

The contribution of social media competencies and privacy in catalyzing the sustainable performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Uganda

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to establish whether social media competencies and privacy matter for sustainable performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Design/methodology/approach – The study is cross-sectional and adopted a mixed-methods design. Data were gathered from 245 SMEs under Uganda Manufacturers Association (UMA) operating in the central region of Uganda using a self-administered questionnaire; a semi-structured interview guide on other hand was used to gather views from UMA coordinators and administrators. Statistical Package for Social Sciences and ATLAS.ti supported data analysis.

Findings – Study results indicate that social media competencies and privacy matter for sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. However, social media privacy matters more than social media competencies.

Practical implications – Government ministries, departments and agencies such as National Information Technology Authority-Uganda should create a social media privacy guide and laws that will enable the business community to confidently use social media for sustainable growth of their businesses. Likewise, private organizations like UMA should invest in the SME fraternity by providing entrepreneurs with training opportunities to unlock their social media soft and technical skills needed to fully integrate social media into the operations of the SMEs for sustainable performance in Uganda.



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Originality/value – Study findings demonstrated that social media competencies and social media privacy matter for increased sustainable performance of SMEs unlike previous studies that have investigated the two predictors independently.

Keywords Social media competencies, Social media privacy, Sustainable performance, SMEs, Uganda

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The sustainable performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is acknowledged as a strategic pathway in fostering sustainable development. Sustainable performance presents the ability of the SMEs to balance their social, environmental and economic aspects simultaneously (Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal, 2023). This results into creation of more employment opportunities and generating government revenue while preserving the natural environment and values of the society for the benefit of the current and the future generations (Kimuli *et al.*, 2022). The potential of SMEs to foster sustainable development has encouraged governments across the globe to come up with initiatives to support this sector. As such, the government of Uganda developed the micro, small and medium enterprises' policy (Minister of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives, 2024) to guide business operations to add a net positive impact on the natural environment and the society, the recent Parish Development Model (PDM, 2022) that provides grassroot entrepreneurs with capital for inclusive development and the national strategy for the development of the private sector (2017–2021) that intends to promote the private sector through attracting local and foreign investors, promoting industrialization and boosting investor confidence for enterprise growth and profitability. Moreover, the government regulated the usage of plastic bags with the goal of minimizing usage of materials that adversely affect the environment (Sendawula *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the above interventions, it is important to note that some of them are not fully implemented, while others are developed without considering the contextual issues of the business community. As a result, the general performance of SMEs and their contribution to the conservation of the natural environment and the values of the society is still wanting. Specifically, 75% of the SMEs fail before completing a year in operation (Kabatunzi, 2022) while 50% operate on losses (Muhwezi and Kiliman, 2023). Besides their declining performance, SMEs have contributed to degradation of the natural environment through using plastic bags as packaging materials and poorly disposing them (Wandeka *et al.*, 2022). As a result, 600 tons of plastic bags are used every day, with 51% of plastic rubbish in Kampala remaining uncollected (Sendawula *et al.*, 2021). These have clogged drainage channels, resulting into floods and health hazards in the suburbs of Kampala (Okia *et al.*, 2018).

Currently, scholars such as Sendawula *et al.* (2022) present social media as a feasible pathway that can enable SMEs to attain sustainable performance. Li *et al.* (2023) conceptualized social media as the internet platforms and programs that allow multiple parties including SMEs to connect and share pertinent information. These platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, among others permit SME owner-managers to conduct business operations cheaply while limiting actions such as frequent transportation and packaging that may be harmful to the natural environment (Kimuli *et al.*, 2022; Gupta *et al.*, 2017). This results in improved economic performance of the SME fraternity while protecting the natural environment that is likely to enable Uganda

attain a green economy status as envisaged in Vision 2040 (National Planning Authority, 2024).

Review of extant literature on sustainable performance of SMEs indicates that scholars have focused on social media usage, digital leadership and innovation capabilities (Borah *et al.*, 2022), compatibility, perceived usefulness and ease of use (Chatterjee and Kar, 2020), firm size (Bourlakis *et al.*, 2014) and dynamic capabilities (Eikelenboom and De Jong, 2019). We also note that Sendawula *et al.* (2022) who recently examined social media and sustainable growth of SMEs, focused on social media perception, readiness and usage while paying less attention to social media competencies and privacy. From our observation and knowledge of the subject matter, social media as a technology, keeps on changing and entrepreneurs need to have a stock of soft and technical skills that permit them to navigate the online environment for sustainable performance of their businesses.

