

DIGITAL MARKETING PRACTICES AMONG MALAYSIAN WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS OF MICRO, SMALL, AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the level of awareness and utilization of digital marketing tools among women entrepreneurs operating Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in central Malaysia. The rapid growth of digital marketing has reshaped business strategies worldwide, yet women entrepreneurs in MSMEs often face unique challenges in leveraging these tools effectively. To assess this, a mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating a survey and interviews with 22 women entrepreneurs. The study aims (1) to examine the level of awareness of digital marketing tools, (2) to analyze the extent to which these entrepreneurs utilize digital marketing tools in their businesses, and (3) to identify the challenges and opportunities in adopting digital marketing strategies. The findings indicate that while there is a moderate level of awareness of popular digital marketing tools such as social media platforms, many respondents reported limited use due to challenges such as a lack of skills, time constraints, limited budgets, a shortage of skilled employees, difficulties in measuring return on investment (ROI), and limited access to devices. The analysis also revealed that women entrepreneurs who actively engage in digital marketing strategies tend to use platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to connect with customers and build brand visibility. However, their approach is often informal, lacking comprehensive digital strategies that can maximize reach and impact. Additionally, respondents identified significant opportunities in expanding their customer base and enhancing competitiveness, but they emphasized the need for better training programs and support networks to overcome barriers. This paper contributes to the understanding of awareness, utilization, and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in MSMEs in Malaysia regarding the adoption of digital marketing tools, providing insights into how these entrepreneurs navigate the digital landscape to overcome barriers and leverage digital platforms for business growth and competitiveness.

Keywords: *Women Entrepreneurs, Digital Marketing, MSMEs, Womenpreneur, Training and Support*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital marketing has become an essential component of business strategy, transforming how companies interact with customers and promote their products or services. The rapid growth of digital marketing has reshaped business strategies worldwide, enabling businesses to adapt quickly to changing market conditions and consumer behaviors. The rise of the internet, social media platforms, and mobile technology has revolutionized marketing by providing businesses with cost-effective and scalable tools to reach a global audience (Mishra, 2020).

For Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), digital marketing offers a unique opportunity allowing MSMEs to create and execute marketing campaigns with limited resources. Unlike larger corporations with substantial budgets for TV commercials, print ads, and outdoor billboards, MSMEs typically operate with tighter financial constraints. Digital marketing, however, allows these businesses to access a wide range of tools and platforms at relatively low costs (Manzoor et al., 2020). For example, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Furthermore, the rise of e-commerce platforms has made it easier for MSMEs to sell their products or services online, expanding their market reach far beyond their physical locations

(Shuraddin & Adnan, 2022; Gao et al., 2023). Platforms like Shopify, Lazada, and Shopee provide affordable solutions for MSMEs to set up online stores, manage customer relationships, and promote products through digital ads (Cen et al., 2019).

Despite the promising opportunities that digital marketing offers, many MSMEs face significant challenges in effectively implementing these strategies. These challenges include limited resources, budget constraints, and a lack of understanding of digital marketing strategies (Sentoso et al., 2023; Rachmawati, 2024). While digital technology plays an increasingly vital role in business operations and consumer behavior, many MSMEs continue to face difficulties in effectively leveraging digital marketing channels (Saputri & Kurniasih, 2020). As a result, the adoption of digital marketing tools among MSMEs remains significantly lower than the overall growth of internet users (Saputri & Kurniasih, 2020).

Women entrepreneurs play a crucial role in MSMEs, particularly in developing countries, where they contribute significantly to capital management, production, distribution, and marketing (Indriani et al., 2024). Their involvement in MSMEs not only drives economic growth but also fosters social empowerment by enhancing livelihoods, self-confidence, decision-making capacity, and financial autonomy (Feyisa & Tamene, 2019). However, despite making up nearly half the population, women's entrepreneurship rates remain lower than men's, with higher participation concentrated in rural micro-enterprises (Rani, 2021). Nonetheless, women-owned enterprises are expanding rapidly, breaking traditional barriers, and playing an increasingly vital role in economic progress (Khan, Bhatt & Amu, 2014).

