



Adaptive Digital Marketing Approaches for MSMEs Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

**¹Kristiningsih, ²Santirianingrum Soebandhi, ³Adrianto Trimarjono,
⁴Mochamad Ali Imron**

¹Universitas Wijaya Kusuma Surabaya, Indonesia, ²Universitas Wijaya Kusuma Surabaya, Indonesia,

³Universitas Wijaya Kusuma Surabaya, Indonesia, ⁴Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

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Abstract

This study emphasizes the transformative potential of adaptive digital marketing strategies, demonstrating their integral role in enhancing the resilience and capabilities of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in weathering the twin storms of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 global pandemic. Operating within a broad framework of socio-economic empowerment, the research takes a deep-dive into the crucial adaptive changes that MSMEs must implement within their marketing strategies, to not only survive the tumultuous business environment but also to seize opportunities for growth and advancement. The methodological approach employed by this study embraces a qualitative research paradigm, which allows for an in-depth examination and impartial interpretation of the available scholarly literature on the subject. The findings of the study illuminate the burgeoning role of digital marketing in empowering consumers with expansive, immediate access to detailed product information, thereby enabling smooth, time-efficient, and location-agnostic transactions over the internet. Simultaneously, MSMEs can reap considerable benefits from digital marketing strategies by gaining valuable, real-time insight into evolving market trends and consumer preferences and behaviours. This holistic informational ecosystem fosters strategic decision-making capabilities and creates a more streamlined, cost-effective framework for MSMEs, exhibiting a stark contrast with the often-limited scalability of traditional retail channels.

1. Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a pivotal role in driving economic growth, particularly in countries like Indonesia, where the majority of businesses fall under this category. MSMEs account for more than 26 million businesses, or 98.68 percent of Indonesia's total nonfarm businesses, and provide employment for over 59 million people, constituting around 75.33 percent of the nonfarm workforce (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These enterprises offer several advantages, including their

ability to produce goods and services tailored to local needs, reliance on domestic resources in terms of human resources, capital, raw materials, and equipment, and the utilization of self-owned capital or non-traditional financing methods (Central Statistics, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted various economic sectors, with tourism, trade, and investment sectors bearing the brunt in Indonesia. This disruption has caused MSMEs, which serve as the backbone of the national economy, to

experience not only production and trading challenges but also job losses (Pakpahan, 2020). A survey conducted by the Central Statistics Agency in December 2021 highlighted that 84.20 percent of MSMEs faced a decline in income (Central Statistics, 2022). Additionally, the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs reported around 37,000 Small and Medium Enterprises were severely affected by the pandemic, with 56 percent experiencing reduced sales, 22 percent encountering financing issues, 15 percent dealing with distribution problems, and 4 percent struggling to obtain raw materials (Yusmalina, 2020; Joko, 2019).

Furthermore, the pandemic's effects extended beyond business parameters into the everyday lives of individuals. The sweeping preventive measures rolled out to curb the spread of the virus, including Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), have significantly reduced individuals' purchasing power. People started to conserve their spending in light of uncertain economic prospects, further exacerbating the MSMEs' predicament. This conservative trend had twofold implications: a decrease in demand (consumption and purchase power from the public), which affected the supply side, evidenced by the severing of work relations and looming threats of loan defaults.

These factors culminated in the disruption of economic activity. Aspects such as production, distribution, and sales were heavily impacted, resulting in a deeper dent in MSMEs' performance and overall contribution to the national economy. At such a critical juncture, digitization became increasingly prominent, shaping daily routines and fundamentally altering the manner in which consumers and businesses interact.

The rapid evolution of technology, along with the ubiquity of the digital world and the internet, induced major shifts in marketing trends. The transition has been notably from conventional (offline) methods to digital (online) strategies, which are seen as valuable due to their ability to provide consumers with comprehensive product information and easy transaction processing. Digitalization, specifically social media, has significantly transformed consumer behaviors, leading to ramifications for companies, products, and brands (Muntinga et.al, 2011).

Digital marketing today is viewed as a unique blend of promotional and market-sustaining activities conducted through online digital media using varied resources such as social networking platforms. On one side, it enables businesses to monitor and cater closely to the needs and wants of prospective customers. On the other, it empowers consumers to access product information through virtual browsing. Furthermore, digital marketing dismantles geographical and temporal barriers, reaching communities far and wide. Several

studies have confirmed the positive correlation between digitalization and the growth, performance, and competitiveness of small businesses. It's an opportune moment for small businesses to harness the potential of digital marketing and social media platforms to attract new customers and more effectively engage with existing ones.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Comprehensive Digital Marketing Approach

Digital marketing, an evolution in the commercial landscape, has progressed from confined marketing activities using digital avenues to a more expansive concept encompassing all processes of customer acquisition, preference-building, brand promotion, customer nurturing, and sales increase. Different from traditional marketing merely enhanced by digital elements, digital marketing embodies distinctly unique characteristics and dynamics that need comprehension for selecting effective marketing strategies and tactics.

