

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs through Digital Marketing Adoption: A Path toward Sustainable Business Growth

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Received: 12 November 2025

Accepted: 19 November 2025

Published online: 20 November 2025

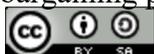
Abstract

This study examines how the adoption of digital marketing empowers women entrepreneurs and contributes to sustainable business growth within micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Women entrepreneurs often face socio-cultural, structural, and technological barriers that limit their access to markets, mobility, and decision-making opportunities. In this context, digital marketing provides an alternative pathway for overcoming long-standing constraints by enabling wider market reach, flexible business operations, and increased visibility. Using a descriptive qualitative design, this research examines the experiences, motivations, challenges, and empowerment outcomes of women entrepreneurs in relation to the adoption of digital tools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with women-led MSMEs from various sectors and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that digital marketing adoption is driven by perceived opportunities for market expansion, consumer behavior shifts, and peer network support. However, entrepreneurs face significant challenges related to digital literacy, access to technology, time limitations, and exposure to online risks. Despite these barriers, digital adoption enhances economic, social, and psychological empowerment by increasing income stability, strengthening professional networks, and improving confidence in technology use. Furthermore, digital marketing supports long-term business sustainability by fostering customer loyalty, enabling innovation, and enhancing resilience during market disruptions. Overall, the study underscores the transformative potential of digital tools for advancing women's entrepreneurial empowerment and business sustainability, while highlighting the need for targeted capacity-building and supportive digital ecosystems.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Adoption, Women Entrepreneurs, Empowerment, Sustainable Business Growth, MSMEs

1. Introduction

Women-owned micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) have emerged as an essential pillar of socio-economic development, particularly in developing economies where women's entrepreneurial activities contribute significantly to household income, job creation, and poverty reduction (Tambunan, 2017). The increased involvement of women in business reflects broader shifts in gender roles, economic participation, and societal expectations. Nevertheless, this participation does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped by both enabling and constraining structures that influence women's access to resources, markets, and opportunities. Many women entrepreneurs continue to face challenges such as limited mobility, lack of collateral for financing, lower levels of digital literacy, gendered social norms, and reduced bargaining power within economic networks.



In this context, the digital transformation of markets presents an unprecedented opportunity for women to overcome several long-standing structural barriers. Digital technologies, particularly digital marketing tools, have reconfigured how businesses communicate with customers, generate value, and maintain market visibility. Through social media platforms, e-commerce marketplaces, search engine tools, and data analytics, MSMEs can effectively reach wider audiences at relatively low costs, stay competitive, and engage directly with consumers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For women entrepreneurs, these technologies do more than merely enhance sales performance; they offer pathways toward greater autonomy, agency, and empowerment.

Digital marketing adoption is increasingly recognized as a strategic mechanism for fostering inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Prior research indicates that digital platforms enable women entrepreneurs to bypass traditional gendered gatekeeping mechanisms, such as physical business networks dominated by men or offline market structures that restrict women's mobility (Rouse et al., 2013). Digital spaces allow women to market products from home, manage transactions flexibly, and build professional identities that may otherwise be constrained in offline settings. In addition, digital tools support the development of strong customer relationships through continuous engagement, storytelling, and transparent branding elements that have become central to modern MSME competitiveness.

Despite its promise, digital marketing adoption is uneven among women. The digital divide, characterized by disparities in access to devices, internet connectivity, digital skills, and socio-cultural support, remains a significant barrier. Women entrepreneurs often experience self-efficacy issues, fear of online criticism, and limited exposure to technology training programs. These constraints may inhibit their ability to fully leverage digital tools to enhance business performance and sustainability. As a result, digital empowerment is not only a technological concern but also a socio-cultural and institutional challenge requiring holistic interventions.

The movement toward sustainable business growth further reinforces the importance of digital adoption. Sustainability in MSME contexts refers not only to environmental considerations but also to long-term business resilience, adaptability, and competitiveness (Hitt et al., 2011). Digital marketing contributes to this sustainability by enabling real-time communication with customers, facilitating data-driven decision-making, supporting innovative product development, and strengthening brand loyalty. In crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses with strong digital presence demonstrated higher resilience, quicker recovery, and stronger capacity to reach new markets (Priyono et al., 2020). For women entrepreneurs, many of whom operate micro-scale businesses vulnerable to economic shocks, digital adoption becomes essential for survival and long-term growth.