Women entrepreneurs in MSMEs face several challenges in adopting digital marketing strategies. Limited awareness and technical skills, restricted access to capital, gender biases, and work-life balance constraints often hinder their ability to fully leverage digital platforms (Mannummel & Jerome, 2024). Many women entrepreneurs struggle with digital literacy, adapting to emerging technologies, and effectively managing digital marketing campaigns, which can limit their business growth and competitiveness (Trisninawati & Sartika, 2024). Additionally, despite representing a significant portion of the population, women's participation in entrepreneurship—particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises—remains relatively low due to structural and societal barriers (Rani, 2021).

While women entrepreneurs may face unique limitations, the digital era presents a valuable opportunity for them to overcome these challenges. The rise of e-commerce platforms and digital marketing has enabled businesses owned by women entrepreneurs to access broader markets and operate more efficiently, regardless of size or geographic location (Pergelova et al., 2019). Digital tools provide a cost-effective way for women entrepreneurs to promote their products, engage with customers, and expand their reach into both local and global markets. These platforms empower women to compete with larger businesses, even with limited financial and technical resources, by leveraging digital strategies that enhance visibility and foster customer engagement (Kamberidou, 2020).

To address these challenges, this study aims to explore the digital marketing practices among Malaysian women entrepreneurs in the MSME sector, identifying key barriers and opportunities they encounter. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives: (1) to examine the level of awareness of digital marketing tools among women-led MSMEs, (2) to analyze the extent to which these entrepreneurs utilize digital marketing tools in their businesses, and (3) to identify the challenges and opportunities in adopting digital marketing strategies. By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and women entrepreneurs to foster greater digital inclusion and business growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have reported that the current level of awareness and adoption of digital marketing tools and platforms among MSMEs in Malaysia remains relatively low, with micro and small enterprises continuing to rely on traditional marketing methods (Hamid & Aliman, 2020; Faudzi, Bakar & Ahmad, 2024). This is due to several challenges that hinder the adoption of digital marketing among MSMEs in Malaysia, such as lack of knowledge, skills, and resources (Hamid & Aliman, 2020; Othman et al., 2022), as well as difficulties in product management and human resources (Othman et al., 2022).

These challenges are especially critical for women entrepreneurs in MSMEs, as they often face additional barriers in adopting digital marketing. Lack of finance is a major obstacle, with 79.2% of Muslim women entrepreneurs reporting this issue (Ilhaamie et al., 2014). Other significant challenges include intense competition, affecting 90.3% of micro and small business owners in Kuching-Sarawak (Loveline & Uchenna, 2014), and lack of demand (50.9%) (Ilhaamie et al., 2014). Family responsibilities, gender stereotypes (Chipfunde, Yahaya & Othman, 2021), lack of technical skills, access to capital, and gender bias also pose difficulties (Mannummel & Jerome, 2024).

Despite these obstacles, digital marketing offers significant potential for business growth and brand awareness (Makrides, Vrontis & Christofi, 2020). Social media platforms, in particular, have proven to be highly effective for expanding brand reach and increasing sales, especially for small businesses and MSMEs (Rasheed & Nafiz, 2022; Jalil et al., 2022). These platforms offer a cost-effective way to connect with a large and diverse audience, breaking down geographical and financial barriers that traditionally limited marketing efforts (Yulisa, Utama & Ruslim, 2022). To fully leverage digital marketing, women entrepreneurs need to improve their understanding and literacy in this area, especially in developing business marketing strategies (Maharani et al., 2021). Choosing appropriate social media platforms and managing content effectively are key factors in successful digital marketing implementation for women-led MSMEs (Maharani et al., 2021).

