How to design for marketing strategies of local shops in the crisis?

Professional Portfolio
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1. Introduction

My name is Atousa Ghahramani. I study Master of Digital Media at Victoria University. I completed an internship in Digital Marketing in a large software company in Australia. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science, diploma of Business & Commerce and Certificate II in Customer Engagement. I established a trade and marketing company 10 years ago with the aim of marketing and exporting Australian made products to the overseas market. I have more than 15 years of experience in the sales and marketing industry and developed business and marketing of more than 10 SME companies for the local and international market. Recently, I participated in a project with Maribyrnong City Council to improve the performance of the small businesses in the Footscray area during the covid-19 lockdown.

This academic portfolio is prepared to compile selected documents and proofs to illustrate my accomplishments during the past years. The earned experiences, knowledge and skills encouraged me to integrate my achievements to develop a new idea. The focus would be to design marketing strategies for the local shops and plan hands-on workshops for the managers to develop their own digital transformation. The aim is to improve the performance of small businesses through recommending tailored marketing strategies and educating the retailers to build digital literacy skills.

The three major areas that have been addressed in this portfolio are including educational, research and activities development. This portfolio covers various documents to analyse the existing problem of retailers in different aspects, consisting of a research report, video presentation, marketing report, whiteboard challenge, workshop report, professional presentation and professional poster. The documents are attached to this portfolio and also are available on my website.

The portfolio has been created to apply for the job vacancies that conform to my past skills and experiences. I seek to work with marketing consulting companies who are interested in growing fashion retail with the aim of enhancing my work performance in the long term. A cover letter and tailored CV are prepared to apply for the defined position.

2. My website

Data analytics empowers a marketing consultant to analyse the collected data from the customer trends to improve the products and services and make effective decisions for the future. Data analytics can enhance the understanding of customers' behaviour along the journey from the beginning to the final decisions.

A Github website has been developed based on data analytics skills to present a clearer picture of my performance in the projects. All updated documents can be found on my website.

3. Research report

Why does experiential research need academic research? Ken Grant et al (2001) believes that the combination of research and marketing has enabled the connection between academic research and decision-making when evaluating SME companies . A marketing consultant would be able to benefit from academic research to connect theory and practice to design more effectively.

The prepared research report focuses on exploring the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Australian economy in the retail industry and evaluates the role of digital media during the restrictions caused by the pandemic. This research studies the trend of digital consumption during the pandemic and predicts the changes in consumer behavior in the future. This report has been supported by a qualitative method through conducting semi-structured interviews. To collect deeper information and for a better understanding of the problem, two interviews scheduled with the project manager of Maribyrnong City Council and the business owner of Merge Fashion retail shop. The answers to the prepared open ended questions could clarify the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the retailers as the main problem.(File1 attached)

4. Learning & Teaching symposium

A voice over video presentation has been submitted to the L&T symposium on September 23, 2020 based on analysing the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the retail community and evaluating the importance of digital media in communication and awareness during the lockdown. The aim is to present the impact of social distancing on the consumer behavior and the trend of online shopping in Australia during the pandemic. Following the increase of E-commerce during the restrictions in Australia, small businesses are required to move towards creating online marketplaces. Digital technology and specifically social media have played a significant role in building effective communication in the retail sector to connect businesses and customers.(Figures 1-5)

Figure 1

Role of Digital Media in the community during COVID-19

Presentation By

Shirin Noori

Saswot Man Shrestha

Atousa Ghahramani

Suresh Tamang

(Freepik 2020)

Figure 2

Social media impact on community during COVID-19

- Increasing digital technology consumption.
- People quarantined in homes have time at their disposal, and many choose to spend it on social media.
- Online sales were up 76% over year compared with June 2019.
- People are spending 70% more time across all social media apps.
- Social media platforms are playing substantial role in retailers' marketing .
- Social media can enhance customer outreach at little cost.
- Popularity of takeaway business in Melbourne's lockdown.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

5. Marketing strategy recommendations

The Maribyrnong City Council project has been initiated in response to COVID-19 restrictions on trade which affected the consumers spendings and traffic in the footscray area. It was essential to carry out situation analysis to analyse company, customers, competitors, collaborators, context and also capability analysis including SWOT analysis for each shop. After comprehensive market research, sustainable marketing strategies have been recommended to the retailer to improve the performance of the shop during the pandemic and also after the crisis.

