

Digital Marketing Adoption Strategy of Legendary Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar City

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Abstract

This study explores the adoption of digital marketing strategies among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar, Indonesia, focusing on their phased approach, responses to market pressures, and the role of organizational readiness in digital transformation. Utilizing a qualitative case study design, in-depth interviews and observations were conducted with five well-established culinary MSMEs. Thematic analysis and manual coding were used to identify key themes and validate findings on their digital marketing adoption journey. The findings reveal a staged adoption process, beginning with basic social media use and evolving toward e-commerce platforms, targeted advertising, and customer relationship management (CRM) systems. Market pressures—such as heightened competition and shifting consumer preferences—were key drivers, though adoption levels varied. For instance, while 80% of respondents had adopted e-commerce platforms, others remained limited to social media engagement due to lower organizational readiness. Organizational readiness, encompassing technology infrastructure, financial capacity, and leadership attitudes, was crucial for effective digital adoption. The study highlights the need for tailored support, including digital literacy training, financial assistance, and an innovation-friendly culture, to enhance MSME competitiveness in the digital economy. This research contributes to the broader discourse on digital marketing adoption by providing strategic recommendations to support MSME growth in a digital landscape.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; MSMEs; Organizational Readiness; Market Pressures; Digital Transformation

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INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, the transformation of the digital economy has become a catalyst for reshaping global businesses, including the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) sector. Technological advancements present challenges and opportunities, compelling MSMEs to adapt to maintain competitiveness (Polyviou, et.al., 2020). MSMEs play a vital role in the national economies by creating jobs and driving innovation. In Makassar, as in many other regions, MSMEs are the backbone of the local economy, significantly contributing to GDP growth—about 3.5% from 2020 to 2023—and employment (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023), as well as to employment absorption (Naldi, et al., 2022). However, many long-established MSMEs face challenges adapting to increasing competition and evolving consumer preferences.

Adopting digital marketing through e-commerce platforms, social media, and mobile applications has become essential for MSMEs to expand their reach, enhance operational efficiency, and seize new business opportunities (Alifah, et al., 2023; Deku et al., 2024; Obembe & Obembe, 2021; Wu et al., 2024). Digital marketing enables MSMEs not only to survive but also to thrive by responding to market demands with agility (Amiri, et.al., 2023; Patil, et.al., 2022; Sholihin, 2024; Wijaya & Simamora, 2022). Nevertheless, the transition to digital is fraught with challenges, including market pressures and varying levels of organizational readiness, which affect the ability of MSMEs to fully leverage digital marketing strategies (Melo, et.al., 2023).

While previous studies have emphasized the benefits of digital marketing for business growth, few have examined the barriers that long-established MSMEs face in adopting these strategies in response to market pressures and readiness levels. This study addresses this gap by exploring the factors influencing digital marketing adoption among legendary MSMEs in Makassar (Mohammed Shebeen, et.al., 2024). This research aims to provide insights and strategic recommendations to help MSMEs enhance their readiness and competitiveness in the digital economy, thus strengthening the MSME ecosystem and supporting inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Rine & Brown, 2023).

The adoption of digital marketing strategies by MSMEs has been critical in their evolution and adaptation to the modern business landscape. Digital marketing tools like e-commerce platforms, social media, and mobile applications allow MSMEs to reach broader markets and improve operational efficiency. According to Amiri, et al. (2023) and Patil, et.al. (2022), the evolution of MSMEs in adopting digital technologies often begins with the basic use of social media for brand visibility, followed by the gradual integration of more complex tools like customer relationship management (CRM) systems and data analytics. These technologies empower MSMEs to make data-driven decisions and offer personalized customer experiences, crucial in an increasingly competitive market.

Previous studies have highlighted various stages of digital marketing adoption among MSMEs. For instance, Melo, et.al., (2023) emphasize that the initial stages often focus on enhancing online visibility through social media and websites, while more advanced stages include targeted advertising, SEO (Search Engine Optimization), and automated marketing systems. Deku, et.al., (2024) and Wu, et.al., (2024) also argue that the level of technological adoption is influenced by several factors, such as the size of the enterprise, the industry sector, and the technological readiness of the business owners.

Moreover, studies by Alifah, et.al., (2023) suggest that the evolution of digital marketing adoption by MSMEs is not linear. The process often involves learning from trial and error as MSMEs gradually familiarize themselves with the complexities of digital marketing platforms. Mohammed Shebeen, et.al., (2024) further explain that MSMEs prioritizing continuous learning and innovation tend to show greater resilience in adopting new marketing technologies and strategies. This evolution, while slow at times, positions MSMEs to better compete in a digital economy.

