



SMEs IN THE DIGITAL AGE: PRELIMINARY INSIGHTS INTO SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 3 March 2025 Revised: 14 December 2025 Accepted: 3 June 2026 Published: 15 August 2026 Keywords: SME, digital age, marketing strategies, social media, sustainable growth	In the digital era, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have opportunities and challenges when adopting social media for marketing. Grounded in the Resource-based View (RBV) and Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theories, this study aims to explore the use of social media marketing strategies by SMEs in response to the unprecedented business disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach was employed, involving three in-depth interviews with a marketing manager and two SME owners from three different SMEs. The data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. This study found that SMEs prefer to use Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to increase brand awareness, engage with consumers, and increase revenue. Preliminary findings also show that SMEs have improved their business performance while reducing marketing expenses using social media marketing. However, SMEs face difficulties in navigating the digital marketing landscape due to internet access problems, limited resources, lack of new ideas for creating attractive promotional ads, and changes in consumer buying behaviour. These region-specific and non-generalizable insights offer practical guidance for SMEs seeking to leverage digital tools for resilience and growth. Moreover, the findings provide preliminary implications for policymakers in supporting sustainable SME's development through initiatives such as digital literacy training and targeted financial assistance.

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Introduction

“In the digital age, businesses seeking to expand must make use of the advantages that digital marketing strategies provide, such as correct target markets, cost-effectiveness, and measurable outcomes... Social media, with its platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, offers real-time engagement, personal interactions, and a wide audience reach, making it the best alternative among these strategies... An effective marketing strategy must include social media since it enables businesses to build consumer loyalty, increase brand awareness, and

drive higher conversion rates through its interactive features...”

– Marketing Manager
of Alpha Sdn. Bhd.

This statement illustrates how digital marketing, particularly with social media, helps SMEs operate for more profits. Digital marketing is a technique used to advertise any product or service online by a business (Jadhav *et al.*, 2023). The internet and online advertising have become important components of enterprises as a necessity for the increased use of technology. As stated by Rizvanović *et al.* (2023), digital marketing is essential to

creating lasting relationships between start-ups and customers. Chen *et al.* (2017) emphasised the necessity of brand co-building techniques to increase awareness and grow a start-up's reputation. Meanwhile, Lehnert *et al.* (2020) acknowledged that creating a customer profile is essential to comprehending the needs, drives, and feelings of the intended audience.

Whilst the number of studies on digital marketing increase in Malaysia, many of the studies concentrate on the urban or west coast regions such as Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang where the digital infrastructure as well as technological readiness is more advanced than in the East Coast region. Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang which are located at the East Coast of Malaysia are underdeveloped in digital uptake and have less experience in social media marketing practices. The situations provide an insight on how SMEs in less-developed digital regions pursue digital transformation and highlight the resilience, adaptability, and innovation capacity of the SMEs. In this respect, the focus of this research is given on the East Coast SMEs as there are less studies conducted in this geographical region.

Digital marketing strategies have evolved, according to Gao *et al.* (2023), to increase sales, improve brand recognition, and overcome obstacles in new fields. These strategies comprise employing digital channels of distribution such as computers or tablets, mobile phones, and smartphones, to advertise goods and services (Smith, 2012). However, because most of the literature focused on large enterprises, little is understood about digital marketing for SMEs. Large firms employ external Search Engine Optimization (SEO) specialists, mobile-friendly websites, and social media marketing agencies for their campaigns (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). In contrast, SMEs need to develop, adapt, and enhance their specific social networking marketing strategies by themselves. One reason for the performance discrepancy between SMEs and larger businesses is their inability to attract their target customers and increase revenue (Ritz *et al.*, 2019).

However, concerns about ethics and transparency are raised in the context of the digital world. This is because digital two-way communication creates ethical and transparency issues as customers may provide personal information to the business entities. Transparency is one of the most significant factors that influence decision-making since it is a major cause of millennial disinterest in an organisation (Deloitte, 2019). These factors include the amount of data sought, data protection, and how an organisation tracks or shares a user's online activities. Online advertising, on the other hand, is a marketing technique to achieve marketing goals by utilising digital technology (Chaffey *et al.*, 2009).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers' buying habits changed from making purchases face-to-face to making purchases online for their needs. This was a consequence of the emergence of digital platforms during that period. According to Jadhav *et al.* (2023), digital marketing allows consumers to obtain information about products and services continuously, 24 hours a day, through various online activities such as browsing business websites, reading content, and making purchases. On the other hand, traditional advertising requires customers to see advertisements on television, billboards, or other traditional media before purchasing in a store. As a result, digital marketing reduces the work processes required for marketing channels and allows customers to make informed purchases.

The objective of this study is to explore how SMEs in East Coast Malaysia employ social media marketing strategies and how these efforts affect their business performance. This research specifically investigates the use of Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok among selected SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insights into the digital adaptation process and practical strategies that promote business resilience in times of uncertainty. The East Coast Malaysia has its particular socio-economic context, levels of digital infrastructure development, and provides a compelling yet less

explored context to look into SMEs' approach to digital transformation. Examining their experiences provides valuable insights for other business entities with similar developmental contexts in the East Coast of Malaysia. This study contributes to both theoretical and practical fields. It applies the Resource-based View (RBV) and Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theories to show how SMEs can achieve competitive edge through digital skills and how factors related to innovation affect the way organisations use social media.

From a practical aspect, this study provides information on how SMEs in developing areas can utilise low-cost digital plans for long-term growth. This study also provides suggestions for policies that could make social media marketing easy for consumers to get online and support Malaysian entrepreneurs. Following this introduction, the paper provides a substantial literature review, explaining the theoretical foresight of RBV and DOI in social media marketing for SMEs. The methodology section details a qualitative approach and data collection. The results and discussion section discuss the empirical data, then concludes with key implications for practitioners and areas of future research exploration.