Merge Fashion is a boutique that supplies clothes to women for more than 13 years in Footscray mall. Before Covid-19 pandemic, Anna the business owner, earned a high revenue following the support of her loyal customers and according to competitive prices and many seasonal discounts. The business was forced to shut down following 75% loss in profit and for the lack of online presence to connect with the customers.

Recently, there are many local shops around us that are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A marketing consultant can assist them to survive during the pandemic and grow after the crisis by recommending appropriate marketing strategies. The attached report has been provided for Merge fashion following a wide range of situation and capability analysis of the shop. It includes a variety of unique digital/online and offline/traditional marketing strategies tailored for this shop.

The shop would be able to use them any time and when is necessary according to the defined marketing budget in a period of time.

A similar report can be provided and extended to the other shops, boutiques and fashion retailers. This step-by-step instruction is simple and easy to understand by the business owners and managers. A marketing consultant is always ready to support the business to answer any question and assist during the process.(File2 attached)

6. Whiteboard Challenge

Lack of online connection between the small businesses and the customers has been identified as the critical problem in the world of social distancing. Among the digital media tools, using retail apps is found as the most interactive platform to connect the retailers with their customers in a short time. Creating an app and practicing E-commerce is recognised as the best solution for the retailers to survive during the pandemic and grow after the crisis.