However, the literature also highlights MSMEs' challenges in this digital evolution. In a study by Obembe & Obembe (2021), it is observed that limited financial resources, lack of technical expertise, and insufficient digital infrastructure can hinder the effective adoption of digital marketing strategies. For MSMEs to evolve successfully, these barriers must be addressed by

providing targeted training and support, particularly in emerging markets and rural areas where digital literacy remains low (Polyviou, et.al., 2020).

Market pressure plays a significant role in shaping the readiness of MSMEs to adopt digital marketing technologies. As consumer preferences evolve and competition intensifies, MSMEs face increasing pressure to modernize their operations and marketing approaches. Sholihin (2024) and Wijaya & Simamora (2022) discuss how MSMEs operating in competitive environments are more likely to adopt digital marketing strategies in response to the need for greater visibility and customer engagement. In particular, businesses in highly dynamic industries such as retail and hospitality have shown a faster evolution in their adoption of digital tools (Rine & Brown, 2023).

Market pressures, including customer demand for online services, peer competition, and larger corporations' increasing use of digital platforms, often drive MSMEs to innovate. Naldi, et.al., (2022) found that MSMEs experiencing high market competition tend to adopt more agile marketing strategies, such as leveraging data analytics to tailor customer experiences. The study also suggests that MSMEs that align their digital marketing efforts with market demands tend to see improved business performance and customer satisfaction.

On the other hand, organizational readiness is a critical factor influencing the success of digital marketing adoption. According to Rine & Brown (2023), organizational readiness includes several dimensions: the availability of financial resources, the presence of skilled human capital, and the willingness of leadership to invest in digital technologies. Melo, et.al., (2023) add that businesses that exhibit a higher level of readiness—such as those with dedicated IT departments or digital-savvy leadership—are better equipped to manage the complexities of digital transformation.

Furthermore, Mohammed Shebeen, et.al. (2024) highlights the role of organizational culture in determining readiness. MSMEs with a culture that encourages innovation and flexibility are more likely to succeed in implementing digital marketing strategies. In contrast, businesses that resist change or lack a clear vision for digital integration often struggle to meet market demands (Deku, et.al., 2024; Wu, et.al., 2024).

Several studies also point to external factors that influence both market pressures and organizational readiness. For example, Obembe & Obembe (2021) argue that government policies and initiatives promoting digitalization can significantly enhance MSME readiness. Support programs, such as digital literacy training, financial incentives for technology investments, and partnerships with tech companies, are crucial for helping MSMEs overcome the barriers to digital marketing adoption. Without such support, MSMEs may face difficulties adapting to evolving market trends and customer expectations (Alifah, et.al., 2023).

In conclusion, the evolution of MSMEs in adopting digital marketing technologies is closely tied to the market pressures they face and their organizational readiness to adapt. While external challenges such as competition and consumer behavior drive MSMEs toward digital transformation, internal factors such as resources, leadership, and culture determine the speed and success of this evolution (Naldi, et.al., 2022). Therefore, understanding both market pressures and organizational readiness is essential for developing effective strategies supporting MSMEs' digital growth.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the dynamics of digital marketing adoption strategies among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar. A case study approach is chosen due to its suitability in answering "how" and "why" questions related to complex phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). It enables a detailed and holistic investigation into the experiences of MSMEs, particularly their evolution in digital marketing adoption, market pressures, and organizational readiness. The study leverages both the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) model (Rogers, 2003) and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990) to explore how technological, organizational, and environmental factors influence the digital marketing strategies of MSMEs.

The participants of this study are five legendary MSMEs in Makassar's culinary sector that have demonstrated a significant level of adaptation and innovation in digital marketing. These



businesses were selected based on their popularity, impact on the local community, and success in expanding their market reach through digital marketing strategies. These MSMEs were selected based on their longevity in the market, experience in digital marketing, and varying scales of business operations. This variety ensures diverse insights into their strategies for adopting digital marketing and adapting to the evolving business environment.

Data were collected using a combination of in-depth interviews and direct observations to gain a comprehensive understanding of the digital marketing practices and organizational readiness of MSMEs:

- **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with owners and managers of the selected MSMEs. The interviews explored their experiences and perspectives on digital marketing adoption, perceived market pressures, and internal readiness for digital transformation. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their challenges, strategies, and success stories in adopting digital marketing.
- **Direct Observations:** Observations were made of the MSMEs' digital marketing activities, particularly their use of social media platforms (such as Instagram and Facebook), websites, and e-commerce channels. Observational data provided insights into the practices and strategies employed, complementing the information gathered from interviews.