We also argue that social media privacy is vital in providing the SME fraternity with assurance that the business information shared online is safe without unauthorized access for sustainable business operation. Upon that backdrop, we intended to address the research question “do social media competencies and privacy matter for the sustainable performance of SMEs?” This was addressed through gathering both quantitative and qualitative data from SMEs that are under the Uganda Manufacturers Association (UMA) in the central region of Uganda. As such we established that social media privacy matters more than social media competencies in fostering sustainable performance of SMEs. The rest of the paper presents literature review, the research methodology, study results, discussion, summary and conclusion, implications and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Small and medium enterprises

To date, there is no universally acceptable definition of SMEs and they are perceived differently basing on the industry, sector and country. In the context of this study, we conceptualize SMEs based on the definition of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives (2024) that considers number of employees and capital investment. This definition was adopted since it clearly presents a true picture of SMEs in the Ugandan context, where the study was conducted. Accordingly, small enterprises are business organizations that employ between 5 and 49 workers and have their capital between UGX 10m and 100m. While medium enterprises on the other hand employ between 50 and 100 workers and have capital that ranges from UGX 100m to 360m.

In this study, SMEs were considered because they significantly contribute to the growth of Uganda's economy. Specifically, they employ about 90% of the working population in Uganda, contribute 20% of national gross domestic product (GDP) and facilitate income distribution and general reduction in poverty levels (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). At the micro level, SMEs facilitate self-employment, freedom, maximizing people's potential as well as earning social and professional respect in the society (Sendawula *et al.*, 2020). Thus, it is important to investigate the sustainable performance of SMEs with a goal of ensuring that their contribution to the growth of the country benefits the current and the future generations.

2.2 Sustainable performance

Traditionally, the performance of SMEs has been perceived in terms of financial position that is how a business can effectively and efficiently use its assets to generate revenue (Kádárová *et al.*, 2023). With the introduction of the balance score card – a strategic planning and management tool used by organizations to improve their performance, the nonfinancial aspects that include customer satisfaction, employee turnover, market share, innovation,

product and service delivery process were introduced (Fatima and Elbanna, 2020; Oduro *et al.*, 2022).

Currently, we are in the era of sustainability, and scholars introduced the concept in the general performance of SMEs (Thekkoote, 2022; Melo *et al.*, 2023). This is intended to ensure that the actions and operations of SMEs today do not constrain the range of economic, social and environmental opportunities for the future generations, giving birth to sustainable performance (Greenland *et al.*, 2022). In the literature of SMEs, scholars have developed measures to examine sustainable performance and these include the environmental, social and economic aspects (Bourlakis *et al.*, 2014; Borah *et al.*, 2022).

Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal (2023) view sustainable performance as the combination of economic, environmental and social performance that not only improve the natural environment and society, but also results in long-term economic advantages and a firm's competitive edge. Alraja *et al.* (2022) add that sustainable performance entails the ability of an SME to achieve its environmental, economic and social performance goals over an extended period. Based on the foregoing conversation we define sustainable performance as the ability of a business to conserve the natural environment and the values of the society while achieving its financial goal simultaneously. Therefore, we measure sustainable performance of SMEs in terms of their social, economic and environmental performance (Agyabeng-Mensah *et al.*, 2021).

2.3 Social media

Social media is viewed as the networks or websites that support the development of social relations among people from different contexts (Joseph *et al.*, 2020). Thus, company-sponsored discussion boards, websites blogs, e-mails, YouTube, internet discussion forums and social networking sites like Facebook and WhatsApp are some of the common social media platforms, pages and channels used by the business fraternity (Sengar, 2021; Rosário and Dias, 2023). Application of social media technology in business operations boosts brand recognition, customer acquisition and retention, customer connection and satisfaction (Yang *et al.*, 2022). It is also important to note that social media usage minimizes unnecessary movements, packaging among other business operations that may negatively affect the natural environment (Bourlakis *et al.*, 2014).