Figure 6 presents the whiteboard challenge which has been organised with Maribyrnong City Council in response to the problem raised by COVID-19 pandemic for the shops located in the Footscray area. The aim was to convince the council to invest in mobile apps for the local retailers. The zoom meeting with the council managers has been scheduled online and the whiteboard discussion implemented through "Miro" which is an online visual platform with high capability and flexibility for teamwork and discussion.
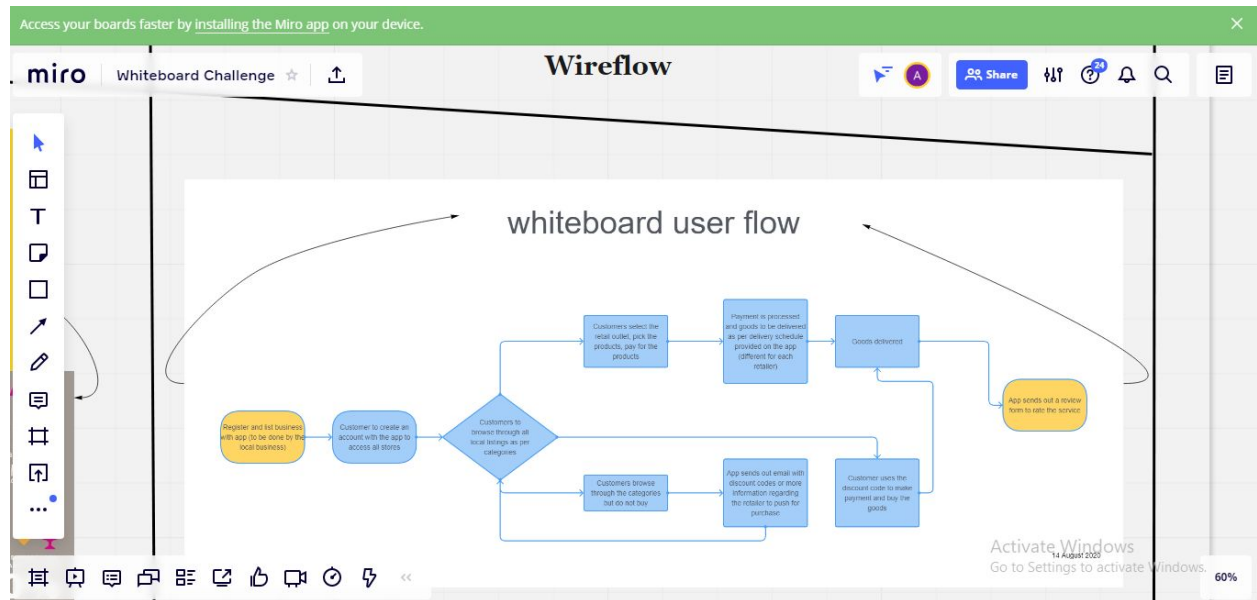
Figure 6
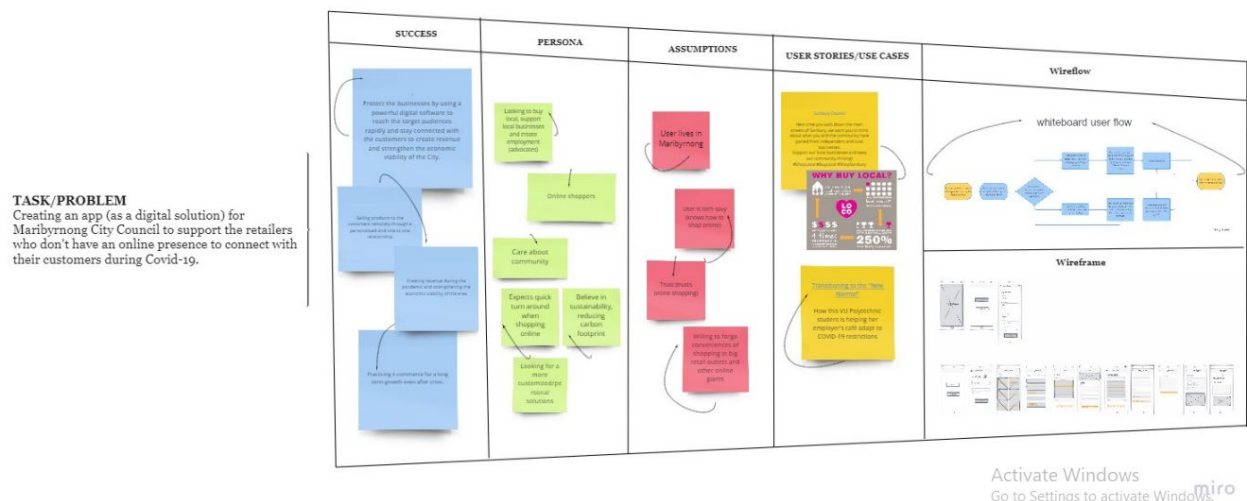
The advantage of this whiteboard challenge was to engage a group of experts in the discussion and benefit from their points of view to design for the problem in the most effective way. Eventually, the designed mobile application has been approved by the council managers for the local shops in order to connect the businesses to the customers. This application enables business to manage the customer relationship during the time and through E-commerce. The mockups of wireflow and wireframe (UI prototype) of the mobile retail app are illustrated in Figure 7 and 8.

