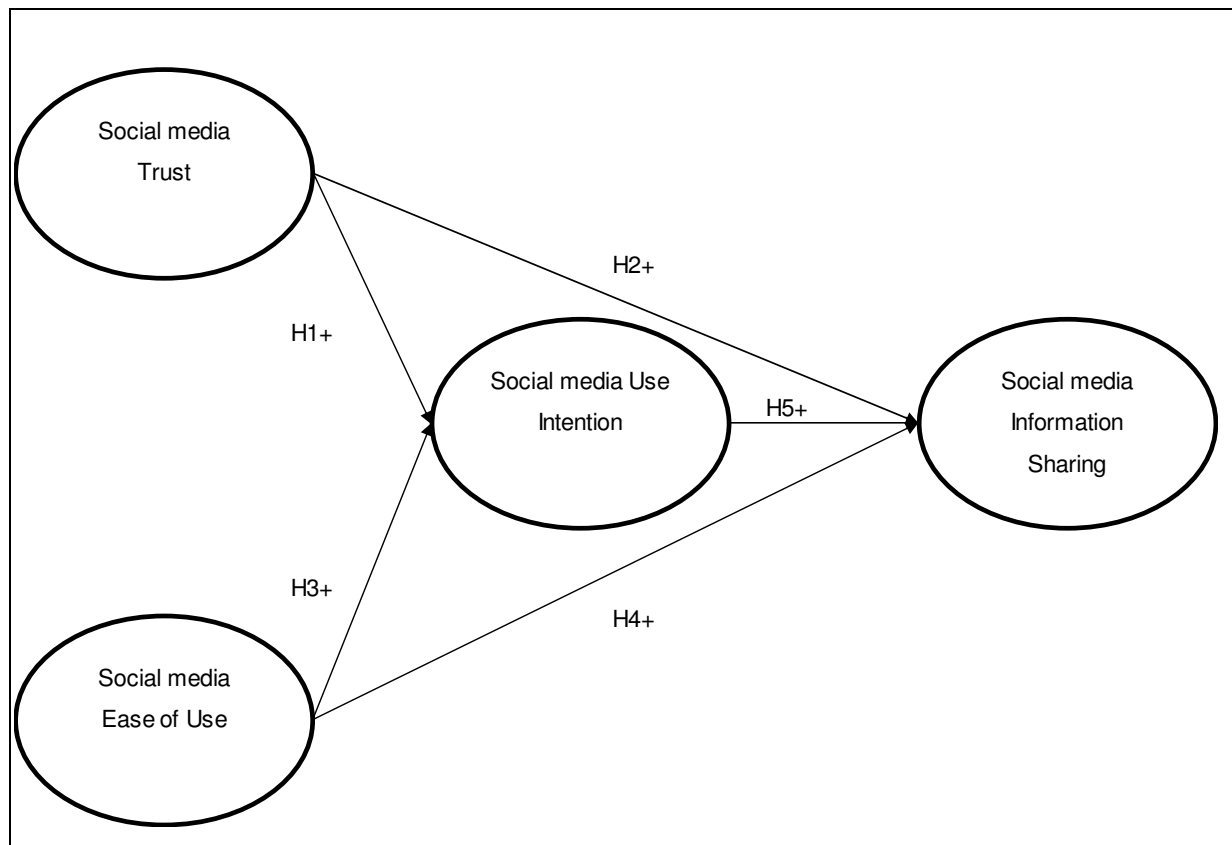
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FIGURE 1: Conceptual model

Source: Authors construction based on the findings from the literature review

4.2　Social media trust, use intention and information sharing

Definitions of trust can be found in various fields ranging from sociology, psychology to economics (Kim & Park 2013:320). Trust in social media use and information sharing is also widely covered in the literature (Corritore *et al.* 2003:738; Cyr *et al.* 2007:46; Hsu *et al.* 2007:156; Zhang & Mao 2008:793; Shin 2010:430; Whiting & Williams 2013:364). Shin (2010:430) suggests that when users have trust in a social media platform, they will be more inclined to sharing information and developing new relationships. This is because trust helps users reduce their risk perceptions when dealing with other social media platform users (van der Heijden, Verhagen & Creemers 2003:43), and makes them more comfortable sharing their personal information, which is essential for cooperative information exchange. Therefore, the higher the degree of trust the Generation Y virtual community has in a social media platform, the more they want to share information at that social media platform in order to gratify their needs.

Accordingly, drawing from the Use and Gratification Theory (UGT), it can be expected that social media trust fosters social media platform use intention and information sharing among Generation Y virtual community in South Africa. Therefore, we posit that:

H1: Trust in a social media platform will be positively associated with users' intention to use the platform.

