

Optimizing Digital Marketing for Competitive MSMEs: Integration of E-Commerce and Social Media in Gorontalo

*E-Commerce and
Social Media for
Competitive MSMEs*

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ABSTRACT

Despite their substantial economic contribution, many MSMEs still struggle to optimize digital marketing, as their use of social media and e-commerce remains fragmented and limited, reducing competitiveness in wider markets. This study aims to examine the utilization of digital marketing among MSMEs in Gorontalo, focusing on the integration of e-commerce and social media. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with MSMEs, government, and academics. Results show that while most MSMEs rely on Facebook and WhatsApp for promotion, their use of e-commerce platforms such as Shopee and Tokopedia remains limited due to high shipping costs, limited human resources, and weak content management strategies. Analytical findings highlight three key barriers: low digital readiness, lack of platform synergy, and structural challenges such as logistics costs. In response, this study proposes an integrative digital marketing model consisting of three components: digital readiness, strategic alignment, and platform synergy. The model has been preliminarily validated with MSME actors and is considered relevant and applicable. The findings contribute to designing policies, academic interventions, and practical strategies to enhance MSME competitiveness in the digital era.

Keywords: Competitiveness, Digital Marketing, Digital Transformation, E-Commerce, MSMEs, Social Media.

ABSTRAK

Meskipun memiliki kontribusi ekonomi yang besar, banyak UMKM masih menghadapi kesulitan dalam mengoptimalkan pemasaran digital karena pemanfaatan media sosial dan e-commerce yang masih terpisah dan terbatas, sehingga menurunkan daya saing di pasar yang lebih luas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menelaah pemanfaatan digital marketing oleh UMKM di Gorontalo, dengan fokus pada integrasi e-commerce dan media sosial. Menggunakan pendekatan mixed-methods, data dikumpulkan melalui survei, focus group discussion dan wawancara mendalam dengan UMKM, pemerintah, dan akademisi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar UMKM masih mengandalkan Facebook dan WhatsApp sebagai sarana promosi, sedangkan pemanfaatan e-commerce seperti Shopee dan Tokopedia masih terbatas akibat tingginya ongkos kirim, keterbatasan sumber daya manusia, dan lemahnya strategi konten. Analisis data menyoroti tiga hambatan utama yaitu rendahnya kesiapan digital, lemahnya sinergi antar platform, serta kendala struktural berupa biaya logistik. Sebagai jawaban, penelitian ini menawarkan model digital marketing terintegrasi yang terdiri atas tiga komponen yakni digital readiness, strategic alignment, dan platform synergy. Model ini telah divalidasi awal bersama pelaku UMKM dan dinilai relevan serta aplikatif. Temuan ini berkontribusi bagi perumusan kebijakan, intervensi akademik, serta strategi praktis dalam meningkatkan daya saing UMKM di era digital.

Kata kunci: Daya Saing, Pemasaran Digital, Transformasi Digital, Perdagangan Elektronik, UMKM, Media Sosial.

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INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of Indonesia's economy, contributing 60.5% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorbing around 97% of the workforce (Harianto & Sari, 2021). Despite this significant role, many MSMEs continue to face difficulties in adapting to the ongoing digital transformation (Hariyanti & Kristanti, 2024). The rapid growth of digital technology has reshaped consumer behavior and business competition, making digital marketing not only an alternative but also a necessity to ensure sustainability and competitiveness in both domestic and international markets (Alias et al., 2016; Gani et al., 2023).

In practice, however, the digital adoption rate among MSMEs remains limited. Out of 65 million MSMEs in Indonesia, only about 22 million are connected to digital platforms, and most of them have not yet integrated e-commerce with social media. Several factors contribute to this condition, including low digital literacy, lack of human resources with expertise in digital promotion, weak integration across platforms, and logistical barriers such as high shipping costs. These barriers reduce market penetration and weaken competitiveness, especially compared to MSMEs from other regions that are more digitally advanced.