In summary, the literature reveals that while the awareness and adoption of digital marketing tools among MSMEs in Malaysia remain relatively low, there is growing recognition of the significant potential that digital marketing holds for business growth and brand awareness. Despite these opportunities, many MSMEs, particularly those owned by women entrepreneurs, face substantial challenges in adopting digital marketing strategies. While existing studies highlight these issues, there remains a gap in understanding how women entrepreneurs in Malaysia specifically navigate these barriers and leverage digital marketing tools to overcome them. Furthermore, the role of tailored support, education, and resources to empower women entrepreneurs in adopting digital marketing has yet to be thoroughly explored. This study aims to address this gap by examining the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in MSMEs.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining a survey and group interviews to gather data on digital marketing awareness and practices among Malaysian women entrepreneurs from the B40 income group who operate micro, small, and medium enterprises. The participants of this study were 22 Malaysian women entrepreneurs from the B40 income group operating micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). This demographic was selected due to their significant economic contributions despite facing financial limitations, digital literacy gaps, and restricted access to digital marketing tools. Women entrepreneurs, particularly from lower-income groups, often struggle with digital adoption due to socio-economic barriers, making them a critical group for studying digital marketing challenges and opportunities.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant characteristics aligned with the study’s objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to select individuals who can provide in-depth insights into a specific phenomenon (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). In this case, participants were drawn from a workshop on creative content creation for TikTok, organized by the Video Innovation Club from Fakulti Teknologi dan Sains Maklumat, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This selection ensured that respondents were either actively engaged in or exploring digital marketing strategies, making them suitable for examining the adoption of digital tools.

Additionally, heterogeneous (maximum variation) sampling was applied to include women entrepreneurs with varying levels of business experience and involvement in diverse industries, such as food and beverage, health products, and service-based businesses (Patton, 2014). Their experience ranged from less than a year to over five years, allowing for comparative insights into digital marketing adoption across different stages of entrepreneurship. The chosen sample size of 22 is aligned with qualitative research recommendations, where depth of understanding is prioritized over generalizability (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Thus, this study ensures a contextually rich and analytically meaningful selection of respondents, capturing real-world challenges and opportunities in digital marketing adoption among Malaysian women entrepreneurs in the MSME sector. The age distribution of the participants, ranging from 20 to 65 years, represented a diverse group of women entrepreneurs, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Age Category Distribution of Participants

Age Category (Years)	Number of Participants
20 – 29	2
30 – 39	6
40 – 49	6
50 – 59	6
60 – 65	2
Total	22

The data collection consisted of two main instruments. First, prior to the start of the workshop, participants completed a structured survey designed to gather data on key areas such as demographic profiles, levels of awareness and practice of digital marketing tools, utilization of digital tools for marketing purposes, including the most frequently used social media platforms, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face. Following the survey, group interviews were conducted where participants were divided into smaller groups of 4-5 informants. These semi-structured interviews aimed to explore each key area covered by the survey in greater depth, offering qualitative insights and context to complement the survey findings. The survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize levels of awareness and use of digital marketing tools, and the challenges and opportunities. Following the data analysis for the survey, audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim to create an accurate record of informants' responses. During the coding phase, key phrases and concepts were highlighted through line-by-line coding to capture meaningful segments of data. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that reflected major aspects of the informants' digital marketing awareness, practices, as well as challenges and opportunities.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the survey conducted to assess the level of awareness, practices, and challenges related to digital marketing among women entrepreneurs in the MSME sector. The findings are organized into three key areas: the level of awareness of digital marketing tools, the utilization of digital marketing tools, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in adopting digital marketing strategies.

The level of awareness of digital marketing tools

The data on the level of awareness of digital marketing tools reveals varying levels of familiarity among the women entrepreneurs. Participants have a moderate to high awareness of websites as a digital marketing tool, with 31.82% reporting a moderate level of awareness and 27.27% at a high level. A smaller segment (13.64%) had very low or very high awareness. Social media marketing stands out as the most widely recognized digital marketing tool, with 40.91% of respondents reporting very high awareness, followed by 27.27% at a high level. Only 4.55% of participants reported very low awareness. Awareness of email marketing is somewhat less widespread, with 27.27% of respondents reporting very low awareness and only 4.55% expressing very high awareness. However, 31.82% were moderately aware, and 22.73% had a high level of awareness. Awareness of digital marketing content tools (e.g., content creation and distribution strategies) shows a moderate to high level of recognition, with 31.82% of respondents reporting high awareness and 27.27% expressing very high awareness. Only a small percentage (13.64%) were unaware or had low awareness. The awareness of search engines, such as Google, is comparatively lower, with 36.36% of

respondents reporting very low awareness. However, there is a moderate segment (18.18%) that is moderately aware and another 18.18% with high awareness.