H2: Trust in a social media platform will be positively associated with users' information sharing behaviour.

4.3   Social media ease of use, use intention and information sharing

The perceived ease of use of a particular social media platform is an important determinant of the intention to use that social media platform (Zhang & Mao 2008:791).

Thus, the better the social media platform's ease of use, the stronger the users' intention to use the platform to share information. Bonds-Raacke & Raacke (2010:170) have also supported a linkage between social media ease of use and intention to use and information sharing. We posit that:

H3: Social media platform ease of use will be positively associated with users' intention to use the platform.

H4: Social media platform ease of use will be positively associated with users' information sharing behaviour.

4.4   Social media use intention and information sharing

Drawing from the extant literature, information sharing has been found to be a motivation for using emergent virtual communities (Wasko & Faraj 2000:156). Virtual community members can either receive information or disseminate information on a social media platform (Hsu *et al.* 2007:156).

Prior evidence has indicated that information sharing is influenced by pro-social attitudes and intentions to participate in social media platforms (Constant, Sproull & Kiesler 1996:121). Therefore, we posit that:

H5: Social media platform use intention will be positively associated with users' information sharing behaviour.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Sample and data collection

This study was conducted in Gauteng, one of the nine provinces of South Africa, among 180 respondents. They represented students from two public universities of South Africa. The students who were included in the sample had to be active, registered students at the time of the data collection. A main identifier of this criterion was the student card which held each student's name and the year of registration.

From the total of 180 surveys that were distributed and completed by the students, 150 completed surveys (or 83.3 percent) were used for the data analysis and the balance of 30 surveys (16.7 percent) was discarded from the analysis as it was not fully completed and thus, it was deemed to be invalid.. The high response rate was achieved because of the fact that the questionnaire distribution and collection was done by hand.

5.2 Measurement instrument and questionnaire design

Drawing on established scales used in prior studies, we adapted our scales to reflect our research context which were all anchored by 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree to express the degree of agreement with a statement. For example, we used Herna´ndez-Ortega (2011:532)'s measures of "Social media ease of use" and "social media trust" as a basis for our measurement scales.

Our measure of "social media use intention" was altered on the basis of Lee, Xiong & Hu (2012:823)'s prior work. Lastly, our "social media information sharing" scale was modified from Bock, Zmud, Kim & Lee (2005:100). "Social media information sharing" used a five-item scale while "social media ease of use"; "Social media trust" as well as "Social media intension" all used a three-item scale in the study. The details behind each measurement items are provided in Table 1.

5.3 Profile of respondents

Table 2 provides the demographic profile of the 150 respondents. As indicated, 56.7% were male, and 43.3% were females. The majority of respondents (60.7%) were aged 25 years or younger. Most of the respondents (71.3%) were undergraduates, while more than 75% of the respondents were students at University A.

TABLE 1:   Measurement items

CONSTRUCTS	ITEMS	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (mean & standard deviation)
1. Social media trust	1. I believe I can trust the various social media	Mean = 3.238 SD = 0.537
	2. I believe social media is reliable	
	3. I believe that social media provides good service	
2. Social media ease of use	1. The various social media are (would be) easy to use	Mean = 3.453 SD = 0.743
	2. Learning to use the social media is (would be) easy for me	
	3. It is (would be) easy to use the various social media to do what I want to do	
3. Social media use intention	1. I will frequently use the social media for other things in the future	Mean = 4.215 SD = 0.634
	2. I will use the social media on a regular basis in the future	
	3. It is most likely that I will continue using the various social media for my activities	
4. Social media information sharing	1. The use of social media information sharing is good.	Mean = 4.0344 SD = 0.689
	2. The use of social media information sharing is harmful	
	3. The use of social media information sharing is an enjoyable experience	
	4. The use of social media information sharing is valuable to me	
	5. The use of social media information sharing in business is a wise move	

Source: Authors construction based on the findings from the literature review

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TABLE 2:   Sample demographics

Gender	Frequency	Gender
Male	65	43.3%
Female	85	56.7%
Total	150	100%
Age	Frequency	Percentage
≦20	12	8.0%
21-25	79	52.7%
≧ 25	59	39.3%
Total	150	100%
Academic Level	Frequency	Percentage
Undergraduate student	107	71.3%
Postgraduate student	43	28.7%
Total	150	100%
Student University	Frequency	Percentage
University A	113	75.3%
University B	37	24.7%
Total	150	100%

Source: Calculated from survey results

6.   RESULTS

6.1   Smart PLS software and structural equation modelling approach

The Smart PLS software version 2.0 for variance-based partial least squares structured equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the model in Figure 1. PLS-SEM is a statistical tool that has emerged as a powerful approach to test relationships among variables (Chinomona & Surujal 2012:892-893) even under conditions of non-normality.