2.4 Social media competencies and sustainable performance

From our observation and experience, social media is a technology that evolves over time. Social media users such as the business owner-managers need to have an up-to-date set of competencies needed to effectively navigate the online platforms, channels and pages relevant for the businesses. This suggests that the SME fraternity needs to be competent enough to adopt social media. As such, social media competencies are conceptualized as the ability to logically and spontaneously respond to opportunities and challenges using the potential of the internet (Aulia, 2023). Dimitriadis and Koning (2022) add that social competencies entail the ability of the user to efficiently and effectively locate content on the social media platforms, pages and channels. Social media competencies are further conceptualized as an individual's capacity to use and combine one's knowledge (i.e. know-what), skill (i.e. know-how), and attitude (i.e. know-why) associated with three related competence areas, technological, cognitive and social, to use new or existing ICT to analyze, select and critically evaluate information in order to investigate and solve work-related problems and develop a collaborative knowledge base while engaging in organizational practices within a specific organizational context (Vieru *et al.*, 2015).

Against that backdrop, we view social media competencies as the soft and technical skills needed by the business owner-managers to successfully navigate the web and social media environment. In a study conducted by [Caldana et al. \(2023\)](#), we note that competencies can be operational, information, strategic and formal in nature. The operational competencies enable the user to operate the different softwares and hardware; with the information competencies, the users are able to use the computer to search and select appropriate information. While the strategic competencies on the other hand allow business owner-managers to use the internet to achieve their set goals and the formal competencies allow the users to traverse in a multimedia context.

Review of extant literature indicates social media competencies can potentially catalyze sustainable performance of SMEs. For example, [Kwasek et al. \(2024\)](#) indicate that the successful utilization of ICT platforms depends on the employees possessing appropriate ICT skills. This suggests that when business owner-managers have the required skills, they can effectively deploy social media technology in the operations of their businesses to realize sustainable performance. In a recent study on social media perception, readiness and usage, [Sendawula et al. \(2022\)](#) identified lack of technical and soft skills as one of the factors that impede the potential of micro and small businesses in Uganda to effectively adopt social media for sustainable growth. This suggests that entrepreneurs or owner-managers with insufficient competencies may not be able to use social media in their businesses for sustainable performance.

Similarly, [Borah et al. \(2022\)](#) maintained that sustainable performance of SMEs can be catalyzed by the leaders' and employees' skills such as digital leadership and innovation capabilities that are needed to efficiently handle social media in their businesses. In the same vein, [Dossena et al. \(2020\)](#) reported the relevance of social media competencies associated with rational and marketing capabilities in fostering organizational change. However, engagement with extant literature demonstrates that there seems to be no study that has directly explored whether social media competencies matter for sustainable performance of SMEs. Thus, we hypothesize that:

- H1.* There is a positive significant association between social media competencies and sustainable performance of SMEs.

2.5 Social media privacy and sustainable performance

The vast amount of personal and business information that is collected, saved, transferred and distributed on social media platforms, social media privacy as a notion in online literature has attracted the interest and attention of a number of researchers ([Ali et al., 2020](#)). Relatedly, as social media grows in popularity, users reveal personal information while sharing sensitive information with others online ([Ara et al., 2022](#)). Because information posted on social media is co-constructed by oneself and other users, individual and mutual privacy borders become blurred.

As such, [Page et al. \(2022\)](#) view social media privacy as control over the mobility of one's personal information, including transmission and exchange via social media. [Ali et al. \(2020\)](#) add that social media privacy is the right of a person to keep information to themselves and only share it with relevant people like employees, customers, suppliers and others. We further observe that social media privacy is thought to be a means of maintaining anonymity while also tightly regulating an individual's information on social media ([Trepte, 2021](#)). Therefore, the social media user is completely responsible for maintaining data privacy because they can put strong safeguards in place to protect their

privacy (Ahmad, 2023). This is aimed at keeping the users' information posted on social media inaccessible by unauthorized users (Mubeen *et al.*, 2022).

The conceptualization of social media privacy is also anchored on the General Data Protection Regulation, a European Union (EU) policy designed to preserve the fundamental right to privacy of EU people and ensure data protection by imposing stringent restrictions on the management of personal data. This suggests that when using social media platforms, restrictions are imposed to protect personal data and leave what is relevant for public consumption.