Given this context, understanding how digital marketing adoption empowers women entrepreneurs becomes critical. Empowerment, according to Kabeer (1999), involves expanding the ability to make strategic life choices through access to resources, enhanced agency, and the achievement of desired outcomes. Digital adoption intersects with each of these components: it provides economic resources through market expansion, enhances agency through improved decision-making autonomy, and enables achievements reflected in business growth and personal confidence. Yet, these outcomes depend heavily on the availability of

supportive ecosystems, including training, peer networks, digital infrastructure, and gender-sensitive policies.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of digital marketing adoption in empowering women entrepreneurs and its contribution to sustainable business growth. By exploring the experiences, motivations, challenges, and outcomes of women-led MSMEs in adopting digital tools, this research provides insights into how digital empowerment can be operationalized in real-world entrepreneurial contexts. The findings are expected to contribute to theoretical discussions on women's empowerment and digital transformation, while also offering practical implications for policymakers, development agencies, and entrepreneurship support organizations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women Entrepreneurship and Empowerment

Women's entrepreneurship has increasingly become a central topic in discussions of inclusive economic development and gender equality. Research indicates that women-owned enterprises contribute significantly to community welfare, economic diversification, and the reduction of structural gender disparities in the labor market (Lewis et al., 2014; Tambunan, 2017). However, women entrepreneurs often operate within complex socio-cultural systems that shape their access to resources, market opportunities, and decision-making spaces. Kabeer's (1999) foundational framework conceptualizes empowerment as a process involving resources, agency, and achievements, emphasizing that women's ability to make strategic life choices is conditioned by both individual capabilities and broader institutional structures. In many developing contexts, women face challenges related to limited mobility, restricted access to formal financial institutions, and embedded gender norms that position entrepreneurship as a male-dominated domain (Roomi & Parrott, 2008). These constraints can limit women's participation in entrepreneurial ecosystems and reduce their ability to scale their businesses.

Despite these barriers, entrepreneurship remains a pathway for enhancing women's autonomy and socio-economic agency. Entrepreneurial engagement can increase financial participation, confidence, and networking opportunities (Coleman & Robb, 2016). However, empowerment outcomes depend on access to training, supportive policies, and technological tools. As the global economy digitalizes, women's entrepreneurship becomes more strongly linked to digital tools, particularly digital marketing platforms. Thus, understanding empowerment requires attention not only to economic gains but also to technological access and digital agency.

2.2. Digital Marketing Adoption in MSMEs

Digital marketing has transformed how micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) promote their products, build brand identity, and compete in dynamic market environments. Defined as the strategic use of digital platforms, including social media, search engines, marketplaces, and mobile applications to reach and engage target audiences, digital marketing enables businesses to operate with greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For MSMEs, digital marketing offers benefits such as lower costs, analytics, and improved customer engagement. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) emphasizes perceived usefulness and ease of use as adoption drivers (Davis, 1989), while the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) framework highlights relative advantage, compatibility, and trialability (Rogers, 2003).

Women entrepreneurs experience digital adoption differently. Research indicates that digital literacy, self-confidence, and exposure to digital ecosystems shape women's adoption of digital marketing (Sam & Mu'min, 2025). Social influences also matter, yet barriers persist, including limited device access, weak connectivity, and inadequate training. Socio-cultural norms can reduce the time available for learning digital skills, creating a gendered digital divide. Despite challenges, many women leverage platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp Business, Shopee, and Facebook Marketplace to enhance visibility and engage customers. Adoption levels depend on structural factors and personal agency.

2.3. Digitalization and Sustainable Business Growth

Digitalization has become a critical driver of sustainable business growth, reshaping how firms operate and adapt to market shifts. Sustainable business growth refers to long-term profitability, resilience, and adaptability (Hitt et al., 2011). Digital tools support this by improving efficiency, engagement, and innovation (Bai et al., 2021). For MSMEs, digitalization strengthens resilience against external shocks, with the COVID-19 pandemic illustrating how digitalized businesses recovered faster (Priyono et al., 2020).