The data analysis was carried out in several stages, following a thematic analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994):

1. **Coding and Categorization:** Interview transcripts and observation notes were carefully reviewed, coded, and categorized based on relevant themes such as digital marketing strategies, market pressures, and organizational readiness.
2. **Thematic Analysis:** The coded data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and emerging themes related to the evolution of digital marketing strategies, the influence of market pressures, and the level of organizational readiness among MSMEs. The analysis utilized the DOI model to understand the behavior and process of technology adoption and the TOE framework to explore the role of technology, organization, and environment in this evolution.
3. **Triangulation:** To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing data from interviews and observations to verify the consistency of information and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research themes.
4. **Development of Strategic Recommendations:** The final step involved developing strategic recommendations for MSMEs based on the analyzed data. These recommendations aimed to provide practical strategies for improving digital marketing adoption, addressing identified challenges, leveraging opportunities, and enhancing organizational readiness for digital transformation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONSk

This study examined digital marketing adoption strategies among MSMEs in Makassar, their responses to market pressures, and the role of organizational readiness in digital transformation. Using a qualitative case study approach, five legendary MSMEs from the culinary sector were selected based on their established presence and unique brand history. This allows an in-depth exploration of their opportunities and challenges in adopting digital marketing. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and on-site observations, with interview questions focusing on digital marketing practices, responses to competitive pressures, and organizational capabilities. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to the stages of digital marketing adoption, market pressures, and organizational readiness as factors influencing success or hindrance in digital transformation.

Stages of Digital Marketing Adoption among MSMEs

The research finds that the MSMEs in Makassar adopted digital marketing strategies in a phased and evolving manner. Initially, digital marketing efforts were rudimentary, focusing primarily on enhancing brand visibility and engagement through social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. These efforts included sharing promotional content, posting images of



products, and engaging directly with customers via comments and messages. This approach built brand recognition and maintained customer relationships, effectively substituting for some aspects of traditional marketing (e.g., face-to-face interactions and word-of-mouth promotion). The familiarity of social media and its relatively low cost made it an accessible starting point for MSMEs with limited technological experience, supporting the finding by Amiri, et.al. (2023) and Patil, et.al. (2022), which argues that the initial step for most MSMEs is to utilize basic digital tools before progressing to more complex systems.

As these MSMEs gained experience and confidence with digital platforms, their strategies became more sophisticated. The businesses began integrating e-commerce platforms to reach broader markets and improve sales efficiency. Platforms like Shopee, Gojek, Grab, Maxim, and their online stores provided opportunities to expand beyond their local markets. Over time, MSMEs recognized the value of having an online presence and leveraging digital marketing analytics to understand consumer behavior, preferences, and purchasing trends.

The progression from essential digital tools to advanced digital marketing aligns with the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) model (Rogers, 2003), which suggests that innovation adoption occurs in distinct phases. The MSMEs initially fall into the "early adopters" phase, where they experiment with digital platforms, followed by a more widespread adoption and integration stage as they perceive tangible benefits, such as increased sales and customer reach. As a result, there is a gradual increase in digital sophistication and marketing effectiveness over time.

However, the rate and extent of digital marketing adoption varied significantly among the MSMEs studied. For example, "MSME 1," which effectively harnessed e-commerce platforms, expanded its market beyond Makassar to other parts of Indonesia. This MSME invested in professional digital marketing services and developed a comprehensive online sales strategy. On the other hand, "MSME 2" maintained a more limited approach, relying primarily on social media for customer engagement without fully leveraging the potential of e-commerce platforms or CRM systems.

These variations suggest that while MSMEs acknowledge the potential benefits of digital marketing, their adoption strategies are influenced by several factors. These include their digital literacy, available resources, perceived return on investment, and comfort with technological change, as noted by Melo, et.al., (2023). Some MSMEs are more agile and willing to experiment with digital marketing. In contrast, others exhibit hesitancy due to a lack of skills, knowledge, or financial capacity to invest in digital tools. Additionally, some MSMEs may not perceive a need to scale their operations beyond local markets, influencing their decisions on how far to adopt digital marketing technologies.

Influence of Market Pressures on Digital Marketing Strategy

Market pressures emerged as a significant driver for MSMEs to adopt and refine their digital marketing strategies. The competitive business environment in Makassar, changing consumer preferences, and the increased demand for online purchasing options—particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—pushed MSMEs to explore digital marketing as a means of survival and growth. With traditional marketing channels and face-to-face sales limited by lockdowns and social distancing measures, MSMEs had to adapt to online platforms to maintain their operations and market presence.