Scholars present the importance of social media privacy in business operations. For example, in their study of the impact of privacy concern in social networking web sites, Chung *et al.* (2021) revealed that privacy concerns of social media users were found to be statistically significant and ultimately affect performance of their business. Oywaya (2023) also revealed that use of social media platforms' privacy such as Facebook, Pinterest, Google Plus, LinkedIn and Twitter promoted performance of small businesses in the Arabia market. Furthermore, in their investigation of the privacy concerns of social network site users, Sawy and Bögenhold (2023) reported that social media users like small business owners indicated awareness of social media threats and the need to control personal and business information against unauthorized users. This finding suggests that when entrepreneurs feel that secret business and personal information is protected, they are likely to integrate social media into their businesses to foster their performance. The foregoing discussion indicates that extant studies have paid less attention to whether social media privacy matters for sustainable performance of SMEs or not. We hypothesize that:

- H2. There is a positive significant association between social media privacy and sustainable performance of SMEs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and period

In this study, we used a mixed-methods design with a sample of 285 SMEs drawn from a population of 1,100 members of the UMA, as defined by (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970) sampling table. We received 245 usable questionnaires out of the 285 distributed instruments from respondents (business owners), yielding an 85% response rate. In the qualitative phase of the study, coordinators and administrators of the UMA were engaged with the goal of validating and strengthening the quantitative findings of the study, as recommended by Creswell (Weyant, 2022). Thus, the point of saturation was reached when the eighth respondent gave a similar answer during the data collection process. Data collection for this study was in two phases. In particular, phase one was conducted in March 2024 with the goal of validating the data collection tools through a pretest exercise, and the final survey was conducted in May 2024.

3.2 Sampling methods

Using simple random sampling, 245 SMEs were selected to participate in the survey (Noor *et al.*, 2022). This provided respondents with an equal opportunity to participate in the study. Purposive sampling, on the other hand, was used to pick on the seven participants (UMA coordinators and administrators) as the key informants since they had relevant knowledge on the social media competencies, privacy and sustainable performance of their members operating in the central region of Uganda (Campbell *et al.*, 2020).

3.3 Respondents characteristics

3.3.1 Small and medium enterprise owners' characteristics. During the data collection exercise, gender, age bracket, level of education and business experience were captured as the key characteristics as presented in [Table 1](#).

The study findings indicated in [Table 2](#) show that most SME owners were male (63%), while their female counterparts were at 37%. This demonstrates that the number of women starting and owning businesses in Uganda is increasing, with the potential to get to the same level as or even outweigh their male counterparts with time. We also established that the majority of the SME owners are in the age bracket of 46–55 (77%), showing that most business associations in Uganda mainly attract entrepreneurs who are well established, mature and have adequate business exposure as compared to the youths, who are at 10%. Regarding the level of education, most respondents (24%) have a diploma, suggesting that they have the knowledge, competencies and skills needed to successfully integrate social media platforms into their businesses for sustainable performance. Finally, our results indicate that most SME owners have been in business for a period of 6–10 years and above (32%), implying that business owners are aware of the challenges of running a physical firm and can thus understand the advantages of working online with the potential to integrate social media platforms, pages and channels to support the sustainable performance of their businesses.

3.3.2 Key informant characteristics. We considered UMA coordinators and administrators as the key informants and their characteristics revolved around their gender, education level and area of operation as indicated in [Table 2](#).

Table 1. SME owner's characteristics

SN	Item	Frequency	%
1	<i>Gender</i>		
	Male	154	63
	Female	91	37
2	<i>Age bracket</i>		
	18–25	24	10
	26–35	47	19
	36–45	62	25
	46–55	77	31
	56–65	25	10
	Above 65 years	10	4
3	<i>Level of education</i>		
	None	8	3
	Primary	31	13
	Secondary	51	21
	Certificate	52	21
	Diploma	59	24
	Degree	42	17
	Masters	2	1
4	<i>Experience in business</i>		
	Less than two years	22	9
	2–5years	66	27
	6–10years	78	32
<i>n</i> = 245	Above 10 years	79	32

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 2. Key informant characteristics

Case	Gender	Level of education	Area of operation
1	Female	Bachelor's degree	Eastern region
2	Male	Master's degree	Mbale sub region
3	Male	Bachelor's degree	Greater Mukono
4	Female	Master's degree	Greater Luweero
5	Female	Bachelor's degree	Fort Portal and Kasese
6	Male	Bachelor's degree	Kampala district
7	Male	Bachelor's degree	Northern region
8	Male	Bachelor's degree	Hoima

Source(s): Authors' own work

Study results indicate that five key informants were male and three were female, indicating that men mainly dominate the leadership of organizations and associations coordinating SME activities in Uganda as compared to their female counterparts. For the education level of the key informants, most of them have a bachelor's degree with only two having a masters' degree, suggesting that they have enough knowledge relevant in guiding their members on how to use social media platforms, pages and channels in business for sustainable performance. In addition, our results show that key informants who participated in the study were selected from all regions of the country to guide our understanding of the social media competencies, privacy and sustainable performance of their members across the country.