For women entrepreneurs, digitalization enables market expansion and flexible working arrangements aligned with domestic responsibilities. Digital marketing supports continuous customer interaction, loyalty building, and real-time market insight. It also enhances innovation capacity through access to trends and entrepreneurial communities. However, sustainable outcomes depend on overcoming digital barriers and accessing supportive ecosystems. Thus, digitalization serves as both a catalyst for sustainable growth and a mechanism for strengthening women's entrepreneurial resilience and agency.

3. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the experiences, challenges, and empowerment outcomes of women entrepreneurs adopting digital marketing. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of social and contextual factors influencing digital adoption and empowerment, which are often not fully captured through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants consisted of women-owned micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the culinary, fashion, beauty, and creative industries. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure the inclusion of entrepreneurs with varying degrees of digital marketing adoption, business maturity, and digital literacy levels. A total of 15 participants were targeted, which aligns with qualitative research norms where depth of data is prioritized over sample size (Guest et al., 2020). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final narrative. This approach was selected because it provides flexibility in capturing patterned meanings across participant experiences while remaining grounded in the data. Codes and themes were compared iteratively to ensure reliability and reduce interpretive bias.

To enhance research trustworthiness, the study incorporated triangulation, member checking, and audit trail documentation. Triangulation involved comparing data from multiple participants and validating emerging themes across sources. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to confirm accuracy and credibility. An audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions, coding processes, and reflections throughout the study, following Lincoln's (2007) criteria for qualitative rigor.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Drivers of Digital Marketing Adoption

The findings indicate that women entrepreneurs adopt digital marketing primarily due to the perceived opportunity to expand their market reach beyond local boundaries. Many participants noted that digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook Marketplace, and Shopee allow them to connect with customers from distant regions without requiring physical mobility, which is often constrained by domestic responsibilities and socio-cultural expectations. This aligns with Rahayu and Day's (2015) argument that digital channels reduce geographical limitations and enable MSMEs to access broader markets efficiently. Participants also emphasized that shifts in consumer behavior, particularly the tendency to search for products online, created a strong incentive to adopt digital tools. This increased visibility and customer demand online acted as external pressure for entrepreneurs to digitalize their promotional activities.

Another significant driver identified in the study is the influence of peer networks and community-based learning. Many women entrepreneurs reported learning digital marketing through informal peer groups, online communities, and local training workshops. These findings support Vu (2023) and Bourhlal dan Alhaderi (2025), who highlight the role of social influence and collective learning in accelerating digital adoption among small-enterprise owners. Furthermore, participants viewed digital marketing as a cost-effective strategy, especially compared to traditional advertising methods that require higher financial investment. This reflects the "relative advantage" principle in Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovation theory, which suggests that perceived benefits of an innovation increase the likelihood of its adoption. Overall, the data show that digital marketing adoption is shaped by both market opportunities and socio-relational support structures.

4.2. Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Despite recognizing its potential, many participants faced substantial barriers in adopting digital marketing effectively. One of the most recurrent issues was low digital literacy, with entrepreneurs expressing difficulty in understanding algorithm changes, content creation techniques, and data analytics features. This mirrors findings that women in developing economies consistently have less access to digital skills and technology than men, with gaps in both basic and advanced digital skills (Chetty et al., 2018; Kashyap et al., 2020). Participants also shared that learning digital skills often requires dedicated time, something many women struggle to allocate due to household responsibilities and cultural expectations around gendered labor. Roomi and Harrison (2010) similarly argue that domestic workload significantly restricts women's ability to engage in formal business development activities.

Access to technological resources also emerged as a challenge. Several respondents operated with limited internet connectivity, outdated devices, or insufficient funds to invest in paid online advertising, which affected the consistency and quality of their digital engagement. These findings are consistent with Nguyen et al. (2025), which notes that women-led businesses are often concentrated in low-profit sectors and are more sensitive to industry and regional disparities, with rural women's incomes especially affected by technological and infrastructural gaps. Additionally, participants voiced concerns about negative online experiences, including fraudulent buyers, cyber harassment, and harsh public criticism, which

lowered their confidence in managing online platforms. Collectively, these challenges reveal that digital adoption is not solely a matter of technological availability but also reflects broader structural, cultural, and emotional barriers.