Figure 7

Figure 8
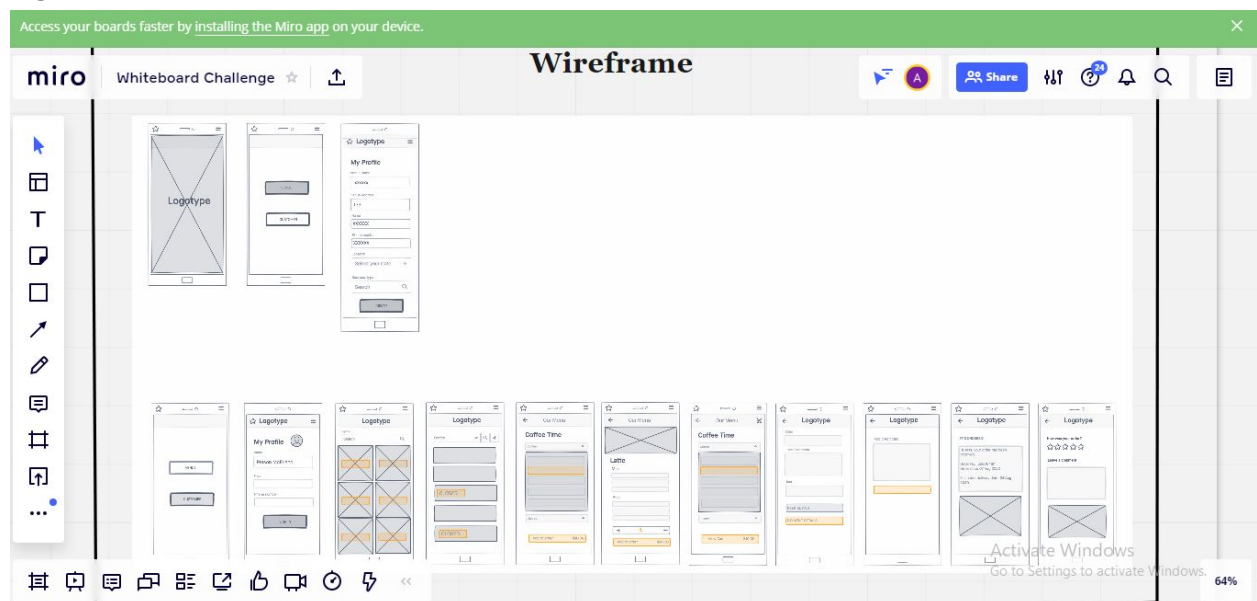
7. International Visualisation conference September 2020

Data Analysis Student Association (DASA) is Victoria University affiliate established with the aim of assisting students across Melbourne and Sydney through running tutorial, consultation sessions and workshops to improve the technology skills of students. All sessions are implemented online due the covid-19 pandemic by using Zoom platform. Zoom is one of the most interactive online tools for educational purposes.

A hands-on training workshop was carried out for two hours on September 7, 2020 in the International Visualisation conference to present the efficiency of the workshop in enhancing digital skills. (Figure 9)

The experience with running remote hands-on training workshops and online tutorial sessions could be applied to online sessions for improving technology skills of business owners. The aim is to encourage business owners to attend the online workshops and build digital literacy. The learned skills will be used in digital transformation of the business and creating online marketplaces. They will learn to create google accounts, build websites, create social media accounts, design digital flyers and prints, create apps and use many other digital techniques for their own business along with a digital marketing consultant.

Figure 9

7.1 Social media marketing for the workshop

Facebook, as a cost-effective and popular social media platform, will be used to advertise the workshop on the group page of retailers and also on the public page. Impressive posts will be designed to attract business owners and managers to attend the workshop. Figure 10 shows an example of a post on Facebook to promote the workshop.