3.3 Data collection

To collect quantitative and qualitative data for the study, a self-administered questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide were employed (Dahl et al., 2022). The instruments included items and questions relating to respondent characteristics, social media competencies, privacy and sustainable performance. All questionnaire items were anchored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA). The data was collected in English, and a recorder was used to capture the participants' perspectives during the qualitative phase, which were then transcribed and evaluated as directed by Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023).

The interview guide included questions that captured the participants, characteristics; what social media platforms, pages and channels are commonly used. The questions were: How competent are your members in utilizing social media technologies for sustainable performance of their businesses? What are the social media privacy issues or concerns demonstrated by your members while using social media in their businesses? How has social media privacy affected sustainable performance of your members' businesses? Appointments were also scheduled with UMA coordinators and administrators, who subsequently engaged in physical interviews in their respective jurisdictions using a semi-structured interview guide.

3.4 Measurement and operationalization of the study variables

In this study, we adopted Agyabeng-Mensah et al.'s (2023) items for sustainable performance of SMEs that include social, environmental and economic performance. Sustainable performance was measured using 18 items. On the other hand, social media competencies were measured using 24 items capturing soft and technical skills (Cho et al., 2024). While social media privacy was operationalized in terms of privacy

collection, privacy awareness and privacy control (Page *et al.*, 2022) with 15 items as presented in Table 3.

3.5 Validity and reliability

Validity is the extent to which an instrument measures what it purports to measure (Flake *et al.*, 2022). This was achieved through developing the scales with the help of the experts and using items that were used in the previous studies. In addition, we used the expert judgment of the experts to verify the validity of the data collection instrument by rating questionnaire items as relevant and irrelevant. Using their feedback, content validity index (CVI) was run and accounting for the study results in Table 4, the instrument was valid since all CVI for all the variables are above the recommended cutoff of 0.7.

Reliability, on the other hand, was run after conducting a pilot exercise and according to the results in Table 5, it is indicated that the questionnaire was reliable since Cronbach's alpha figures for all the variables are above the recommended cutoff point of 0.7 (Kennedy, 2022). In addition, triangulation was adopted to achieve reliability and validity (Donkoh and Mensah, 2023; Arias Valencia, 2022). Specifically, data were collected from the SME owners and administrators as well as the coordinators of UMA (data triangulation), ten research assistants and the researchers themselves participated in the data collection exercises (investigator triangulation), and both quantitative and qualitative methods (methodology triangulation) were used to study whether social media competencies and privacy matter for sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. This was done to use qualitative results to validate our quantitative findings.

3.6 Data analysis

Analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the 245 members of UMA in the central region of Uganda was done using SPSS.23 to generate descriptive statistics, correlation and regression results that were relevant in appreciating whether social media competencies and privacy matter for sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. Qualitative data, on the other hand, which was gathered from the administrators and coordinator of UMA using a semi-structured interview guide was analyzed using ATLAS.ti to validate the quantitative results.

3.7 Common method variance

The study used a questionnaire for data collection, and we accounted for prevalent methodological bias that typically influences questionnaire-based outcomes in the social sciences (Gorrell *et al.*, 2011). This was accomplished by adhering to the recommendations of (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003); consequently, we ensured that the dependent and independent variables were distinct in content, assured the respondents that there were no correct or incorrect answers, avoided double-barreled questions, and, most importantly, engaged business managers as the unit of inquiry, as they have a deeper understanding of the contribution of social media competencies and privacy in catalyzing the sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda.