In addition, PLS-SEM can handle complex predictive models in small-to-medium samples and, therefore, befits the purpose of the current study since the study's sample size (n = 150) is relatively small. Based on the ten-times rule of thumb which supports that data analysed using PLS should equate to at least "ten times the largest number of formative indicators used to measure one construct; or ten times the largest number of inner model

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paths directed at a particular construct in the inner model", the minimum sample size using such criteria has been met in this study (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins & Kuppelwieser 2014:109).

By applying the ten-rule of thumb to our data, the minimum sample when using the above-mentioned criteria is 30 (representing the largest number of paths pointing to a construct which is three. When applying the ten-rule of thumb, this number is multiplied by 10) or 50 (representing the largest number of indicators being five which is linked to the five measure items found under the social media information construct. When applying the ten-rule of thumb, this number is multiplied by 10). The sample size for this study is 150 which exceed the minimum sample size of 80 required when applying PLS in this study.

6.2   Measurement model

Convergent validity was checked by assessing the values of items loaded on their respective variables. The item loadings are expected to reach a threshold of equal or greater than 0.6 to be acceptable (Chin 1998:xiii). Discriminant validity was assessed using the inter-variables correlation matrix.

A cross-loading of less than 0.850 was deemed acceptable (Chin 1998:xiii). Drawing from Table 3 and Table 4 results, it can be noted that the item loadings range from 0.794 to 0.956 while the cross-loadings for the research constructs are all less than the value 0.787. This implies that all the required thresholds were found acceptable. Thus, the results from the item loadings and the inter-construct correlation matrix confirms the existence of convergent and discriminant validity respectively.

However, to further confirm the validity of the measurement instruments, particularly the discriminant validity, the researchers checked if the average variance extracted (AVE) of the research constructs were more than the value of 0.5 that was recommended by Chin (1998:xi). The results in Table 3 also indicate that the AVE values for all the research variables are above 0.6 and therefore exceeding the acceptable value of 0.5.

The reliability of the measurement instruments was assessed using two indicators namely the Cronbach's Alpha value and the Composite Reliability value. The recommended acceptable value for the Cronbach's Alpha value is 0.6 while that of Composite Reliability value is 0.7 (Malhotra 2004:864; Chin 1998:x). Drawing from the results in Table 4, the Cronbach's Alpha values for the research variables ranges from 0.839 and 0.934, while the Composite Reliability values for all the variables are greater than 0.9 respectively. These findings confirm that the research instruments used in this study are reliable. According to

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Malhotra (2004:864), a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.8-1.0 indicates very strong internal consistency reliability.

TABLE 3: Accuracy analysis statistics

Construct	Item	Factor loadings	Cronbach's α value	CR value	LV index value	R^2 value	AVE value
SMT	SMT1	0.833	0.839	0.903	4.284	0.000	0.756
	SMT2	0.914					
	SMT3	0.859					
SMEU	SMEU1	0.851	0.893	0.934	4.437	0.000	0.825
	SMEU2	0.956					
	SMEU3	0.915					
SMUI	SMUI1	0.902	0.880	0.926	4.346	0.188	0.807
	SMUI2	0.929					
	SMUI3	0.863					
SMIS	SMIS1	0.794	0.881	0.914	4.479	0.538	0.680
	SMIS2	0.836					
	SMIS3	0.831					
	SMIS4	0.847					
	SMIS5	0.868					

Note: SMT = Social media trust; SMEU = Social media ease of use; SMUI = Social media use intention; SMIS = Social media information sharing

Source: Calculated from survey results

TABLE 4: Correlations between constructs

RESEARCH CONSTRUCTS	SMT	SMEU	SMUI	SMIS
SMT	0.869			
SMEU	0.787	0.908		
SMUI	0.3965	0.420	0.898	
SMIS	0.420	0.529	0.681	0.824

Note: SMT = Social media trust; SMEU = Social media ease of use; SMUI = Social media use intention; SMIS = Social media information sharing