Figure 10
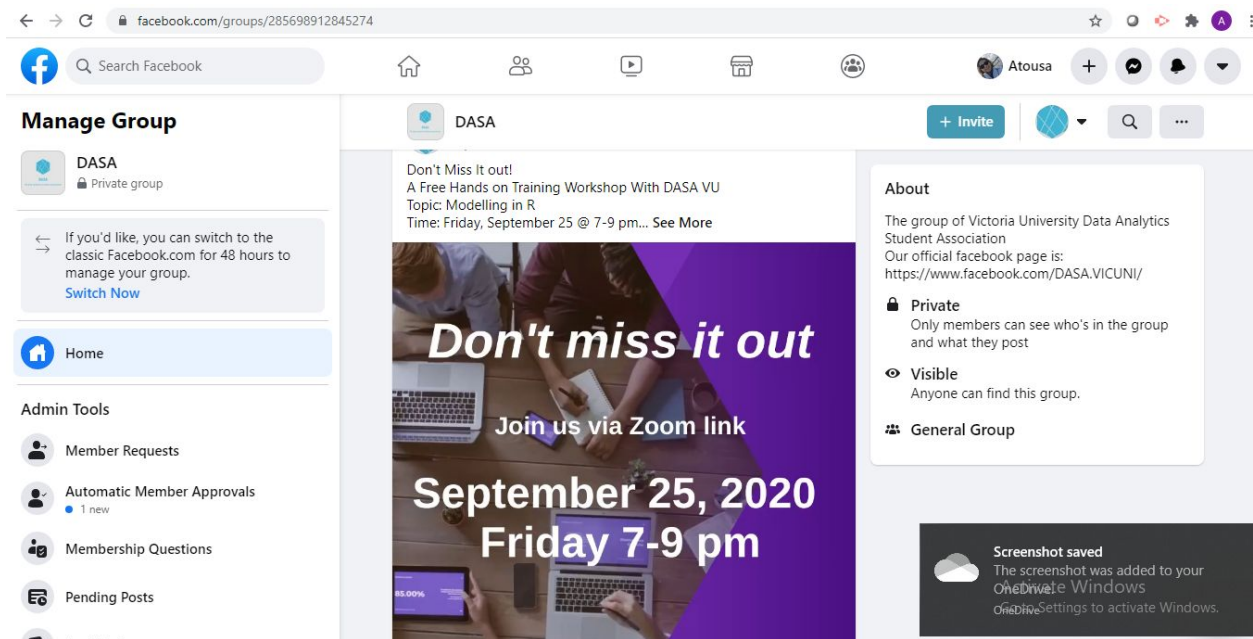
7.2 Digital escape room for the workshop

Interactive tools such as Digital Escape Room are designed to collect information about the knowledge of the participants. This digital escape room encourages them to enjoy the workshop while learning new skills. They can use their phones or computers to solve a digital puzzle and run through a scenario to the next step just through correct answers. A link will be shared with the attendees in the workshop to collect the information. (Figure 11)

Figure 11

8. Professional Presentation

A professional presentation has been prepared to persuade the audiences and motivate them to follow the marketing instructions. The audiences will be the business owners, council managers and consulting company managers. The presentation is a project overview by focusing on the problem and the resolutions. It is designed on Canva which is a powerful graphic platform to demonstrate the concept through attractive images.(File3 attached)

9. Professional Poster

A high resolution digital poster has been created on Canva, as a professional graphic design platform. The poster promotes a free online workshop with the aim of improving digital skills of the retailers and business owners. The digital poster will be advertised on social media, websites and other online environments. It is also possible to print this HR poster in A3, A2 and A1 sizes and advertise it in the office, the local shops and local events. This is more attractive and cheaper than advertising on TV or radio. It is visible easily online or on outdoor billboards and can target the retailers in a specific location (Cambrian Printers, 2015). (File4 attached)

10. Reflective report

10.1 Critical reflection & Achievements

The restrictions caused by COVID-19 pandemic affected most of my activities in the project. It was difficult to communicate properly with the council managers and the business owners. I have been informed that they are not comfortable to do online interviews through meeting tools such as Zoom or Google Meet and they could only answer the questions through email. It was difficult to empathise with them when I was not able to see their emotional gestures or sensitive moods to understand their problems properly during the interview. Face-to-face communication builds environments that inspire the participants to engage in brainstorming and innovation which is important for satisfaction and growth (official blog-Australian Institute of Business, 2017). I was planning marketing strategies for the shop while physical visits were not permitted. Therefore, I started searching online for hours to collect sufficient information about the situation of the city or the potential customers and competitors. Although it was necessary to explore the online markets to build an online marketplace for the shops. One of the most important issues with the marketing strategies that I have planned for the businesses was lack of marketing budget plan (Westwood, J., 2016). Because the business owners avoided disclosing their financial details, I missed to consider the budget plan in the marketing plan. It was difficult to build close contacts and communicate with the business owners to collect sufficient information about their business for the lack of technology skills and poor English language. I recommended digital marketing strategies to the shop without knowing enough about the level of their digital literacy or the other marketing skills. It could be more meaningful and effective if I was able to move step-by-step and receive feedback from them. Unfortunately, it was not possible to meet the business owners and managers in person to explain the steps precisely in the lockdown situation. I recommended to the council to share a questionnaire with the business owners and managers to collect more detailed information about their requirements and expectations. Although the council was so excited to support the businesses through initiating this project, I have not received any response to my request yet. Unfortunately, further restrictions slowed down the progress of this project. The experience with the government and retailers in the real world improved my marketing skills. I learned how to benefit from multichannel marketing in the retail industry and provide clearer guidelines and build customized approaches. I learned to use difficulties as opportunities in hard times to develop new ideas and be creative to design for the future. I feel more confident and could discover more capabilities in myself. I learned to be a good listener and empathise with people by listening to their stories. I had the chance to practice remote working in a team with diverse people from diverse industries in one project. I learned how to use my past experiences in a new field. I am so satisfied with the belief of growing and improving my skills when assisting the other people to grow. It was a mind changing project for me and definitely affects my future plans.