4.3. Empowerment Outcomes of Digital Marketing Adoption

The analysis shows that digital marketing adoption generates multidimensional empowerment outcomes for women entrepreneurs. Economically, participants reported increased sales, more stable income patterns, and access to new customer segments as a direct result of digital presence. These outcomes align with Kotler et al. (2021), who argue that digital tools enhance MSME competitiveness by strengthening brand visibility and customer engagement. The ability to operate online also enabled participants to diversify revenue streams, such as through reseller systems, digital catalogs, and cross-platform promotions. These improvements contribute to greater financial independence, a key indicator of economic empowerment.

Social empowerment also emerged as a significant outcome. Many women described how digital platforms allowed them to build new business relationships, join entrepreneurial communities, and access mentorship opportunities, thereby expanding their social capital. This reflects Lewis et al.'s (2014) findings that social networks are crucial for women entrepreneurs, both for emotional support and business development. Furthermore, psychological empowerment was evident in participants' narratives. Learning to navigate digital tools, receiving positive customer feedback, and achieving measurable online engagement contributed to increased confidence and self-efficacy. This progression resonates with Kabear's (1999) empowerment framework, demonstrating how access to digital resources and enhanced agency lead to meaningful personal and professional achievements for women.

4.4. Toward Sustainable Business Growth

The adoption of digital marketing was found to significantly contribute to sustainable business growth among women entrepreneurs. Participants revealed that consistent online engagement allowed them to build long-term customer relationships, foster brand loyalty, and maintain competitiveness even during periods of market uncertainty. The ability to communicate directly with customers through features such as chat functions, stories, and real-time feedback strengthened their responsiveness to market trends. These findings support Bai et al. (2021), who argue that digitalization enhances a firm's agility and capacity for continuous innovation.

Digital marketing also played a critical role in building business resilience. Several participants shared that during economic disruptions, such as local restrictions or seasonal slowdowns, their online presence enabled them to sustain sales and maintain operational continuity. This observation is consistent with Priyono et al. (2020), who highlight the importance of digital transformation for MSMEs' survival during crisis conditions. Additionally, digital tools encouraged experimentation and innovation, allowing entrepreneurs to test new products, adjust pricing strategies, and tailor promotional content more efficiently. Such capabilities contribute to long-term scalability, resource optimization, and enduring brand relevance. Overall, the results suggest that digital marketing adoption supports not only current business performance but also long-term sustainability and adaptive capacity for women-led enterprises.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of digital marketing adoption in empowering women entrepreneurs and supporting the development of sustainable business practices. The findings reaffirm that digital tools are not merely technological enablers but also catalysts for broader socio-economic empowerment. Women entrepreneurs in this study demonstrated increased visibility, improved customer engagement, enhanced confidence, and greater autonomy in managing their businesses through digital platforms. These outcomes align with empowerment theory, which positions access to information, resources, and decision-making as core drivers of agency and transformation.

Furthermore, the results indicate that digital marketing adoption contributes meaningfully to long-term business sustainability. By enabling cost-efficient promotion, strengthening customer relationships, and expanding market reach, women-owned MSMEs were able to maintain competitiveness in rapidly changing market environments. However, structural challenges such as digital skill gaps, limited access to technology, and gendered domestic burdens continue to hinder optimal utilization of digital tools. Addressing these barriers requires collaborative support from government, educational institutions, and community-based organizations through targeted digital literacy initiatives, mentorship programs, and inclusive digital infrastructure.

Consistent with the expectations outlined before, this study concludes that digital adoption not only strengthens women's business performance but also fosters empowerment across economic, social, and psychological dimensions. Future programs aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs should prioritize capacity-building interventions that integrate digital marketing competencies with empowerment-based training. Further research could expand this study by involving larger samples, comparative regions, or mixed-methods approaches to deepen understanding of the link between digital adoption, empowerment, and sustainable business growth.

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