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), digital marketing is described as an activity, institution, and process that leverages digital technology for creating, communicating, delivering value to customers and stakeholders, and managing customer relationships (Purwana, 2017). In line with this, Sawicky characterizes digital marketing as the exploitation of digital technology for framing channels that can reach potential customers, ultimately serving corporate aims by more efficiently meeting customer needs. Broadly, digital marketing is seen as marketing activities that utilize internet-based media (Purwana, 2017). Thus, it can be concluded that Digital Marketing involves a process of marketing activities (creation, communication, delivery, and exchange) of goods and services underpinned by internet-based technology facilities.

The internet's role in daily life can be likened to basic needs like food; its influence in businesses cannot be underestimated. Highlighting the internet's characteristics, Rahardjo (2011) specifies: 1) Interactivity, which refers to the capacity of technology to stimulate cooperation between individuals, ensuring robust, accurate, effective, and satisfying communication. 2) Demassification, referring to the capability of communication technology to transmit messages to large volumes of participants, while also receiving messages according to individual participant timelines.

Purwana (2017) classifies social media into two categories based on the underlying fundamentals of connection and interaction: 1) Profile-based outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, concentrating on individual member profiles and promoting connections spurred by users' interests. 2) Content-based platforms including Youtube, Instagram, and Pinterest focused on

content, discussion, and comments on the content exhibited, primarily connecting individuals to the content furnished by a specific profile.

Sarbini suggests that digital media is more than just a trend; it is revolutionizing business concepts. Continuous 24-hour digital business operations, easy access to prospective customers regardless of geographical location, and the automatic increase in potential customer numbers underscore digital marketing's standing. The shift towards online shopping is partly due to its ease and convenience that allows customers to compare offerings from different sellers. Simultaneously, manufacturers can simultaneously disseminate information to customers or loyal consumers about new or promotional products (Sarbin, 2017). Thus, social media has carved open a path for businesses to communicate about their products with millions while creating fresh marketing possibilities.

2.2 Community-Based Economic Empowerment

The concept of empowerment, derived from the terms 'empower' and 'empowering,' encompasses two connotations: (1) to grant power or authority to, delegating authority to another party, and (2) to give capacity to or enable someone to attain abilities or power (Hutomo, 2014). People's economic empowerment emerged as a critical development discourse in response to industrialization in Europe, which generated a dominant class of production factor owners and a subservient class of workers. Similarly, such discourse gained momentum in developing countries where development led to social fragmentation, economic inequality, resource degradation, and societal alienation from production factors.

Community empowerment refers to the process of assisting the marginalized in realizing their normative right to surplus value, requiring a grassroots approach starting from households (Hutomo, 2014). This process covers social, political, and psychological elements, allowing communities to be strengthened in various aspects. Community empowerment is also recognized as the capacity of individuals to conflict with or contribute to building communal empowerment to discover new alternatives for community development (Mardikanto, 2014).

Fahrudin (2012) explains that community empowerment is an approach to enable and strengthen communities through three dimensions: 1) *Enabling*—establishing an environment conducive to facilitating societal potential by recognizing, building, nurturing, and developing those potentials. 2) *Empowering*—enhancing capacities and capabilities by reinforcing the inherent power within communities with resources,

inputs, and access to opportunities. 3) *Protecting*—safeguarding the interests of vulnerable groups to prevent imbalanced competition and exploitation of the weak.

The concept of people's economic empowerment, according to Hutomo (2014), can be outlined as follows:

- a) People's economy signifies an economy managed by the citizens. The aim is to construct a robust, extensive, modern, and highly competitive economic structure through the correct market mechanisms. As the development barriers are structural, people's economic empowerment requires structural changes.
- b) Structural changes involve transitioning from traditional to modern economies, moving from weakness to strength, and shifting from dependency to self-reliance. Structural change process steps include resource allocation, institutional strengthening, technology mastery, and human resource empowerment.
- c) Economic empowerment must go beyond mere productivity enhancement, equal-opportunity provisioning, and capital injections; it must also ensure concerted commitment and collaboration among both advanced and underdeveloped community members.
- d) Policy focuses for people's economy include increasing access to production assets (capital), strengthening transactional and partnership positions, providing education and health services, fortifying small industries, fostering new entrepreneurs, and advocating spatial equality.
- e) Community empowerment activities encompass expanding access to business capital assistance, human resource development, and facilities and infrastructure directly supporting local socio-economic dynamics.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptive digital marketing approaches have become pivotal for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The shift to digital platforms facilitates improved communication, expanded reach, and a more inclusive environment for businesses to adapt and thrive. In line with the above-mentioned concepts of people's economic empowerment, digital marketing approaches can contribute to the enabling, empowering, and protecting processes. By leveraging digital channels, MSMEs can access new markets, reinforce their competitive positions, create novel opportunities, and ultimately support broader community empowerment amidst the ongoing global crisis.

3. Method

This research scheme adopts a qualitative methodology, underscored by comprehensive literature reviews. A literature review embodies a textual synthesis of numerous articles, journals, books, and further documents that present the historical and current understanding of a specific subject matter. With the examination and comparison of previous literature, researchers can contrast their current findings, creating a pathway for knowledge enrichment and conceptual development.

The main thrust of this research navigates through adaptive Digital Marketing Strategies for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. With data amalgamated from assorted and pertinent sources, the study seeks to delve into and analyze how effective digital marketing strategies, adapted for prevalent pandemic-based constraints, can aid MSMEs in sustaining business continuity and economic resilience.

This research approach facilitates a cogent understanding of the adaptive digital strategies imperative for MSMEs to weather through the challenging economic scenario induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative exploration encourages an insightful interpretation of the existing materials, providing a comprehensive context for the evolution and application of digital marketing approaches tailored specifically for MSMEs operating under pandemic conditions.

4. Discussion

4.1 Government's Role in Safeguarding MSMEs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have proven to be crucial pillars that support the resilience of the Indonesian economy amid global crises, as evident from the economic downturns during 1997-1998 and subsequent years. During the economic slowdown around 2005, MSMEs demonstrated a significant GDP growth juxtaposed to the sharp decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) experienced in other sectors. This upward trend continued from 2009-2013, with the GDP growth for MSMEs surpassing that of larger industries. (Arshad et al., 2023)

Contrastingly, the economic landscape in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic presents a more formidable challenge. In the second quarter of 2020, Indonesia's economic growth plunged to 5.32%, primarily due to reduced consumer spending as a reaction to uncertain financial futures. This indeed impacts MSMEs, which make up more than 26 million businesses or

98.68% of Indonesia's non-farm businesses (Arsawan et al., 2022).

However, crisis times often catalyze innovative responses. The ongoing pandemic has created an opportunity for the Government to demonstrate its commitment to MSMEs, necessitating strategic policies for economic rejuvenation. Such policies, aligning with communal economic empowerment, aim for societal welfare and prosperity while ensuring MSMEs' survival in these complex times. The challenges require short-term solutions, specifically designed to aid MSMEs and their workers, whereas opportunities call for long-term strategies, particularly focusing on leveraging digital technology in the rapidly-approaching Industrial 4.0 era (Ali Imron, 2021; Priyadi et al., 2023).

In response, the Indonesian Government rolled out the National Economic Recovery program, outlined in Government Regulation No. 23 of 2020, to reboot the economy, safeguard and enhance business actors' economic capabilities. The program, with a substantial budget of Rp695.20 trillion, is categorized into several sectors, including MSMEs, which were allotted an amount of Rp114.82 T.

Manifesting these ambitions, two key government agencies, namely the Ministry of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises (KemenkopUKM) and the Ministry of Industry (Kemenperin), put forth multiple MSME bolstering strategies. KemenkopUKM focuses on three crucial stimuli: loan repayment allowances, six-month MSMEs tax relief, and cash transfer for micro-scale businesses. Kemenperin intends to provide low-interest loans, facilitate partnerships with online technology stores to bolster sales and marketing, cooperate with local industries, and maintain trade negotiation processes for seamless export of Indonesian SME products (Audretsch et al., 2023).

Subsequent long-term structural policies align with both the immediate objectives of negating the COVID-19 impact and the long-term adaptation to the impending Industrial 4.0 era. They include MSMEs' exposure to digital technology, reinforcing their aptitude toward technological utilization in production processes, product marketing, and exploring potential product markets. Assisting MSMEs to acquaint with e-commerce platforms for product sales is a pivotal aspect of this initiative. Given that in 2018, only 8% of MSMEs utilized online platforms to market products, promoting this approach could significantly benefit MSMEs.