Source: Calculated from survey results

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6.3   Path model

The path coefficients among the research variables were generated also using the Smart PLS statistical software version 2.0. A sample size of 200 respondents where used for the study. The chosen sample size was ideal for the software (Smart PLS) that was used for the analysis.
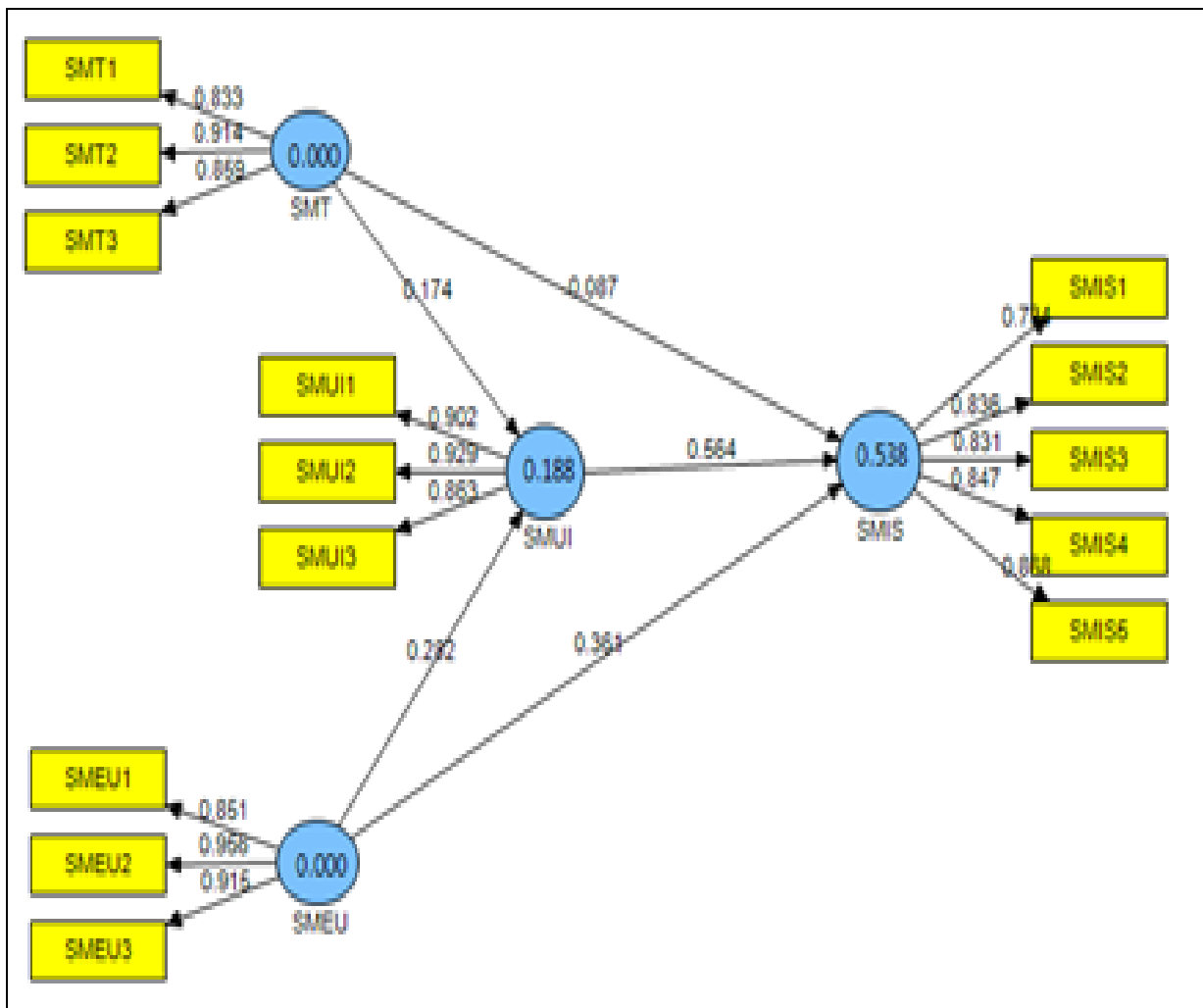

FIGURE 2: Measurement and structural model results

Note: SMT = Social media trust; SMEU = Social media ease of use; SMUI = Social media use intention; SMIS = Social media information sharing

Source: Calculated from survey results

Figure 2 and Table 5 show the standardised path coefficients and their corresponding *t*-values. A statistically significant relationship is expected to have a *t*-value that exceeds 1.96 at a 5% level of significance (Chin 1998:xi).

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Drawing from the results indicated in Figure 2 and Table 5, all five hypotheses (i.e., H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5) are supported (with path coefficients of 0.174, 0.087, 0.282, 0.361 and 0.564 respectively), although H1 and H2 are statistically insignificant relationships because the t-statistics values for these two relationships are less than the recommended cut-off point of 2 (1.140 and 0.681 respectively).