Digital Marketing Strategies

Digital marketing was defined by Mandal *et al.* (2016) as brand promotion using all forms of digital advertising media available to reach the target audience. The modern digital landscape for online organisations includes Social Media Marketing (SMM), Search Engine Marketing (SEM), and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) as essential elements (Lies, 2019; Palos-Sanchez *et al.*, 2019). While SEM deals with strategies for sponsoring search engines and website banner ads, SEO concentrates on improving search engine results. Conversely, SMM uses techniques to interact with consumers on social media platforms through social ads. To engage with consumers and give them a way to interact with the brand through digital channels, marketers utilise electronic media to promote

products or services in the market (Yasmin *et al.*, 2015).

Chinakidzwa and Phiri (2020) found that the performance of a business is impacted by marketing strategy and execution, which are linked to digital marketing strategy. Therefore, if a company does not have an effective digital marketing strategy, it might miss out on opportunities to revolutionise its digital marketing, achieve only partial integration of modern technology into its current business system, create a process that is not entirely seamless, and unable to create indicators to monitor its digital marketing efforts. Chaffey (2011) agreed that social media marketing is an integral part of digital marketing. When done through websites, online advertisements, opt-in emails, interactive kiosks, interactive TVs, or mobile devices, digital marketing is also referred to as online marketing (Chaffey & Smith, 2008).

A study by Gao *et al.* (2023) found that SMEs may maintain their sustainability by implementing digital marketing. Digital marketing is the fastest method to brand products and services. Using the internet is also the most practical mean to transfer information and business ideas, hence it is a technology enabler for a sustainable competitive edge (Sidek *et al.*, 2020). The best way to understand how customers behave and interact with businesses online is through digital marketing, which has become crucial for promoting and communicating businesses' sustainable initiatives today (Saura *et al.*, 2020).

According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), a growing number of businesses, including those in manufacturing, retail, wholesale, and others, are integrating smart digital marketing into their overall sustainable marketing strategies. Many contemporary SMEs in developed countries have already incorporated sustainability initiatives into all their advertising initiatives, including traditional and digital marketing strategies, communications, and other strategies, as sustainability has emerged as one of the most important issues in recent years (Dumitriu *et al.*, 2019).

Digital media marketing campaigns enable organisations to accurately measure campaign outcomes and make more effective adjustments compared with traditional marketing methods, thereby improving returns on marketing investments. Both online and offline platforms are used by consumers to look for goods and services, research their features and costs, and make decisions on what to buy (Rangaswamy *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the targeted demographic segments can be reached quite effectively with the use of digital marketing technologies. Through algorithm analysis, digital marketing assist in understanding the demands, preferences, and level of acceptability of goods and services among the customers (Tarazona-Montoya *et al.*, 2024).

Social Media Marketing

Strategically, social media involvement facilitates the flow of resources between both companies and consumers. Hollebeek *et al.* (2019) argued that consumers may allocate intangible resources (such as knowledge) and tangible resources (such as equipment) while engaging with companies. Social media marketing provides a unique chance to reach a worldwide audience, interact with customers in real time, and establish brand loyalty without the huge expenditures that major organizations require (Kedi *et al.*, 2024). Social media marketing is important for SMEs since it is easily accessible and cost-effective. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn provide a variety of tools and statistics that enable firms to adjust their marketing efforts, target certain demographics, and track campaign effectiveness (Adewumi *et al.*, 2024). This highlights the crucial importance of network interaction in integrating resources. Customer-to-customer contacts are very important, particularly for more involved engagement behaviours (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018).

Therefore, the interconnection and interactions on social media platforms, both between firms and customers and amongst customers themselves, may be seen as

valuable resources that can be transformed into marketing capabilities, as stated by Morgan and Hunt (1999). An example of this is the ability of a company to use information obtained from interactions on social media platforms to discover and foster loyal clients, which is known as CRM skills (Trainor *et al.*, 2014).

As social media has evolved from a simple communication medium to a valuable source of consumer and market insights, marketers may strategically use social media to create unique resources that align with their existing organisational resources and skills. Positive marketing outcomes can be achieved by businesses through strategic engagement with the customers. Thus, social media provides digital opportunities that, when integrated with fundamental marketing principles, enable organisations to develop and implement effective social media marketing strategies. One of the advantages of using social media marketing is its impact on brand reputation and awareness. Social media can increase a brand's reputation through the widespread dissemination of thoughts and reviews by customers. This occurs through interaction between consumers in expressing their support or criticism of a brand, therefore spreading positive or negative feedback about a firm.

Meanwhile, brand awareness refers to the level of familiarity and recognition of a brand in the minds of consumers. It directly affects the consumers' ability to remember and recall the brand, as well as their likelihood of purchasing the product's brand (Lal *et al.*, 2019). Word-of-mouth marketing is successful when the message is positive. Yet, negative reviews have the potential to quickly spread, and this will damage the trust that exists between a business and its customers. Hence, it is important to formulate an efficient strategy for social media communication to create trust. This is because the rapid spread of information on online platforms may have negative effects on relationships and reputation, resulting in long-term effects on the firm (Dolega *et al.*, 2021). To enhance consumer awareness, managers can

disseminate informative and visually appealing news regarding the products and services, provide assurances of price and quality, establish community groups on social media platforms, implement customer loyalty programs, and offer discounts to consumers who make purchases through social media.