To this end, the government has positioned to create a development roadmap for MSMEs that navigates through the Industrial 4.0 era, offering technology retraining for MSME workers, constructing telecommunication infrastructure for rural internet

accessibility, engaging academia and major industry players for hands-on technology training and use, and revitalizing the MSME partnership program. These efforts are geared towards fortifying MSMEs in the face of fluctuating dynamics characteristic of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the advent of the Industrial 4.0 era.

4.2 Harnessing Digital Marketing Strategies for MSMEs Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Digital marketing, particularly through social media, presents an innovative avenue for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to thrive in the COVID-19 landscape. Such platforms offer internet-based applications that underpin the Web 2.0 ideology, encouraging the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Stockdale, Ahmed, & Scheepers, 2012).

These platforms facilitate a myriad of communication channels—ranging from instant messaging to social networking—allowing users to engage, connect, and interact flawlessly. According to Wardhana (2015) in Purwama et al (2017), digital marketing strategies contribute to approximately 78% of the competitive advantage for MSMEs in product marketing. Some of these strategies include:

- a) Ensuring availability of product information and guides
- b) Providing illustrative photos or videos of products
- c) Offering attachments to documents with diverse information formats
- d) Enabling online communication with employers
- e) Supporting transaction tools and various payment mediums
- f) Offering dependable help center and customer services
- g) Encouraging online reviews and testimonials
- h) Tracking visitor records
- i) Providing special offers and brand visibility
- j) Maintaining timely information dissemination through blogs
- k) Promoting easy product searches
- l) Cultivating brand image and identifying new customers

Inclusivity in social media marketing strategies offers impressive dividends to MSMEs. The savvy adoption of digital marketing equips MSMEs with a range of advantages, including but not limited to targeted marketing as per demographics and consumer habits, quick results for swift corrective actions, cost-effectiveness, broadened reach, limitless access, and measurable outcomes (like site visitor amounts and online purchase statistics). What's more, personalized engagements can substantially improve consumer

relationships and enhance their trust in brands (Purwana, 2017).

However, alongside these considerable benefits, digital marketing does present some challenges. These might include susceptibility to imitation by competitors, potential misuse, potential damage to reputation from negative feedback, and limitations due to some consumers' digital illiteracy.

Further research by Stockdale, Ahmed, & Scheepers (2012) identified additional business value from social media for MSMEs. Their observations underlined:

- a) The creation of sustainable marketing channels
- b) Novel avenues for short and long-term revenue growth
- c) Substantial advertising cost reduction (up to 70%)
- d) Overall decrease in marketing expenses
- e) Comparative advantage generation
- f) Easy promotion across various social media platforms
- g) Enhanced brand and product popularity, and
- h) Company exposure to a broader audience

In essence, the judicious use of digital marketing strategies, particularly for MSMEs, can provide a significant edge in the fluctuating economic landscape brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With digital marketing playing an increasingly crucial role in business success, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it's essential for MSMEs to adopt and expand their digital marketing tactics. In this section, several key strategies are outlined to help MSMEs enhance their digital marketing efforts and better navigate the pandemic's economic consequences (Wildan et al., 2020).

4.2.1 Developing a Comprehensive Digital Marketing Strategy:

MSMEs should create a digital marketing strategy that aligns with their overall business goals and objectives. This involves defining target markets, setting achievable and measurable marketing goals, understanding their audiences and their needs, and crafting tailored marketing content. Furthermore, an effective digital marketing strategy should encompass multiple channels, including social media, email marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and content marketing, to resonate with audiences and maximize reach.

4.2.2 Strengthening Brand Presence on Multiple Channels:

Diversifying marketing channels can substantially improve visibility and engagement with potential customers. MSMEs should establish, expand, and maintain a strong presence across various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and

Twitter) and optimize their online presence with detailed business information, regular content updates, and user-friendly website design. Additionally, MSMEs should take advantage of emerging platforms such as TikTok and Clubhouse to connect with younger, tech-savvy audiences who seek innovative content and engagement.

4.2.3 Utilizing Video Marketing:

In a world increasingly dominated by rapidly consumable content, video marketing is a powerful tool to capture audience attention and convey brand messages effectively. MSMEs should consider creating videos illustrating product features, instructions, customer testimonials, or behind-the-scenes peeks to build trust, engagement, and a sense of community. Additionally, live streaming events, webinars, Q&A sessions, or interactive virtual events can further boost audience interaction and foster personal connections with customers.