TABLE 5:   Results of the PLS-SEM analysis

Proposed hypothesis relationship	Hypothesis	Path coefficients	*t*-statistics	Rejected / supported
SMT → SMUI	H1	0.174	1.140	Supported
SMT → SMIS	H2	0.087	0.681	Supported
SMEU → SMUI	H3	0.282	2.002	Supported
SMEU → SMIS	H4	0.361	2.522	Supported
SMUI → SMIS	H5	0.564	8.427	Supported

Note: SMT = Social media trust; SMEU = Social media ease of use; SMUI = Social media use intention; SMIS = Social media information sharing

Source: Calculated from survey results

As shown in Figure 2, the overall, R² for SMIS of 0.538 indicates that the research model explains more than 53% of the variance in SMIS, while SMT and SMEU explain about 19% ($R^2 = 0.188$) of the variance in SMUI.

In order to calculate the global goodness-of-fit (GoF) statistic, a formula provided by Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin & Lauro (2005:173) was used as indicated in the equation:

$$GoF = \sqrt{AVE * R^2}$$

The calculated global goodness of fit (GoF) is 0.47, which exceeds the threshold of GoF>0.36 suggested by Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder & van Oppen (2009:187). Therefore, this study concludes that the research model has a good overall fit.

7.   DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the social media ease of use has stronger effects on social media use intention (0.282) and social media information sharing (0.361) than social media trust on social media use intention (0.087) and social media information sharing (0.174).

However, social media ease of use strongly predicts social media information sharing (0.361) more than social media use intention (0.282). Therefore, having social media platforms that are user-friendly can encourage the sharing of information amongst digital natives through these platforms. In such instances where the platforms are made easy to use, these digital natives will be more inclined to using them. This result supports prior research on the importance of having social media platforms that will require limited efforts if used by virtual community members (Teo *et al.* 2008:267). It can also be noted that the relationship between social media use intention and social media information is more robust (0.564). The implication of this finding is that social medial ease of use and social media trust all have strong influence on social media information sharing via social media use intention. Perhaps this could be due to the fact that the effects of social media ease of use and trust are likely to be more pronounced on social media information sharing only when digital natives have a positive desire to use the social media.

8.   CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate digital natives' information sharing on social media platforms and discuss the implications thereof for managers in the South African context. As part of this, we investigated the extent to which social media trust and ease of use predict South African digital native's social media use intention and information sharing. This study proposed five hypotheses. Using data collected from 150 respondents, the results supported three (H3, H4 and H5) of the proposed five hypotheses, while H1 and H2 could not be supported. Our findings reveal that social media ease of use was a stronger predictor of social media use intention and social media information sharing compared to social media trust.

9.   RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study provide fruitful implications to both practitioners and academicians. On the academic side, this study makes a significant contribution to the social media use literature by systematically exploring the impact of social media ease of use and trust on use intention and information sharing among Generation Y users in an emerging market context. In particular, the current study's findings provide tentative support for the proposition that social media ease of use should be recognized as a significant antecedent and tool to influence digital natives' desire to use social media for information sharing.

From a practitioner's perspective, the influential role of social media ease of use as a predictor of social media information sharing in South African online communities is highlighted. This study indicates that social media platform designers should consider the ease of use aspect when designing social media platforms. When the social media platforms are perceived by Generation Y as easy to use, they are likely to desire using them and, consequently, share more information using these social media platforms. Similarly, marketers who want to disseminate information on social media platforms to digital natives, have to consider those platforms that are regarded as easy to use by their targeted audiences. In light of this, the practical recommendations that can be made to managers include:

▪ to advertise on social media platforms that have good functionalities;

▪ to ensure that content specialists provide information that is simple, easy to read, using an appropriate font type, size and colours;

▪ to avoid social media platforms that are cumbersome and that do not allow for the free flow and sharing of information;

▪ to ensure that information on their brand, products and services are easily accessible on the social media platforms;

▪ to create online mechanisms that encourage the participation of virtual communities, specifically in sharing their experiences with specific brands or product lines.

The limitations of this study can also be viewed as avenues for future research. An important limitation is the geographic scope of the study which only concentrated on a single province. Subsequent research should contemplate replicating this study in other provinces of South Africa or even in other African countries. Moreover, the study was limited to students at two universities in South Africa. Future studies should, therefore, consider expanding data collection to include other virtual community members who utilize social media platforms. Finally, further research could also investigate the effects of other constructs such as "perceived enjoyment" of social media platform use as a possible predictor of the intention to use social media platform and information sharing for education and recreational purposes.

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