According to Rugova and Prenaj (2016), social media platforms possess a substantial number of users, making them an ideal audience for marketers seeking to promote their goods or services online. Social media marketing has emerged as a potent strategy for directing specific online traffic to firms' websites or blogs. Rugova and Prenaj (2016) also discussed the topic of lead generation. Leads are individuals who have the potential to become clients or sales prospects. Social media platforms are used by a vast number of individuals, making it an ideal space for businesses to potentially connect with clients. Furthermore, the implementation of social media by SMEs has the advantage of conducting market insights more effectively, since social media has become increasingly popular (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). The advent of the internet and social media has revolutionised the methods used to do market research and monitor competitors. Rugova and Prenaj (2016) stated that social media marketing improves customer connection. Social media platforms provide extensive and dynamic communication between SMEs and their existing or prospective clients. Consumers may use social media sites to provide feedback, express their thoughts, and seek assistance and support. The communication is straightforward and often enhances connections between SMEs and their consumers.

Nevertheless, several researchers contend that the measurement of consumer involvement might provide challenges since concepts such as "consumer-brand engagement" are difficult to define, conceptualise, and implement in both social media settings and wider consumer behaviour and marketing frameworks. Despite the growing body of literature on social media marketing, there remains a notable empirical gap

concerning its adoption and impact specifically within SMEs operating in developing country contexts such as East Coast Malaysia. Previous studies largely focus on developed economies or larger enterprises, leaving a need for context-specific insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by SMEs with limited resources in these regions.

Challenges in Social Media Marketing

One key aspect that affects adoption is the proficiency of employees in handling technological complexity (Bharati *et al.*, 2015). Bharati *et al.* (2015) also demonstrated that proficiency in using information technology has an impact on the rate at which organisations embrace new technologies. SMEs need to allocate their resources, such as employees and time, to properly manage their social media presence (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). It is important for employees to possess the necessary expertise and receive appropriate training to effectively respond to consumer feedback and concerns, as well as proactively manage unfavourable remarks before they gain wider public attention. SMEs need to consistently provide fresh information regarding their business to maintain customer engagement and foster ongoing connections. However, SMEs should refrain from spreading inconsequential material since it has the potential to be bothersome. It is very important for SMEs to regulate and assess the results of social media marketing to comprehend its efficiency and efficacy. Besides that, SMEs could face several threats, including bad reputations, legal problem, and operational risks. So, to successfully execute social media marketing in business activities, SMEs need to have a clear understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each social media platform to not waste valuable resources such as time and money.

According to Effendi *et al.* (2020), a significant challenge in social media marketing is the awareness of high costs. Technological social media marketing's higher prices are a significant barrier to SMEs' adoption and utilisation of

information technology. Insufficient funding is one of the primary barriers that organisations face when it comes to adopting information technology. The perceived high cost for SME owners to acquire information technology will hinder the adoption of technology (Awa *et al.*, 2015). Potluri and Vajjhala (2018)'s research examined the potential advantages and obstacles encountered while implementing and using Web 3.0 technologies in poor nations. The findings from the article indicated that the financial limitations faced by SMEs have an important impact on their decision to adopt digital technology in their business.

Moreover, Rugova and Prenaj (2016) found that social media introduced new challenges and possibilities such as privacy, security, intellectual property, employment practices, and other legal problems. Before participating in social media activities, the staff in charge of social media needs to possess a comprehensive understanding of information technology legislation. The presence of significant security and operational risks could prevent the adoption of social media marketing. There are risks that arise from malware, viruses, or spyware that are inadvertently downloaded from social media sites. SMEs need to be concerned about their security issues as they may face potential financial losses resulting from viruses and spyware. Moreover, there are also potential intellectual property and media concerns associated with safeguarding the rights of third parties and preventing the dissemination of fraudulent positive evaluations.

Strategies for Effective Social Media Marketing

The success of social media marketing is dependent on the role that consumers attribute to firms and brands in social media (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Consumers may see firms and brands as intruders, gate crashers, or unwelcomed visitors. Nevertheless, studies indicate that many users anticipate companies to engage in social media discussions and may intentionally include companies in the debate by referencing the brand or using hashtags. This disparity may indicate

a diverse customer base, with some consumers being receptive to proactive and involved companies while others resist the breach.

Meanwhile, according to a study conducted by Chatterjee and Kumar (2020), SMEs have a significant potential to enhance and expand their offerings to effectively fulfil customer demands. SMEs can easily accomplish this task by using the consumers' comments and recommendations found on social media platforms. This is facilitating the collaborative development of the business operations of SMEs. It will ultimately lead to the enhancement of the general economic well-being of the SMEs.

One of the main advantages that SMEs gain from social media marketing is cost efficiency. Rugova and Prenaj (2016) pointed out that social media marketing is a cost-effective marketing method that requires little advertising expenses and time investment. It is a cost-effective method for successful business marketing. If a business knows the specific platforms where its target audience engages in social media, a little investment is sufficient to start a social media strategy, which may provide remarkable benefits. For example, Facebook provides a very economical method of focused marketing. This is very important for SMEs, as they lack the financial resources to adopt expensive marketing plans like big companies. This advantage is particularly significant for SMEs and SME start-ups in developing countries, as it allows them to increase their brand visibility, while at the same time reducing costs and saving time. In addition, Kumar *et al.* (2016) agreed that content creation through a company's social media affects consumers' purchasing decisions.

Social Media Marketing for Sustainable Growth

In recent years, there has been a rise in the growth of the discourse on sustainability, with company management paying more attention to measures that promote environmental sustainability (Kang & Sung, 2022). As a matter of fact, the growing significance of sustainability for customers has encouraged businesses to address environmental

concerns within their global supply chains (Ponte, 2020) and convey these concerns to the market (Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2020). Due to the fact that it is interactive and two-way, social media has become one of the most extensively utilised communication channels for environmental concerns (Shin & Ki, 2022; Chen *et al.*, 2023). This is because it makes it easier for people to communicate with one another. When it comes to communication, social media plays a significant role since it is founded on communal intelligence, cooperation, voluntariness, transparency, and commitment (Ros-Diego & Castelló-Martínez, 2012). According to Yang *et al.* (2018) and Rathee (2023), businesses need to determine the most effective channels through which they may disseminate information on sustainability on social media.