4. Study findings

4.1 Correlational analysis

To establish whether social media competencies, and privacy matter for sustainable performance of SMEs, we started by examining the relationship between the study variables using zero-order correlations. According to the study results presented in Table 6, there is a positive significant association between social media competencies and sustainable performance of SMEs ($r = 0.703$, $p < 0.01$), implying that a positive deviation in social media

Table 3. Measurement and operationalization of the study variables

Variable	Dimensions	Sample questionnaire items	Source	Likert scale
Sustainable performance	• Social	• We minimize environmental mishaps, waste generation and reduce usage of toxic and harmful materials	Agyabeng-Mensah <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA)
	• Environmental	• We reduce the environmental impacts of our products		
	• Economic performance	• Undertaking environmental and social activities has improved business profitability		
		• Undertaking environmental and social activities has attracted more customers for our business		
		• Our business has improved the employees' health and safety		
Social media competencies	• Soft skills	• Our business has improved community health and safety	Cho <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA)
	• Hard skills	• We are competent in identifying consumers of our products on social media		
		• We are competent in satisfying consumers' numerous needs on social media		
		• We are competent in maintaining consumer satisfaction on social media		
		• We are competent in competing with rival entrepreneurs on social media		
Social media privacy	Privacy collection	• We are competent in effectively interacting with consumers on social media	Page <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA)
	Privacy awareness	• We are not bothered to put business information on social media platforms		
	Privacy control	• We do not think twice while publishing business information on social media platforms		
		• We are aware of the way data is collected, processed and used via social media platforms		
		• We are aware of how to protect customers' personal information provided via social media platform		
		• We manage business information put on social media platforms and our customers only have access to the public information posted on our business's social media platforms		
Source(s): Literature review				

Table 4. Content validity index

Variable	Anchor	CVIs
Social media competencies	2 points	0.710
Social media privacy	2 points	0.829
Sustainable performance	2 points	0.778

Source(s): Authors' own work**Table 5.** Reliability

Variable	Anchor	Cronbach's alpha value
Social media competencies	5 points	0.855
Social media privacy	5 points	0.778
Sustainable performance	5 points	0.889

Source(s): Authors' own work**Table 6.** Correlational results

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Soft (1)	1							
Technical (2)	0.711**	1						
Competencies (3)	0.922**	0.928**	1					
Privacy awareness (4)	0.622**	0.594**	0.657**	1				
Privacy collection (5)	-0.018	-0.057	-0.041	-0.005	1			
Privacy control (6)	0.569**	0.582**	0.622**	0.551**	-0.043	1		
Social media privacy (7)	0.533**	0.502**	0.559**	0.717**	0.596**	0.668**	1	
Sustainable performance (8)	0.687**	0.615**	0.703**	0.658**	-0.021	0.635**	0.577**	1

Note(s): **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)**Source(s):** Authors' own work

competencies results in to a positive deviation in sustainable performance of SMEs. The findings further indicate that a positive significant relationship exists between social media privacy and sustainable performance of SMEs ($r = 0.577$, $p < 0.01$), implying that a positive variation in social media privacy leads to a positive variation in the sustainable performance of SMEs.

4.2 Hierarchical regression results

We also conducted hierarchical regression to validate study hypotheses and to provide for the explanatory power of each predictor variable when added to the equation (Field, 2009). The hierarchical regression analysis was used as it effectively assesses the relative importance of independent variables in relation to changes in the dependent variable and demonstrates the incremental impact of an additional independent variable on the existing variables in predicting the dependent variable (Field, 2009). According to our results in Table 7, control variables (firm age and size) were introduced in Model 1. It was revealed that the control variables insignificantly contribute to sustainable performance of SMEs ($\beta = 0.096$, $p \leq 0.05$)

Table 7. Regression results

Item	Model I	Model II	Model III
Constant	3.560	1.608	1.182
<i>Control variables</i>			
Firm age	0.096	0.024	−0.063
Firm size	0.250	0.233	0.194
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Social media privacy		0.548**	0.272**
Social media competencies			0.525**
<i>Model summary</i>			
R	0.316	0.627	0.755
R square	0.100	0.393	0.570
Adjusted R square	0.094	0.387	0.565
R square change	0.005	0.293	0.177
Model F	16.211	62.859	96.286
Durbin Watson			1.970

Note(s): **Means that the significance of the relationship between the study variables is 99%
Source(s): Authors' own work

and ($\beta = 0.250, p \leq 0.05$), respectively. The model thus accounts for 0.5% of the variance in sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda.

In agreement with *H1*, study results in Table 7 indicate that there is a positive regression between social media competencies and sustainable performance of SMEs ($\beta = 0.548, \Delta R^2 = 0.293, p \leq 0.001$). This indicates that a unit increase in social media competencies translates into a 0.548 deviation in sustainable performance of SMEs. Thus, social media competencies matter and explain 29.3% of the improvement in sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. These results are consistent with qualitative results that show that a portion of their members use Facebook and WhatsApp in marketing their products, as presented in the following statement:

[...] They use the platforms in marketing their products, and then another thing, they use these platforms to communicate with their customers. For example, if a customer orders for something online, these people can easily use social media to communicate with their customers [...] (Case 3).