Businesses like "MSME 3" and "MSME 4" adopted digital marketing as a reactive measure to market pressures and a proactive strategy to maintain competitiveness and enhance their customer experiences. These businesses quickly adapted to using e-commerce platforms and social media to facilitate sales, launch targeted promotions, and engage with customers in real time. Their success in expanding their customer base and maintaining sales volume despite the challenging market conditions is consistent with findings by Sholihin (2024) and Wijaya & Simamora (2022), who note that MSMEs in highly competitive and dynamic markets are more likely to adopt agile and adaptive digital marketing strategies to stay relevant and meet consumer demand.

Interestingly, the speed and intensity of MSMEs' responses to market pressures were influenced by their perceptions of urgency and openness to change. For example, "MSME 5," an



MSME with a long-standing market presence, initially resisted transitioning to digital marketing. The business was reluctant to change its traditional practices due to perceived complexity and lack of perceived benefit. However, after observing competitors successfully leverage digital platforms and witnessing a shift in customer preferences towards online purchasing, the business gradually adopted social media marketing and began experimenting with online sales channels. This gradual response reflects findings by Alifah, et.al., (2023), who argue that while traditional MSMEs may be slower to adopt digital technologies due to initial skepticism or lack of urgency, they often eventually embrace digital tools when external pressures necessitate adaptation.

The differing responses to market pressures reveal that while competition and changing consumer behaviors serve as external motivators for digital marketing adoption, the extent to which these pressures translate into action depends on internal factors. Businesses that are proactive, willing to experiment, and responsive to market changes are more likely to adopt digital marketing strategies effectively. At the same time, those that are more conservative or risk-averse may delay digital transformation, potentially losing competitive advantage.

Organizational Readiness as a Key Factor in Digital Transformation

An organization's readiness emerged as a key determinant in the successful adoption of digital marketing strategies among the MSMEs studied. Organizational readiness was explored through various dimensions, including technological infrastructure, financial capacity, workforce digital literacy, and leadership attitudes toward innovation. MSMEs that demonstrated better access to digital tools, a strong financial base to invest in technology, and proactive leadership with a forward-thinking mindset showed a higher capacity to adopt and adapt to digital marketing innovations.

For instance, "MSME 3" and "MSME 4" quickly embraced new technologies and successfully implemented online marketing strategies due to supportive leadership and a culture that encouraged innovation. These MSMEs' leaders actively sought digital marketing opportunities, were willing to invest in training and technology, and encouraged a culture of learning and adaptation. This finding aligns with Rine & Brown (2023), who argue that organizational culture and leadership are critical factors in MSMEs' ability to adopt digital marketing tools and leverage them effectively for business growth.

Conversely, other MSMEs encountered challenges in their digital transformation journey due to limited resources, lack of technical skills, and resistance to change. For example, "MSME 2" struggled to transition from traditional to digital marketing, primarily due to the organization's limited financial resources to invest in new technologies and a lack of digital skills. The absence of a dedicated digital strategy and the challenge of learning new digital tools slowed down their digital marketing adoption process, reflecting the barriers that Obembe & Obembe (2021) identified. This suggests that for digital transformation to be successful, MSMEs need more than just the desire to go digital; they also require adequate resources, skills, and a supportive organizational structure to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape effectively.

The interplay of organizational readiness with digital marketing adoption supports the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990). The TOE framework emphasizes that an organization's ability to adopt technology is influenced by its technological infrastructure (e.g., digital tools, platforms), organizational structure (e.g., leadership, culture, resources), and external environment (e.g., market competition, consumer behavior). In this study, it was evident that MSMEs with robust internal structures and leadership that embraced innovation could better respond to external pressures and capitalize on the opportunities presented by digital marketing.

Policy and Program Recommendations

To support MSMEs in their digital transformation, several policy and program recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Provide Targeted Digital Literacy Training: Many MSMEs struggle with digital tools due to limited technical skills. Government and industry bodies could offer targeted training in digital marketing, covering essential skills such as social media management, e-commerce



operations, and data analytics. Programs could include hands-on workshops and online tutorials tailored for MSMEs in specific sectors, enabling them to navigate digital platforms more effectively.