Kiron *et al.* (2017) contended that corporations are adopting corporate sustainability on the assumption that sustainable development would lay outside the purview of policymakers and regulators. Corporations have been catalysts for economic progress, but they must actively pursue a balance between their objectives and the principles of social equality and environmental stewardship. Companies have partially contributed to unsustainable situations. Tomšič (2015) asserted a robust correlation between business sustainability and economic performance, contending that organisations must consistently reconcile their economic performance with social responsibility and environmental stewardship to continue profitable operations in fiercely competitive marketplaces. In this context, it is necessary to re-evaluate the evaluations of the unique interrelations among the sustainability domains – social, environmental, and economic, that impact corporate competitiveness (Lopez-Torres, 2022).

Social media has become a significant avenue for marketing communications, serving as the most accessible method for promoting goods and services. The accessibility of social media platforms enables firms to target varied

audiences and develop successful communication strategies. Sustainability has become a critical concern for both global and local entities. For several organisations, social media has become the primary medium for both internal and external communication on sustainability in SMEs. Social media is distinctive because it not only facilitates message dissemination but also provides opportunities for direct user responses (Basri & Siam, 2019).

From the findings of the data analysis, the research conducted by Suariedewi *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that there is a favourable and substantial effect between social media marketing and the sustainability of SMEs. This indicates that the use of social media in a productive manner has the potential to enhance the sustainability of SMEs in Denpasar City (Elbanna *et al.*, 2019). According to Suariedewi *et al.* (2022), there is a positive impact and a substantial association between social media marketing and the sustainability of SMEs. It means that the efficacy of the use of social media may boost the sustainability of SMEs in Denpasar City.

Materials and Methods

Underpinning Theory

This study is theoretically supported by two main theories: Resource-based View (RBV) theory and the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory. According to Ulrich and Barney (1984), the RBV originated in the field of economics (Penrose, 2009). They argued that the services that resources generate are dependent on how they are used; the same resource can generate different services depending on the use, purpose, method, and combination of other resources. Penrose (2009) posited that an organisation's uniqueness stems from the way it integrates its abilities and assets. The RBV theory states that for businesses to obtain a competitive edge, they must contribute to business rivalry with distinctive assets and competencies (Ulrich & Barney, 1984). Furthermore, RBV also suggests that SMEs can gain a competitive advantage

in social media marketing strategies by utilising their unique resources, which include innovation, personalised customer interactions through customer relationship management (CRM), and adaptability to new technologies. With that, SMEs can produce engaging content, interact with their audience, and react quickly to changes in the market. Thus, through the RBV framework, certain SMEs can take advantage of digital technology advances even in resource-constrained conditions.

Meanwhile, the DOI theory developed by Rogers (2003) looks at how new ideas and innovations can be adopted within businesses. According to the DOI theory, variables including compatibility, complexity, trialability, observability, and relative advantage influence how quickly innovations can be adopted in an organisation. When applied to social media marketing, the DOI outlines the rationale and ways to facilitate SMEs' use of social media tools and platforms. It suggests that SMEs are more than ready to adopt social media marketing if they believe it to be beneficial, aligned with their current operations, easy to implement, and offers positive outcomes.

Therefore, the RBV and DOI integration provides this study in a theoretical realm to determine why SMEs adopt and use social media tools as part of their marketing offerings. From the RBV theory perspective, various digital competencies (content creation, social media facilitating customer engagement, and branding storytelling) emerge as a digital resource to render SMEs competitive advantages (Trainor *et al.*, 2014; Ritz *et al.*, 2019). Within the scope of a few resources available, such competencies are a distinguishing factor against larger companies (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Simultaneously, integration with DOI theory for technology adoption intention occurs naturally due to the innovations' perceived advantage and the degree of adaptability or complexity of use. For social media tools to be investigated in this study, they must be embraced after being perceived as beneficial, aligned with what can be facilitated, and generally, perceived as useful (Gao *et al.*, 2023; Tarazona-Montoya *et al.*, 2024).

For example, the study reveals that the tools with low costs and easy to observe (such as social media platforms) and aligned with branding and engagement efforts are more likely to be adopted by SMEs (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020; Rizvanović *et al.*, 2023). Yet most of the international literature thus far has assessed SMEs in well-established, urbanised areas where digital capabilities flourish. Little research has been conducted on those with limited capabilities and inconsistent digital access. Thus, this work is positioned as a contribution to the literature gaps where the RBV and DOI theoretical approach substantiates the ability of SMEs on the East Coast of Malaysia to develop marketing advantages despite resource limitations and inadequate infrastructure access. The international, theoretical appeal of the findings will further justify a more contextualised approach to understanding similar SMEs undergoing digital transformation in developing areas.

This qualitative research uses a conceptual framework based on the RBV and the DOI as the framework to guide the development of the interview protocol and the thematic coding of responses. The conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 1, is not used to test hypotheses. Constructs of digital capability, perceived characteristics of innovation, and external influence's structure inquiry into how and why SMEs in a Malaysian context adopt social media.

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to obtain preliminary insights into social media marketing strategies among three SMEs in East Coast Malaysia. Three face-to-face interviews were performed between April and July 2023, approximately one to two hours for each session (Table 1). Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, aiming for an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena rather than statistical generalization, a small sample size of three participants was deemed appropriate.