The above finding indicates that some SMEs have some skills and knowledge that is needed to create and sustain social media platforms and channels relevant for sustainable growth of their businesses. However, further engagement with the coordinators and administrators of UMA revealed that some of the business owners are aged and do not know much about social media. Other members who have tried to open up social media platforms, especially Facebook, find some challenges in posting their products online and keeping them updated. This situation is exacerbated when it comes to some members who are unwilling to share information with others in fear of competition and the copycat syndrome characterized by most entrepreneurs in Uganda. This assentation is demonstrated in the following views shared by the key informants:

[...] What I can say is that there are just a few who can do such things, but most of them are old and do not know about them. Even if it is WhatsApp, you find if this person bought a phone and maybe the children trained them in this WhatsApp, they can only type a message, and that's all [...] (Interviewee 4).

[...] These members are not competent enough; you find someone has a Facebook page but does not know how to post his product on the page. This person even doesn't know how to interact with the customers on social media [...] (Interviewee 9).

[...] The biggest challenge is that these small sellers do not want to share information; even when one learns how to design these graphics, and someone approaches them, they will not tell them how they did it. Because they know once they share, this person becomes a competitor [...] (Interviewee 6).

This finding suggests the business owner-managers are not aware of the strengthen embedded in social media as a strategy that can foster their sustainable performance of their businesses. In addition, it is clear that their inability to use social media is due lack of sufficient soft and technical skills as well as knowledge relevant to integrate social media platforms into their businesses.

Our results further indicate that social media privacy has a positive influence on the sustainable performance of SMEs ($\beta = 0.525$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.177$, $p \leq 0.001$). This implies that a unit increase in social media privacy leads to 0.525 deviations in sustainable performance of SMEs. As such, social media privacy matters and contributes 17.7% of the variance in sustainable performance and thus confirming *H2*. This finding is strengthened by the views of the key informants who revealed that their members (SME owners) think that social media platforms have safety and privacy issues that are likely to make their businesses face several challenges compared to operating physically. Other SME owners fear that their products will be copied if they are shared via social media platforms, which is worsened by the commen who use social media to fake business owners and customers. This is associated with huge losses that might not have been incurred if a business is operating traditionally as illustrated in the following excerpts:

[...] Yes, because I have some testimonies from the members. Someone will say I posted some pictures of my product, and someone copied it and made the same product and even used the same name for that person's business. So they sell the customers a fake product, and then the customer ends up saying that this enterprise has fake things, yet it is someone who faked [...] (Interviewee 3).

[...] Some feel unsafe because, on social media, there are fake people. So most of them are scared of that issue, their critical information may be misused [...] (Interviewee 8).

Despite the divergent views from the qualitative results, we note that both social media competencies and social media privacy matter for sustainable performance in Uganda and explain up to 56.5% of the variance. In addition, it is evident that social media privacy matters most as compared to social media competencies in explicating sustainable performance of SMEs with a significant margin of 11.6%. This implies that the SME fraternity needs to strengthen its potential to make their social media platforms, accounts and pages safe without authorized access to better serve their customers to attain sustainable performance.

5. Discussion of the findings

H1 sought to establish whether social media competencies matter for sustainable performance of SMEs. From the study results, this was supported, suggesting that when owner-managers have the ability to identify consumers of a product, satisfy consumers' numerous needs, attract and retain consumers online using social media channels, their economic, environmental and social performance is likely to improve. This is because, they will be spending less in getting customers and customers will be served online, reducing vehicle movement and unnecessary packaging that would have negatively affected the natural environment and the values of the society. In addition, social media competencies enable the SME community to collaborate with different stakeholders to support and finance community-based projects using their platforms, pages and channels. With their competencies still, they can search and exploit any opportunities and seize any threats on these platforms. This eventually enables the society to get healthy, education and empowerment

projects funded and implemented for community development and a general improvement in the quality of surrounding community and the environment at large.