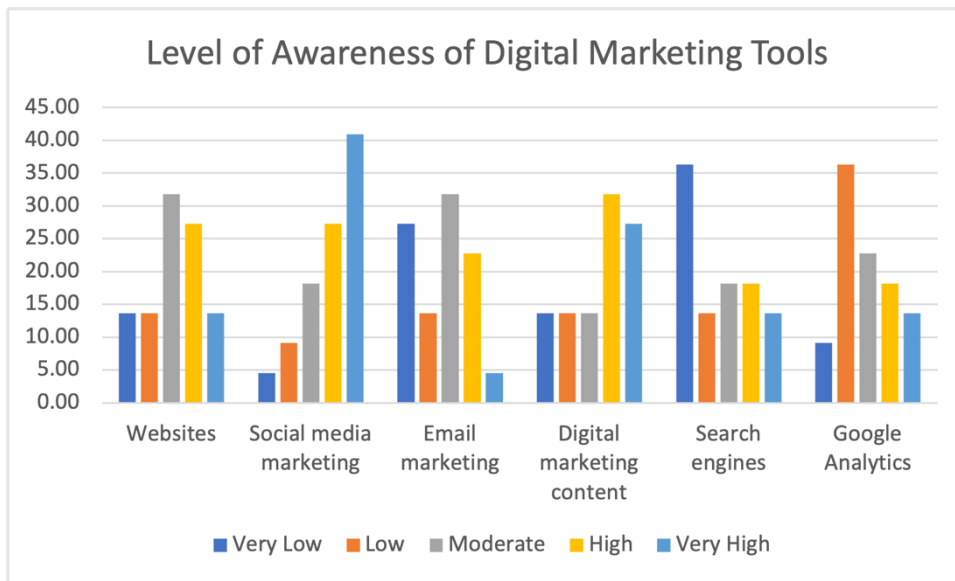


Figure 1: Level of Awareness of Digital Marketing Tools

The awareness levels of social media as a marketing tool are assessed through five key aspects. These include understanding that digital marketing can be effectively conducted on platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Item 1), recognizing the importance of social media management platforms that facilitate interaction and content creation (Item 2), and acknowledging that businesses of all sizes use social media for marketing purposes (Item 3). Additionally, it highlights the awareness that social media marketing can significantly benefit sales and business growth (Item 4), and emphasizes the belief that having a social media presence is essential for businesses today to successfully market their products (Item 5).

The data indicates a high level of awareness and positive attitudes toward the use of social media for marketing purposes. A majority of respondents strongly agreed (77.27%) and agreed (18.18%) that digital marketing can be done on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Only 4.55% remained neutral, and no respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. A significant portion of respondents demonstrated strong comprehension of social media management platforms focused on interaction and content creation, with 45.45% strongly agreeing and 40.91% agreeing. However, 13.64% of respondents selected neutral. Most respondents acknowledged the widespread use of social media for marketing across various business types and sizes, with 72.73% strongly agreeing, 22.73% agreeing and only 4.55% chose neutral. For the item stating that using social media platforms for digital marketing provides many benefits to sales and business, 77.27% strongly agreed and 18.18% agreed. A small 4.55% of respondents chose neutral, and there were no responses for disagreement. Lastly, 77.27% strong agreement and 18.18% agreement, with 4.55% selecting neutral for item 5.