- 2) **Establish Financial Assistance Programs for Digital Investment:** MSMEs with limited financial resources cannot often invest in necessary digital tools. Subsidized loans or grants designated for digital technology could help MSMEs fund infrastructure upgrades, purchase digital marketing tools, and train employees. For example, a government-sponsored digital adoption fund could support MSMEs aiming to expand their online sales channels, improving their access to broader markets.
- 3) **Enhance Access to E-commerce Platforms and Digital Payment Systems:** MSMEs can benefit significantly from simplified payment and e-commerce solutions. Local governments could facilitate partnerships between MSMEs and digital platforms, making e-commerce and online payment systems more accessible. Implementing digital payment systems and streamlining administrative processes could reduce transaction costs, enhance customer convenience, and encourage MSMEs to adopt digital tools.
- 4) **Promote Transparency and Build a Supportive Ecosystem:** Creating a supportive ecosystem for MSMEs involves promoting collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, industry associations, and technology providers. Regular updates on digital marketing trends, sharing best practices, and fostering a network of mentors could help MSMEs build resilience and remain competitive. For instance, mentorship programs pairing MSMEs with experienced digital marketers could provide ongoing support and practical guidance.

Discussion in Light of Existing Literature

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of digital marketing adoption among MSMEs. The evolution of digital marketing strategies—from basic social media use to more sophisticated e-commerce and CRM systems—highlights MSMEs' progressive learning curve and technological adoption journey. The stages of digital marketing adoption align closely with Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) model, demonstrating how businesses progress from initial experimentation to full-scale adoption based on perceived benefits, compatibility with current practices, and the complexity of the technology involved.

The study also reinforces the significance of external market pressures as a catalyst for change. The need to remain competitive, adapt to consumer preferences, and explore new sales channels has driven MSMEs to embrace digital marketing strategies. This supports the findings by Naldi, et.al., (2022), Sholihin (2024), and Wijaya & Simamora (2022), who argue that MSMEs' digital marketing success is largely contingent on their ability to respond to external opportunities and market demands.

However, the research also underscores the disparities in digital marketing adoption levels and outcomes among MSMEs, suggesting that while market pressures may push businesses to consider digital transformation, not all MSMEs are equally prepared to respond effectively. Internal factors, such as leadership, financial resources, and digital literacy, play a critical role in determining the success of digital marketing adoption. This supports Polyviou, et.al.'s (2020) argument that tailored support, including digital literacy training, financial assistance, and mentorship, is crucial for facilitating a more inclusive and equitable digital economy.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how MSMEs in Makassar are navigating the digital economy through evolving marketing strategies. While digital marketing adoption is primarily driven by market pressures and facilitated by organizational readiness, challenges related to digital literacy, resource availability, and cultural adaptation continue to hinder progress.

Recommendations for a multifaceted approach to support MSMEs in digital transformation include:

- 1) Enhancing Digital Literacy Through Targeted Training Programs: Government agencies and business support organizations should provide hands-on digital marketing training tailored to different skill levels. Recommended formats include in-person workshops for foundational skills and online modules for advanced topics, such as e-commerce optimization and digital analytics. To measure effectiveness, these programs should include follow-up assessments and practical tasks, allowing MSMEs to apply skills in real time and receive feedback. Digital literacy support could be further reinforced through mentorship programs, pairing MSMEs with digital marketing experts to offer ongoing guidance.
- 2) Providing Financial Support Mechanisms for Digital Investments: Financial barriers often limit MSMEs' ability to invest in digital tools and infrastructure. Grants or low-interest loans designated for digital upgrades can help MSMEs adopt necessary technologies, such as e-commerce platforms, CRM systems, and analytics tools. For example, a government-backed Digital Adoption Fund could be established to support MSMEs investing in digital marketing tools. Regular progress reports on fund utilization and outcomes can help assess the impact of financial support on MSMEs' digital transformation.
- 3) Encouraging Internal Initiatives to Foster Digital Innovation: MSMEs should be encouraged to establish internal programs that support ongoing digitalization efforts. Forming an innovation team or committee within the MSME could drive digital projects and monitor new technology adoption. Additionally, offering incentives for employees who propose innovative digital ideas can create a culture of continuous improvement. This could involve recognizing top contributors with rewards and fostering a proactive approach to digital marketing among team members.
- 4) Addressing Cultural Challenges in Adopting New Technologies: Cultural resistance to digital transformation, particularly in traditional MSMEs, can be a significant barrier. Some employees or leaders may view digital marketing as disruptive to established practices. To mitigate this, leadership development programs can emphasize the value of digital transformation, highlighting successful case studies from similar MSMEs. Additionally, awareness campaigns and community outreach programs could help demystify digital marketing, positioning it as a vital tool for growth rather than a threat to traditional business methods.

By implementing these recommendations, MSMEs can better leverage digital marketing to enhance competitiveness, expand market reach, and drive business growth, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable digital economy. Overcoming literacy, financial, and cultural barriers through structured support and proactive strategies will equip MSMEs to successfully navigate the evolving digital landscape.

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