Study findings are consistent with [Vieru et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Benitez et al. \(2022\)](#) who revealed that the successful utilization of information and communication technology platforms depends on the employees possessing appropriate information and communication technology skills. This demonstrated that when SME owners have the required soft and technical skills, they can effectively deploy social media technology in operating their businesses to realize sustainable performance. Relatedly, [Dossena et al. \(2020\)](#) documented the relevance of social media competencies in supporting marketing activities of the SMEs to enhance organizational change and overall performance.

However, the qualitative results revealed that some SME owners have insufficient skills needed to fully integrate social media platforms, pages and channels into the functionality of their businesses for sustainable performance. This rhymes well with the findings of [Sendawula et al. \(2022\)](#) who identified lack of skills as one of the factors that impede the potential of micro and small businesses in Uganda to effectively adopt social media for their sustainable growth. This suggests that entrepreneurs or owner –managers with insufficient competencies may not be able to use social media in their businesses for sustainable performance.

In *H2*, we sought to establish whether social media privacy matters for sustainable performance of SMEs. Truly, our results confirmed the hypothesis since social media privacy was found to be a significant predictor of sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. This demonstrates that when the SME fraternity is not bothered to put business information on social media platforms, does not think twice while publishing business information and is not worried to update business information social media platforms, customers will get updates about what is being offered and thus becoming more profitable. In addition, when SME owner-managers are aware of the way; data is collected, processed and used via social media platforms and can competently protect customers' personal information provided via social media platforms, it will contribute to an improvement in their performance. Overall, social media privacy makes entrepreneurs confident while integrating social media into the functionality of their businesses and as such, publish vital information about their products, guide the community on how the product is used and the way waste materials should be handled after product usage for the benefit of the current and the future generations.

Our findings are in agreement with [Oywaya \(2023\)](#) who reported that when social media platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, Google Plus, LinkedIn and Twitter have privacy, it makes SME owners confident to use them in the functionality of their businesses. However, the qualitative views of the key informants suggest that a significant number of SMEs in Uganda fear to go online because social media platforms have safety and privacy issues that are likely to make their businesses face several challenges compared to operating physically. This is also in agreement with [Sawy and Bögenhold \(2023\)](#) who reported that social media users like small business owners indicated awareness of social media threats and the need to control personal and business information against unauthorized users. As such, promotion of social media privacy and empowering the business community on how it is done should be done urgently with a goal of promoting social media usage for sustainable business performance in the global south.

6. Summary and conclusions

The overarching objective of this study is to establish whether social media competencies and privacy matter for sustainable performance of SMEs. This was achieved using a cross-sectional design where a mixed-methods approach was used to comprehensively understand the study phenomenon. Study findings indicated that both social media competencies and

privacy matter for sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. However, social media privacy matters most as compared to social media competencies.

From the study findings, practical implications are drawn to the policy makers, academicians and the SME fraternity. Specifically, the policy makers especially the Ministry of Information, Communication Technology and National Guidance, the National Information Technology Authority – Uganda and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation should develop, publish and promote social media privacy guidelines that are aimed at increasing social media safety and security. This will enable the SME fraternity to develop more trust in social media platforms, pages and channels for increased sustainable performance of SMEs in Uganda. For private organizations such as UMA and Uganda Small Scale Industries Association, they should provide streamlined trainings and refresher trainings to their members to avail them with relevant and ever revolving social media competencies to sustainably operate their ventures.

For academics, our findings demonstrated that social media competencies and social media privacy matter for increased sustainable performance of SMEs. Finally, the SME owner-managers should acquire and update their technical and soft social media skills and knowledge to become more competent in using social media for sustainable performance of their businesses. In addition, business owner-managers should manage business information posted on their social media platforms by allowing customers to only have access to the public information posted, limiting customers from updating business social media platforms, developing a control policy that is verified/monitored by a reputable third party for protecting customers' personal information and operating verified social media platforms. This will enable the SME fraternity to achieve privacy of their social media platforms that will translate into improved sustainable performance.

7. Limitation and future direction

This study like any other investigations has some limitations that can be addressed by future studies. In particular, the study adopted a cross-sectional design where data were collected at one point in time and the findings from such studies are always limited to the current period only hence, future studies should look at a longitudinal research design where businesses are monitored for a long period of time to explore how social media competencies and privacy bring about sustainable performance. The study also focused on social media competencies and privacy as predictors of sustainable performance; future scholars can explore other antecedents of sustainable performance. Moreover, we focused on the members of UMA, presenting a need for future studies to investigate SMEs in the whole country or in contexts that are outside Uganda.

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