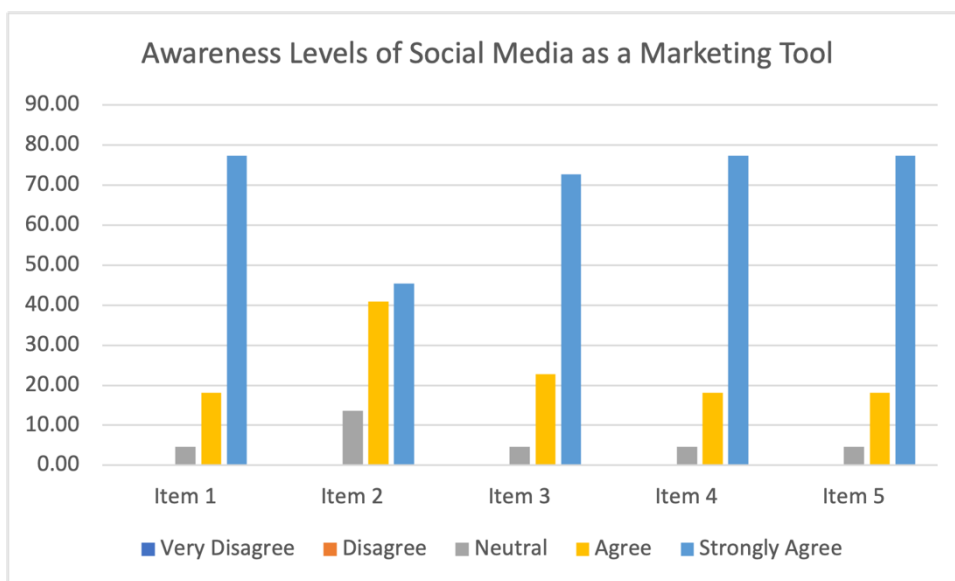


Figure 2: Awareness Levels of Social Media as a Marketing Tool

The utilization of digital marketing tools

The use of websites as a digital marketing tool is relatively moderate, with 22.73% of respondents indicating very low use, 31.82% low, and 22.73% high. However, only 13.64% of respondents report very high usage. Social media marketing shows the highest level of utilization, with 45.45% of respondents indicating very high use. This is followed by 22.73% using it at a high level, showing that social media platforms are a key focus for businesses in their digital marketing strategies. On the lower end, only 9.09% report very low and low usage. Email marketing has a moderate to low adoption rate, with 31.82% of respondents using it at a very low level, and 18.18% using it at low levels. A smaller percentage, 4.55%, utilize it at high or very high levels. Content marketing in digital formats shows a strong presence, with 40.91% of respondents reporting moderate use and 22.73% indicate very high usage. Search engine utilization for digital marketing remains fairly balanced, with 18.18% indicating high use and 22.73% reporting very high usage. The use of Google Analytics shows a more balanced distribution, with 22.73% using it at both low and very high levels.

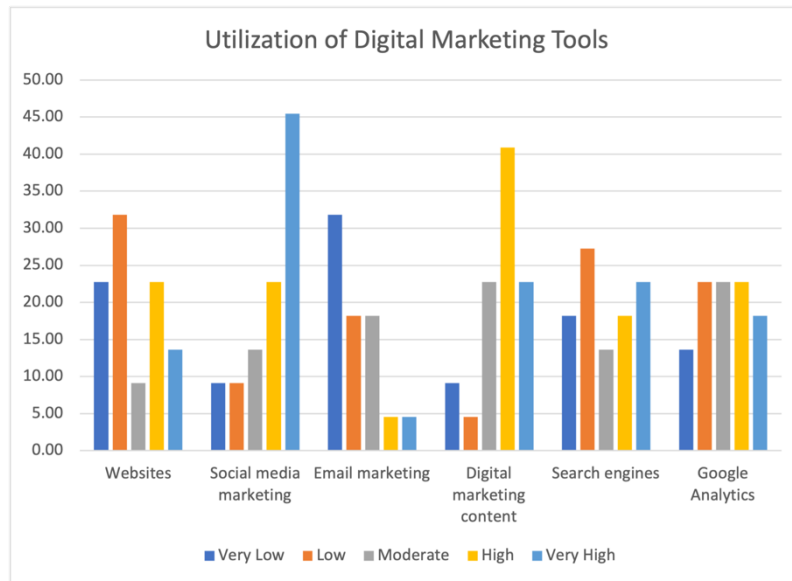


Figure 3: Utilization of Digital Marketing Tools

The challenges and opportunities in adopting digital marketing strategies

The challenges in implementing a digital marketing strategy are influenced by various factors. The most significant obstacles include a lack of skills (77.27%) and time constraints (68.18%). Additionally, limited budgets and the lack of skilled employees each impact 50% of respondents, making it difficult to invest in and execute comprehensive marketing efforts. Measuring the return on investment (ROI) is another challenge, with 36.36% of respondents finding it difficult to assess. Furthermore, limited access to devices and technology remains a barrier for 22.73% of respondents, preventing them from fully leveraging digital marketing tools.