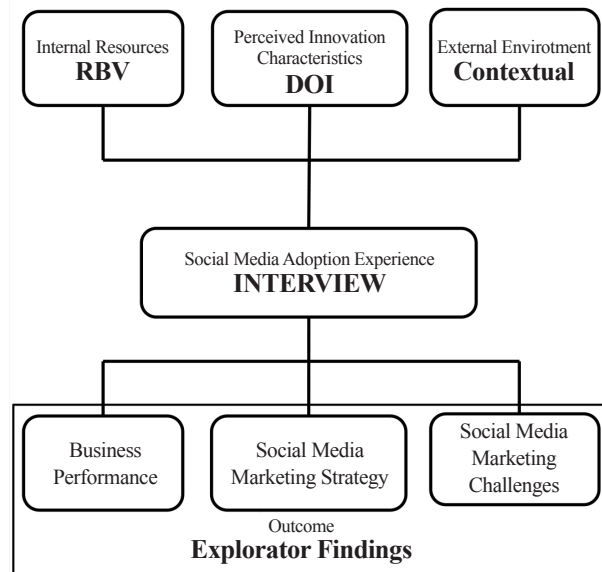


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

This approach allowed for rich, detailed data collection through semi-structured interviews. However, it is important to acknowledge that the findings are specific to these three cases and thus have limited generalizability to the broader SME population.

The research ethics considerations were fully observed throughout this study. The data collection in this study complied with ethical requirements by ensuring that information collected from the respondents would only be used for research purposes and was kept confidential throughout and after the completion of the research. The instruments of the study have passed the approval of the ethical committee's procedure from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu with the letter number UMT/JKEPM/2023/160. All participants were informed of the research purpose and their right to withdraw or answer any questions asked at any time. To ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity, identifiable information has been replaced with pseudonyms. The interview questions, as shown on the Appendix (Interview Script), were reviewed and validated by two academic experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with

the constructs derived from the RBV and DOI theories.

The interviews were audio recorded with the participant's consent to obtain the necessary data and subsequently transcribed. Participants were asked to explain the social media marketing strategies they used throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges they faced in navigating the digitalization efforts, and the impact on business performance. To preserve confidentiality, all participant information was anonymised during data transcriptions. The transcriptions were managed and organised using NVivo software. Using the software, the researcher was able to categorise and reclassify the quotes from the interviews into different themes that were based on the research questions. To ensure trustworthiness and rigor of the thematic analysis, several measures were employed. Initial coding was performed by the researchers, and preliminary themes were cross-checked and discussed to enhance inter-coder reliability and reduce potential bias.

Additionally, participant validation, where participants reviewed the preliminary findings, confirmed the accuracy of their expressed experiences. An audit trail of coding

decisions and analytical memos was maintained throughout the process. Since the interviews were conducted in Malay language, an expert proofreader translated the Malay responses in the transcript into English. Before analysis, the researchers confirmed the accuracy of the English transcripts.

Results and Discussion

According to the stated research objectives, the findings of the study are discussed in this section.

Participants' Profile

Three informative interviews were successfully carried out with three SMEs in East Coast Malaysia. The profiles of the study participants are shown in Table 1.

The data analysis of the study was performed using NVivo analysis. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: The effects of social media marketing strategies on business performance, the obstacles in implementing social media marketing strategies, and the solutions to overcome the obstacles. Thus, the findings of the study have been organised into three themes, each of which is covered in more detail in the subsections that follow.

Theme One: The Effects of Social Media Marketing Strategies on Business Performance

The participants recognised that social media marketing strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic improved their business performance.

In alignment with the RBV, SMEs leveraged their internal capabilities such as flexibility, creativity, and personalised engagement to gain digital visibility despite limited resources. Participant (P) 1 stated that:

"Before the pandemic, we sold our products physically at the factory, either directly to end consumers or wholesale to wholesalers. However, when the Malaysian government executed the Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020 and business operations were forced to stop, the sales began to decline, and we had to pay fixed costs even though production activities could not continue. So, we started to use digital platforms like Shopee, our company website, WhatsApp, Facebook Ads, and TikTok Shop to market our products online. With more than 50% of total sales coming from online channels, our revenues have increased because of the use of digital marketing."

(P1)

In addition, P2 also acknowledged that he began utilising digital marketing to expand his enterprise. P2 mentioned:

"I already used online marketplaces like Facebook and Shopee before COVID-19 pandemic. Online sales continued during the pandemic, although slowly, as the pandemic only caused a 10% decline in sales."

Table 1: Participants' profile

Company	Types of Ownership	Nature of Business	Participant Position	Length of Interview (Hours)
Alpha Sdn. Bhd.	Private Limited Company	A manufacturer – produces and sells various fish chips	Marketing Manager	2
Beta Enterprise	Sole Proprietorship	A retailer – sells shoes through online shop	Owner	1.5
Gamma Enterprise	Sole Proprietorship	A bakery – sells freshly made cakes and desserts	Owner	1

Note: The real names of the companies are kept confidential for privacy concerns, by agreement with the case study organisation.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, I started a new digital marketing campaign to promote my business. This led to a 50% increase in revenues.”

(P2)

P2 added that he used digital marketing campaigns to help increase sales:

“I started to create and share valuable content related to my products – I used videos and infographics on my Facebook and TikTok to attract the audience. I also run contests or giveaways on my Facebook live-streaming to encourage engagement and increase my followers. This is because they are asked to like, share, or comment on the content to enter the contest or giveaway. My business sales are increasing after the digital marketing campaigns.”

(P2)

P3 mentioned the following:

“Mostly I advertised my products on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp before the COVID-19 outbreak. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, I began using GrabFood as an additional online channel for product marketing and sales. GrabFood is a great way for business owners to market and sell their products because its offerings are related to food and drinks and they need to be delivered quickly to clients.”