I worked with cooperative team members to write the report for the research project and to prepare the presentation for the L&T symposium. The most important factor that influenced the effectiveness of our team activity was the diverse background of the members (Tohidi, 2011). It was really difficult to communicate with each other according to the life time management in this difficult time but a new challenge for all of us to still be concentrated when progressing a project

online. Barry CA et al.(1999) propose to employ reflexivity as a team activity, through sharing of reflexive writing and group discussions to raise issues and improve the productivity of the team and quality of the research. We used whatsapp group account and google doc to discuss and share our points of view as the most interactive strategies to lift the issues and improve the quality of team activities. However, we used this valuable opportunity to learn and practice how to work remotely. I also use this opportunity to connect with the other organisations in the world to develop new knowledge and skills at no cost.

As I am always excited to learn new technology skills, I created my professional presentation on Canva to make it more illustrative and interactive and also benefit from the available options to build a presentation including recording a video presentation. It was time consuming to use this platform for the first time but I could use a variety of graphics to design a comprehensive presentation. Although I wanted to record my presentation, later I decided to present it live to improve my oral presentation skills. Unfortunately, I faced a problem at the beginning of my presentation. It was really slow and I could not run it easily according to the technical issue. I practiced many times before and presented for myself without any problem. Later, I found out that I shouldn't open zoom and canva in the same time on my laptop. The best way is to first download the presentation. However, I will never present from the original platform again.

10.2 Future plan

Following the influence of the maribyrnong City Council project on my future career plan, I am interested to expand this project to new groups of local shops and communities. To complete my research, I am preparing a short and productive questionnaire to collect more information from a diverse population of the owners and managers of small businesses. I will share the questionnaire online or in pen and paper when it is possible in the near future. As I believe face-to-face communication is necessary to understand the problems deeply, I am going to schedule face-to-face interviews to collect deeper information from the community when permitted. One of my important plans is to analyse social media for better understanding of consumers' behaviors in retail shopping. I would be able to access valuable information from the customers and retailers with a low cost through analysing social media contents.

For my future career, I think to be focused on retail industry through following options:

-   The first one is to search and apply for the relevant positions to my skills and experiences and work with the interested companies.
-   According to past experiences in running my own business, the next option would be to register a consulting company in Melbourne and focus on the retail industry. I plan to visit the local shops one-on-one and recommend suitable digital and offline marketing strategies to improve the performance of their business. As I am living in Knox city, I plan to prepare a proposal and submit to the Knox City Council following my experience with Maribyrnong City Council to improve the economy of the city.

11. Conclusion

It is necessary to communicate with communities through listening to their stories when talking to them. To be able to design for the retail community, we need to ensure our reliability and effectiveness to those who are affected by the crisis. It is important to understand the retailers' requirements and also their preferable channels and trusted sources. We need to be flexible in using new channels when communicating with the retail sector. It is important to concentrate on the goals and objectives to target the community before deciding about the selected channels (UNHCR Innovation, 2020).

The most appropriate way to create a reliable connection with the retailers and business owners of the local shops is face-to-face communication. A human to human connection is necessary for better understanding of their needs and expectations. Furthermore, it is required to talk to more people in the community. Quantitative analysis should be organised to reach more demographics, including online surveys and pen and paper surveys when it is permitted. Qualitative methods through face-to-face interviews should be conducted when it is possible. However, although we are living in a digital world and digital media plays a significant role in connecting people in the COVID-19 crisis, we cannot ignore the importance of human to human communications.