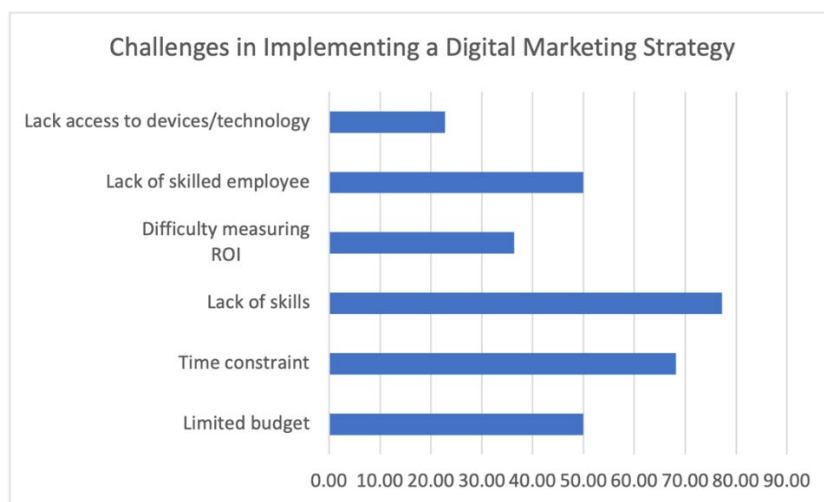


Figure 4: Challenges in Implementing a Digital Marketing Strategy

Insights from group interviews on digital marketing awareness, practices, challenges and opportunities

The group interview responses highlight the crucial role of social media marketing tools in increasing sales and customer engagement for online businesses. Participants emphasized that social media is essential because it is where customers are active, and the traffic on these platforms offers valuable opportunities for businesses to reach their audience. Many also noted that customers prefer to discover products through social media. When asked about the importance of these tools today, respondents unanimously agreed that they are very important. Furthermore, they acknowledged that businesses that do not adopt these digital marketing tools risk being left behind in today's fast-paced digital world.

The insights from the group interview also highlight several factors that may prevent small businesses from using digital marketing tools. Many businesses lack the knowledge of how to effectively use these tools, while others struggle with the skills required to create engaging and creative content. Additionally, some businesses prioritize their core activities, such as selling products, over investing time in marketing efforts, one participant shared:

"We focus more on selling our products because that's the core of our business. Marketing often takes a backseat."

Time constraints and limited financial resources emerged as significant barriers for many of the informants, with several expressing that they struggle to allocate sufficient time or funds for digital marketing initiatives. Many of the small business owners highlighted in the interviews are often overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities, such as managing operations, customer service, and sales, leaving them with little time to focus on learning or implementing digital marketing strategies. Additionally, several informants mentioned that their financial constraints prevent them from investing in digital marketing tools, paying for professional services, or running paid advertising campaigns. This combination of time and budget limitations has led to a reluctance among the informants to prioritize digital marketing, as they perceive it to be an additional burden or an expense they cannot afford.

Although digital marketing is not always a priority for the informants, many of their businesses still make use of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to reach potential customers. Several informants shared that they use these platforms primarily because they are free to use and easy to access. For many small business owners, social media offers an affordable and accessible way to promote their products and engage with their audience without requiring a significant financial investment. The informants noted that platforms like Facebook and Instagram provide an opportunity to showcase their products, interact with customers, and build brand awareness in a way that feels more manageable given their time and budget constraints.

"I use Facebook and Instagram because they're free and easy to connect with customers and show our products..... I can tag my friends and relatives on Facebook, and they can share it to help spread the word."

Most businesses market their products several times a week, with some posting on a daily basis. However, a key challenge they face is getting customers to engage with their posts, which limits the effectiveness of their social media marketing efforts. The group interview revealed that they have not taken significant steps to overcome these challenges, with only a few seeking advice from personal contacts on how to improve their social media strategies. Informants also highlighted technology-related barriers, such as limited knowledge of digital marketing tools and an uncertainty about how to use or learn new tools. Despite these challenges, businesses see opportunities in the digital marketing landscape, particularly in improving creative content. Many still view social media as the most effective and easiest tool for marketing, suggesting they have yet to fully capitalize on its potential.