(P3)

Furthermore, the use of social media marketing can increase brand awareness among consumers as P1 said:

“Social media gives businesses the chance to connect with a large audience. Posting interesting content frequently helps in increasing brand visibility and awareness, which makes it easier for potential buyers to identify and recall the products.”

(P1)

P1 also stated:

“Since content marketing can attract the attention of the audience and drive traffic to a company’s website, I think it’s important in social media marketing.”

(P1)

P3 added:

“I was unable to fulfil customers’ orders at that time due to the MCO, which caused a drop in my business activity during COVID-19. However, because the business is run online, it may stay open despite the problems that I had to face due to the lack of workers during the COVID-19 outbreak. I used Facebook live streaming to introduce my new products to customers, and questions-and-answers (Q&A) sessions with the audience. In addition, I created social media stories on my Facebook and Instagram platforms to promote my products. This digital marketing technique was amazing as my sales started to increase...”

(P3)

P2 further commented:

“Live streaming makes it possible to have direct communication with my customers. More lasting relationships are created, customer loyalty is promoted, and insightful feedback that can be utilised to enhance products and services is provided through this two-way communication.”

(P2)

SMEs typically use Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram as their primary marketing platforms to advertise their products. Utilising social media marketing techniques helped the business perform better and was the best way to market its products during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were unable to physically go shopping for their needs. Customers would invest their time and money in online purchases.

In addition, another benefit of social media marketing is its cost-effectiveness. P1 acknowledged:

“Social media marketing is typically less expensive when compared to traditional marketing strategies. All sizes of businesses can utilise it since they can begin with a small budget and increase their efforts as they see results. We can lessen our reliance on more costly traditional marketing strategies, such as brochure printing, TV or radio advertisement, which have higher expenses and less capability to achieve targeted audience.”

(P1)

P2 also agreed with the low entry costs of using a social media marketing strategy:

“Since many social media sites are free to sign up for and use, businesses may begin establishing an online presence right away without having to spend any money. It costs nothing to create a profile, share content, and interact with followers.”

(P2)

P3 added:

“High-quality content has the potential to become viral on social media, giving it extensive exposure at no extra cost. Postings that users like, share, and comment on have the power to expand a campaign’s viewers beyond its original target.”

(P3)

The findings of this study are consistent with Jacobson *et al.* (2020) who claimed that social media has completely changed marketing

by giving businesses new ways to interact with consumers, gather information, and respond to them individually. Furthermore, social media may be leveraged to enhance customer relations by drawing clients with user-generated content, holding their attention with online chats, and keeping them around by cultivating connections with other users. Establishing a customised relationship with the consumer and providing pertinent information at the appropriate moment are important components of effective customer relations. Businesses may now better understand their customers’ needs and desires by incorporating social CRM into their traditional CRM databases. Table 2 summarises the SMM platforms used by the respondents’ companies and its effects on their business performance.

The results show that the internal digital capabilities, including creativity, personalised engagement, and agility in content creation, were developed to their maximum potential by SMEs to stay competitive during times of disruption. This supports the RBV concept, which suggests that competitive advantage is achieved by firms through the efficient utilisation of internal resources that are rare and cannot be imitated (Ulrich & Barney, 1984). For example, P2 reported that higher sales were made possible by innovative live-stream contests and user-generated interactions, suggesting that social CRM competencies became valuable resources to compete against larger firms with more budgets but slower in reacting in the market.

Relative advantage and compatibility explain how Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram were adopted rapidly as they are perceived as extensions and innovative spins of what SMEs have already been doing. According to DOI theory, the more something can be situated in similar needs and contexts to something

Table 2: Effects on business performance

Participant	SMM Platforms Used	Key Outcomes
P1	Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp	50% increase in sales, reduced costs, brand growth
P2	Facebook, Shopee, TikTok	50% sales growth, higher engagement via contests
P3	Facebook, Instagram, GrabFood	Online continuity, better brand visibility

previously done, the faster adoption occurs (Rogers, 2003). All participants acknowledged that social media would extend consumer reach, minimise product or service costs and guarantee sustainability for lockdowns, which indicates that SMEs only engage when obvious, transparent, and sustainable benefits are present. SMEs showed adoption through a process of trial and error in experimenting with different platforms and contents. These steps support the DOI's idea of innovation adoption being facilitated for small-scale testing with visible results. For instance, P3 adopted WhatsApp, Facebook, Grab Food, and live streaming once there was some visible success, indicating the reinforcing process for adoption.

Theme Two: The Barriers to Adopting Social Media Marketing Strategies

The participants acknowledged that they face a few difficulties with social media marketing. P1 noted that:

"We have lack of ideas to create competitive promotional ads. Attractive ads are very important to attract customers, but sometimes we are stuck in creating new ideas for the advertising. Our team must develop original ideas for each content to persuade viewers to watch our videos."

(P1)

The difficulties faced by P2 are almost identical to those encountered by P1's company. P2 added:

"Internet connection and lack of ideas are two challenges I must face when dealing with social media and online business. Internet access problems sometimes interfere with my live streaming on Facebook or Instagram Live. In addition, customers are more likely to make in-person purchases because they can try the products before deciding."

(P2)

In contrast, P3 claimed:

"I have no problems utilising social media marketing. If I have stable internet connection and access to free platforms for product sales and advertising, I have no difficulty implementing social media as a marketing strategy for my small business."

(P3)

However, P3 commented:

"Understanding customer needs and preferences is also important when using digital marketing. We may struggle to understand customers' digital behaviours and requirements which leads to ineffective implementation of marketing strategy. Some customers also prefer to have real experience in buying the products physically. Therefore, the use of digital marketing might be difficult to satisfy their needs."