4.2.4 Leveraging Influencer Marketing:

Collaborating with industry influencers and thought leaders can help MSMEs reach new audiences, boost brand credibility, and showcase their products or services from an authentic perspective. Bridge-building with trusted, established personalities who align with the brand's values and goals can significantly impact consumer purchasing decisions through endorsements or reviews.

4.2.5 Embracing Local and Hyperlocal Marketing:

To target audiences more effectively, MSMEs should focus on localized digital marketing through tactics like Google My Business listings, localized SEO, and location-specific social media campaigns. By enhancing visibility for local search queries, MSMEs can build robust relationships with communities and customers alike. Geotargeted advertising campaigns and partnering with other local businesses for cross-promotional initiatives can also help MSMEs consolidate their presence in regional markets.

4.2.6 Employing Online Advertising:

Paid online advertising, including search engine marketing (SEM), display advertising, and social media advertising, can empower MSMEs to reach users with intent-driven messages at crucial stages of the buyer's journey. By utilizing audience targeting methods based on demographics, interests, and location, MSMEs can direct their marketing resources efficiently towards potential customers, garnering substantial ROI.

4.2.7 Engaging Customers with Interactive Content:

Building connections through interactive content like quizzes, polls, augmented reality (AR) experiences, online events, or user-generated content campaigns can foster active customer involvement and brand loyalty. These initiatives promote authentic engagement,

encourage followers to share content, and collect valuable user data that can guide future marketing efforts.

4.2.8 Harnessing Data and Analytics:

To improve decision-making and derive insights on customer behavior, MSMEs should track and measure key performance indicators (KPIs) such as website traffic, social media interactions, email open and click-through rates, paid advertising conversions, and content engagement levels. By leveraging data and analytics, MSMEs can adjust marketing strategies, stay better informed about customer preferences, and optimize campaigns for greater efficiency.

4.2.9 Nurturing Customer Relationships through Email Marketing:

Email marketing campaigns can help increase brand visibility, showcase products, and promotions, and nurture customer relationships. By sending personalized, valuable content to targeted audiences, MSMEs can foster customer loyalty, upsell or cross-sell products or services, and build a community of committed supporters.

4.2.10 Preparing for the Future of Digital Marketing:

As technology and user behavior continue to evolve, MSMEs must stay informed about emerging trends, technologies, and consumer expectations to remain competitive and maintain a robust digital presence. By adopting and refining innovative digital marketing approaches, MSMEs can navigate the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and harness new opportunities for growth and success.

Conclusion

In light of the detailed analysis presented, we conclude that digital marketing empowers buyers to access comprehensive product information and conduct transactions online. Simultaneously, sellers can cater to potential consumers' needs and desires without being constrained by time or geography. Digital marketing, underpinned by technology, holds great promise for MSMEs striving to become economic powerhouses. Importantly, digital marketing is highly relevant for the current COVID-19 pandemic, as Large-Scale Social Restrictions are put into place—enabling sales transactions without the need for face-to-face interactions.

The government's role as a regulator has been essential in helping MSMEs manage the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Short-term programs, such as the National Economic Recovery initiative, aim to maintain people's purchasing power (consumer side) and provide direct cash assistance to the MSME sector (producer side). This program has significantly boosted economic growth from -5.32% in the second quarter to -3.49% in the third quarter of 2020. Nevertheless, long-

term program optimization of MSME performance in Indonesia requires further government effort.

Empowering communities economically does not imply alienating large-scale entrepreneurs or powerful economic groups. By fostering mutually strengthening relationships among all business levels, a robust and efficient interdependence can be established. This interconnectedness promotes fair production, resulting in higher competitiveness.

Suggestions

Adopting Digital Marketing: Digital marketing presents a strategic opportunity for MSMEs, as underscored by Stockdale, Ahmed, & Scheepers's (2012) research. However, this requires MSMEs to take the initiative in adopting technologies such as smartphones to support their product marketing. The ubiquity and accessibility of social media can assist MSMEs in promoting their products without incurring advertising costs.

Government Cooperation with Digital Platforms: To foster MSME potential, the government should collaborate with large digital developers, platforms, or e-commerce companies to integrate MSMEs within industry ladders and support their growth.

Human Resource Development: A systematic, strategic plan for human resource development is crucial for long-term economic development. The government should prioritize human resources as they serve as the foundation for strengthening community economies through capacity-building programs and skill enhancement initiatives.

As we navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to acknowledge the strategic importance of digital marketing for MSMEs and design appropriate policies and frameworks for their continued growth and development. By actively adapting digital marketing solutions and fostering symbiotic relationships between various business segments, MSMEs can overcome pandemic-induced challenges and emerge as reliable economic forces.

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