A closer look at the participants' engagement with digital marketing training reveals that 63% have attended at least one relevant session, indicating an awareness of the need to improve their skills. This suggests that while there is an effort to improve skills, a lack of practical application or further learning may still hinder progress. Only a small number of respondents actively sought advice from personal contacts on how to enhance their social media marketing efforts. Additionally, technology-related barriers such as limited knowledge of tools and uncertainty about how to learn them continue to pose challenges.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that participants have a moderate to high awareness of websites as a digital marketing tool and a high level of awareness and positive attitudes toward social media for marketing purposes. This aligns with previous studies that highlight the increasing role of digital platforms in MSMEs (Saputri & Kurniasih, 2020). According to Rachmawati (2024), social media marketing is becoming the preferred channel among small business owners due to its cost-effectiveness and ease of use. Similarly, Sentoso et al. (2023) found that social media fosters customer engagement and brand visibility, making it a vital tool for micro-entrepreneurs.

Despite the high awareness, the actual use of websites as a digital marketing tool remains moderate. This trend is consistent with prior research that highlights social media's dominance over traditional websites for marketing among MSMEs (Mannummel & Jerome, 2024). Websites require more maintenance and technical expertise, which often discourages small businesses from fully utilizing them (Trisninawati & Sartika, 2024). As a result, many women entrepreneurs prefer social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for customer interaction and content marketing (Rani, 2021).

Additionally, a significant portion of respondents demonstrated strong comprehension of social media management platforms, particularly those that emphasize interaction and content creation. This supports previous studies that suggest social media literacy among entrepreneurs is improving, driven by the increasing availability of online resources and workshops (Khan, Bhatt & Amu, 2014). However, while comprehension is high, practical application varies due to resource constraints.

Although women entrepreneurs in MSMEs recognize the benefits of digital marketing, they face several challenges, including a lack of skills, time constraints, limited budgets, and a shortage of skilled employees. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that highlight financial and technical barriers as key obstacles for MSMEs (Feyisa & Tamene, 2019). According to

Rani (2021), women entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas, often lack access to formal training in digital tools, limiting their ability to leverage online marketing effectively.

Furthermore, work-life balance concerns, particularly for single mothers and those with caregiving responsibilities, further restrict their ability to manage digital marketing efforts (Indriani et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the notion that structural and socio-economic factors significantly impact digital business adoption among women entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the awareness, utilization, and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in MSMEs in Malaysia regarding the adoption of digital marketing tools. The importance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how digital marketing can empower women-led businesses to compete in a rapidly evolving digital economy. The findings from the survey reveal that while there is a moderate level of awareness of digital marketing tools, particularly social media platforms, many women entrepreneurs face significant challenges in fully utilizing these tools. Common obstacles include a lack of technical skills, limited time and budgets, insufficient skilled staff, difficulty in measuring the return on investment (ROI), and restricted access to devices. Despite these barriers, the study highlights that women entrepreneurs who actively engage in digital marketing often leverage platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to enhance brand visibility, connect with customers, and expand their reach. This study bridges the gap in the literature by uncovering the specific barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in adopting digital marketing tools, addressing the limited research on how technical skill deficiencies, time constraints, and budget limitations impact their ability to fully leverage digital platforms for business growth. Based on the findings, relevant stakeholders can develop targeted strategies or frameworks to address the challenges identified in this study effectively.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to note its limitations. The sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, to mitigate this, a group interview was conducted, allowing for deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs. This study contributes to the understanding of the awareness, utilization, and challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs in MSMEs in Malaysia regarding digital marketing adoption. It provides valuable insights into how these entrepreneurs navigate the digital landscape, helping to identify the key barriers they encounter and the strategies that can empower them to fully harness the potential of digital marketing. This research is crucial for informing policies, support programs, and training initiatives aimed at enhancing digital literacy and promoting the growth of women-led businesses in Malaysia.

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