(P3)

P3 continued:

"But it is hard to continuously provide interesting and high-quality content. Creativity, understanding, and knowing our intended audience are necessary. Video production, copywriting, and other related skills are areas that businesses must invest on."

(P3)

P1 added that another obstacle they faced was the lack of financial resources.

"We have limited financial resources, thus, making it challenging to invest in digital technologies and digital training. Due to this, we struggled to find and provide workers with the necessary digital skills related to marketing technique."

(P1)

Other challenges that are frequently faced by businesses that use social media platforms as their marketing strategies are negative feedback or comments from customers. P2 claimed:

“Customers can publicly express their dissatisfaction on social media platforms. Potential customers may notice negative reviews which could affect how they see our products, and this will lead to a damage of brand’s reputation. This is because, reviews from other people are frequently trusted by consumers, and thus it may discourage them from buying the products.”

(P2)

P1 also agreed:

“Negative reviews have the potential to go viral, particularly if the customers bring up issues that are sensitive or draw attention to serious mistakes. This might get out of control very soon and become a bigger reputational damage.”

(P1)

Rugova and Prenaj (2016) identified the challenges as the need for SMEs to invest in people and time resources, as well as the requirement that staff members be very active and regularly produce new content. Employees

engaging in social media activities should be highly skilled and trained to handle any queries or complaints from customers to control any negative comments that could be viewed by hundreds or thousands of people. Employees who manage social media marketing need to be creative and regularly produce new content if they want to stay on consumers’ radars. This is important because it enables SMEs to maintain constant engagement with their customers. One of the obstacles to social media marketing, according to Dwivedi *et al.* (2021), is the continuous development of social media networks, including new platforms. Because new features are continuously introduced to social media platforms while they are still in beta testing, these platforms are always evolving. Because of this, studying social media analytics and marketing brings difficulties. The summary of challenges faced by the respondents’ companies in adopting SMM is presented in Table 3.

RBV and DOI’s synergy is observed in how SMEs were able to capitalise on their inherent strengths in resources such as branding, creativity, and innovation, together with those in social media innovation, such as being low-cost and highly accessible. Despite identified limitations in their resources (Theme 2), there was compensation in taking advantage

Table 3: Key challenges in adopting SMM among SMEs

Participant	Challenges	Explanation
P1	Lack of creative ideas	Difficult to consistently produce engaging promotional content
P1	Limited financial resources	Unable to invest in digital tools or employee training
P1, P2	Negative feedback and reputational risk	Viral customer complaints can damage brand image
P2	Internet connectivity issues	Unstable connection disrupts live-streaming and online engagement
P2	Customer preference for physical shopping	Some buyers prefer trying products offline
P3	Difficulty understanding customer preferences	Misalignment between content and target audience expectations
P3	Content quality and consistency challenges	Need for skills in video editing, copywriting, and audience understanding

of low-cost features in technology, thereby demonstrating that external technology enablers play a crucial role in developing their inherent capacity.

Theme Three: Overcoming the Obstacles

There may be several challenges when putting social media marketing strategies into practice, but they may be overcome with the correct approaches. P1 mentioned that:

"A lot of businesses enter the world of social media without measurable targets. The most important thing that you need to do is to establish your specific objectives. In simple words, you must have measurable and relevant targets. For example, set a six-month goal to increase brand awareness by 20%. Or you set monthly key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement rates and click-through rates. This will help your company to measure your achievement."

(P1)

P1 added:

"Our company also sends employees to a skill-building class, so they are capable of operating the packaging machine and social media, such as Facebook ads."

(P1)

Furthermore, P2 also claimed:

"SMEs often suffer lack of resources, including money, staff, and time, when it comes to social media marketing. So, to handle social media initiatives, we can think about working with freelancers, media influencers, or partnering with digital marketing agencies. Considering our target audience and business objectives, we concentrate on the platforms that provide the most returns."

(P2)

On social media, it might be difficult to handle negative comments and criticism. P3 suggested:

"I normally respond to the negative comments professionally. In other way, I use it to demonstrate the dedication of my brand to provide excellent customer service."

(P3)

P3 acknowledged:

"Sometimes I also misunderstood the target audience's needs. This will lead to ineffective social media strategies. To resolve this issue, I regularly communicate with my followers through surveys, polls, and direct interactions during live streaming, to get comments and feedback from them."

(P3)

As mentioned by Dolega *et al.* (2021), SMEs may benefit from social media marketing as it allows them to effectively interact with customers and provide relevant information. Customers may use social media platforms to provide comments, share their opinions, and seek help and support. Typically, the communication that occurs is direct and often strengthens the relationships between SMEs and their customers. This provides benefit for both parties engaged in the company. It assists SMEs in improving their brand recognition and increase their sales. Kumar *et al.* (2016) found that content created by SMEs on social media, television, and email marketing have a significant impact on customer buying decisions. The impact is particularly significant among those who possess expertise in technology and often engage with social media. Table 4 presents the summary of strategies used by the respondents' companies to overcome the barriers.