We are also required to evaluate the retail market from the customers' point of view and understand their requirements and expectations from the local shops. It is obvious that the customers will always need to shop in brick-and-mortar. People don't just go to the shops and malls to buy products, they also need to have enjoyment and unique experiences. It is important that the retailers think about creating new and unique in-store engagements for re-opening their shops for the customers' entertainment. It is essential for the business owners to not only plan to create an online marketplace and use digital marketing strategies to engage the customers online, but also adopt traditional and offline marketing strategies to attract customers to their physical store. They need to plan for short term and long term goals according to the defined marketing budget in a period of time.

The question still remains that; Which marketing strategies provide the best support for both businesses and customers in the retail industry after the crisis, online or offline?

12. Job application

As the first step to follow the career plans, an application including a tailored CV and cover letter have been prepared to apply for the position. This position matches my past experiences and qualifications and is found through searches on job websites. (Figure 12)

Figure 12
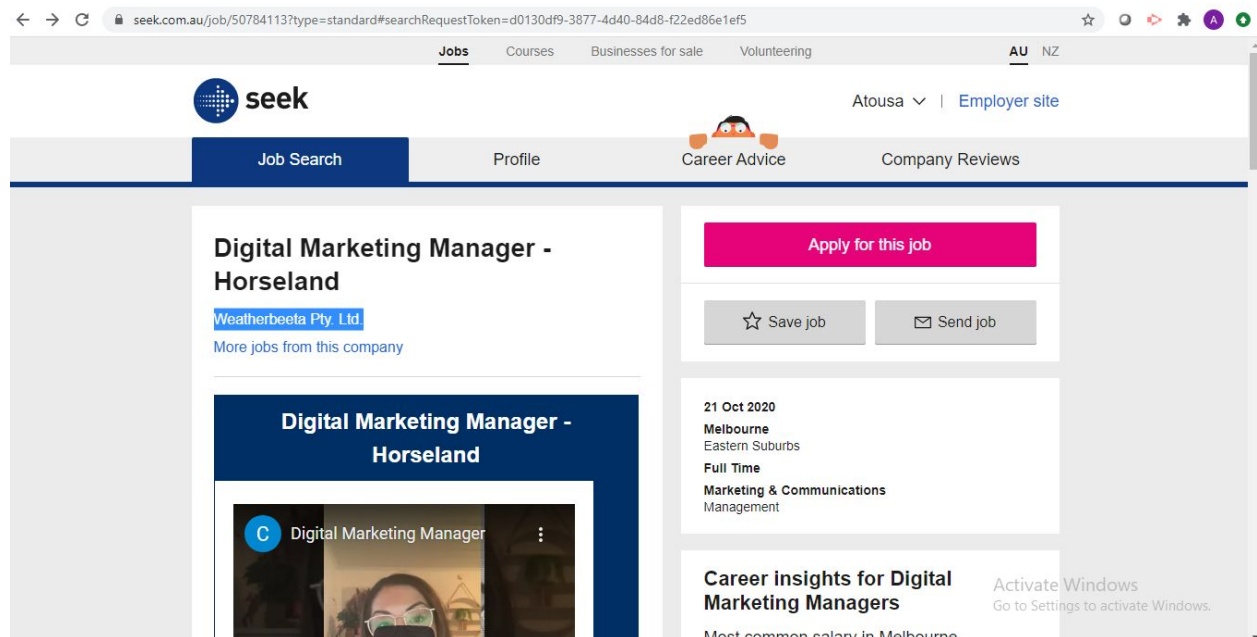
13. Curriculum Vitae

A CV including the history of my employment, education and skills has been attached to explain more in detail about my background and past experiences to support this job application.(File5 attached)

14. Cover letter

A cover letter has been provided to describe the interest,qualification and goals to apply for the advertised position. (File6 attached)

15. References

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