While the literature consistently highlights the role of social media in increasing brand awareness and sales, as mentioned in the literature review, our findings from P3, a

Table 4: Strategies for overcoming social media marketing challenges

Participant	Strategies	Description
P1	Set measurable goals	Define KPIs such as engagement or awareness increase to guide efforts
P1	Upskilling employees	Send staff to training session for tools like Facebook Ads
P2	Collaborate with freelancers/ influencers/agencies	Outsource when internal resources are insufficient
P2	Platform prioritisation	Focus only on platforms that yield best returns
P3	Professional response to negative comments	Use criticism to showcase strong customer service values
P3	Customer interaction through feedback channels	Use live polls, surveys, and Q&A sessions to understand preferences

bakery owner in a rural setting in East Coast Malaysia, offer a nuanced perspective. P3's strategic adoption of GrabFood in conjunction with Facebook and Instagram shows how a hyper-local adaptation to the digital landscape, leveraging platform-specific delivery services that might be more critical for consumable goods or in areas with different consumer behaviours, compared to more developed SMEs discussed in other studies.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. In terms of generalizability, the interviews were only conducted in East Coast Malaysia. The findings of this study can only be applied to the SMEs in East Coast Malaysia. Care should be exercised before applying these findings to other SMEs as they are not generalised to the whole population in Malaysia. Therefore, other researchers should be cautious in generalizing the findings of the study to other SMEs in general. In fact, the observations and interviews with only three respondents may limit the findings and cannot be used to generalise the whole SMEs in East Coast Malaysia. This is because the culture and IT readiness that each SMEs have, for example, might be different if compared to the SMEs in the West Coast or South Coast Region in Malaysia.

Therefore, future studies should consider employing mixed-method or quantitative approach, by using a survey approach through a questionnaire distributed to the SME population in Malaysia. This will provide more understanding of the impacts of social media marketing strategies on the performance of Malaysian SMEs. Additionally, further research could focus on specific social media platforms, such as TikTok Shop or Facebook Marketplace and explore how SMEs use these integrated e-commerce tools not just for promotion but for direct sales. Exploring platform-specific strategies will enhance the understanding of how multi-functional digital ecosystems shape SME marketing behaviour and business performance.

Conclusions

To sum up, social media marketing has become an important tool for SMEs to overcome the difficulties brought by COVID-19 pandemic. The use of social media marketing strategies in SMEs offers some digital potential, which can improve sales revenue after the business owner puts them into practice. SMEs can benefit from social media marketing, but there are still some difficulties that the business must overcome when putting the marketing plan into practice. To have the best marketing strategy using social media platforms, SMEs

must overcome its challenges such as limited resources, internet access problems, lack of new ideas in creating promotional ads, and shifting consumer behaviours. However, a quantitative study that includes all states in Malaysia could be carried out to learn more about the potential of social media marketing and how it affects business performance. Additional research might concentrate on social media-provided e-commerce platforms like Facebook and TikTok – one digital platform with multiple features that allow businesses to market and sell their products simultaneously.

This study provides significant contributions to both theory and practical concerning social media marketing adoption by SMEs during times of disruption. Theoretically, it extends the application of the RBV and DOI theories by offering contextualised insights into how SMEs in East Coast Malaysia leverage unique digital resources and overcome adoption barriers. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for SMEs to enhance their digital marketing strategies for sustainable growth, and for policymakers to design targeted support initiatives. Generally, the combination of RBV and DOI in this study enables a more comprehensive analysis to be made on the adoption of digital marketing amongst SMEs in a regionally developing environment. These social media websites not only provided an economical innovation in technology, which was subsequently adopted due to its ease (DOI), but are also viewed in this research as strategic resources for these companies, differentiating their competitiveness in markets via branding, relationships, and market responses (RBV).

In addressing the aforementioned barriers such as limited internet connectivity, inadequate resources to support content creation, and lack of content development ideas, three recommendations are proposed for policymakers in East Coast Malaysia. The first is targeted digital literacy training involving the delivery of workshops and training sessions on content creation, reporting social media metrics,

and engaging customers online, especially in places where SMEs have less access to digital connection. The second is subsidised internet provision that has the potential to improve a reliable and affordable connection to individuals and businesses in less connected or rural areas to help alleviate the divide that exists because of connectivity. Finally, providing digital transformation grants or other financial incentives to SMEs to allow them to invest in digital tools, receive specific training, and potentially hiring external help (e.g., freelancers or agencies as P2 suggested).

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions Statement

Hanim Nazira contributed in literature review, collecting data, data analysis, draft article, and article formatting. Norazlina contributed in review, revisions, and approved the article submission. Wan Zuriati contributed to the final version of the manuscript and validation. Hanim Nazira and Norazlina wrote the manuscript with input from all authors. Norazlina and Wan Zuriati supervised research progress. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

Appendix

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

INTERVIEW ON THE TOPIC “SMES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: PRELIMINARY INSIGHTS INTO SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH”

- This interview is conducted on <date of interview> at <time of interview>.
- Okay Sir/Madam/Miss, we will begin the interview...

❖ **Background Questions (most likely during small talk):**

- 1) How long has the company been operating?
- 2) What type of business activities are your company doing?
- 3) Was your company affected during COVID-19 pandemic?
- 4) In your opinion, how were business activities during COVID-19 pandemic?

❖ **Interview Questions for Research Study:**

- 1) How would you describe a company's social media marketing strategy?
- 2) What were the main social media marketing strategy activities carried out during COVID-19?
- 3) Type of digital transformation adoption in your business? Example: Social media, online shops, online payment
- 4) For manufacturing company, what type of digital transformation adoption was done before COVID-19 and after COVID-19? What are the main justifications for implementing social media marketing strategy into your company?
- 5) What are the biggest challenges to the adoption of social media marketing?
- 6) What factors are most important to be considered in implementing social media marketing strategy?
- 7) Did the social media marketing strategy increase your company's sales?
 - If yes, can you share the percentage of the sales increase?
- 8) Did your company's social media marketing strategy improve customer experience and satisfaction?
- 9) How much had been incurred to implement social media marketing strategy?
- 10) Has the company received any funds to help implement digital transformation?
- 11) (*Depending on the answer to the question above*) Did the company apply for the SME Digitization Grant Scheme?
- 12) Did your organization provide employees with resources or opportunities to acquire the right digital skills or digital transformation?

Thank you, Sir/Madam/Miss. That should be my last question for this interview session. Is there anything else that you want to add?

Thank you again for your kind participation.

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