Gorontalo Province reflects these challenges clearly. Local MSMEs, especially those in the culinary and creative sectors, have begun using digital tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok for promotional purposes. However, their adoption of e-commerce platforms such as Shopee and Tokopedia is still relatively low, often constrained by expensive logistics costs, limited capacity to manage online stores, and the absence of integrated marketing strategies. Even when MSMEs register in marketplaces, transactions are limited and inconsistent because promotions through social media are not systematically linked to online purchasing channels. For example, many business owners use Facebook and Instagram merely as digital showcases, without embedding interactive features or call-to-action links that can direct customers to their e-commerce stores (Mukherjee & Hollenbaugh, 2019).

On the other hand, successful cases such as fish floss (*abon ikan*) MSMEs demonstrate that when social media, e-commerce, and websites are strategically integrated, Gorontalo's local products can reach national markets and even penetrate international ones. These experiences prove that digital transformation is possible, but only if MSMEs are equipped with the right strategies and ecosystem support. Previous studies by Sudirjo et al. (2023) and Librianty et al. (2025) have generally treated social media and e-commerce separately. Meanwhile, the urgent need is to formulate a comprehensive and contextual framework that synergizes the two platforms and enhances MSME readiness.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the condition of MSMEs' utilization of digital marketing in Gorontalo, particularly regarding the integration of social media and e-commerce, identify the key challenges they encounter in the adoption process, and develop an integrative and context-appropriate digital marketing optimization model to strengthen their competitiveness in both national and global markets. This article employs a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews with MSME actors, academics, and government representatives. The findings are expected to enrich the academic discourse on digital marketing in the MSME context, while also providing practical recommendations for policymakers, universities, and entrepreneurs in developing strategic interventions to optimize MSME competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integration of Social Media and E-Commerce

E-commerce provides structured opportunities for MSMEs to access wider markets, standardize transactions, and gain consumer trust (Tavengerwei, 2018; Wahyudi et al., 2025). However, several studies indicate that high shipping costs, inconsistent product quality, and limited knowledge about online store management are major barriers for MSMEs (Duggan et al., 2013; Amornkitvikai et al., 2022). For instance, many Gorontalo

MSMEs reported that logistics costs often exceed the selling price of their products, discouraging them from fully adopting e-commerce. Moreover, competition on e-commerce platforms is intense, requiring strong branding and differentiation strategies (Yu et al., 2022; Mulyati & Murwadji, 2024).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are widely used by MSMEs due to their accessibility and ability to reach diverse audiences (Kuswanto, 2024; Ginting, 2025). They enable direct communication with consumers and foster brand loyalty through interactive features (Safira & Aryansyah, 2023; Fitriyana et al., 2025). Nevertheless, many MSMEs still lack the capacity to design engaging content and maintain consistency in posting, which limits the effectiveness of their promotion strategies (Basuki & Hidayat, 2024; Ohara et al., 2024). MSMEs highlighted challenges in managing social media due to limited human resources, where often only one person is responsible for content management.

The integration of social media and e-commerce, often referred to as social commerce, creates a seamless customer journey from awareness to transaction (Bghdadi, 2016; Joshi, 2025). This integration not only enhances sales conversion but also builds stronger consumer trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Tseng et al., 2022). The concept of value co-creation is one in which customers actively participate in shaping brand identity and product perception (Iglesias et al., 2013). However, achieving such integration requires digital readiness in terms of skills, infrastructure, and strategic alignment between promotional and transactional platforms (Akpe et al., 2023).

Digital Marketing to Enhance MSMEs' Competitiveness

Digital marketing refers to the use of internet-based platforms and tools such as social media, e-commerce, and websites to promote products and services, engage customers, and facilitate transactions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Brahma & Dutta, 2020; Kotler et al., 2021). For MSMEs, digital marketing is considered one of the most effective strategies to enhance market reach, reduce operational costs, and strengthen competitiveness (Purwana et al., 2017; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Research has shown that MSMEs that adopt digital marketing are more resilient in facing crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and can expand their markets beyond local boundaries (Harianto & Sari, 2021; Yawised et al., 2021).

In the Indonesian context, the adoption of digital marketing by MSMEs has increased in the last five years, but the integration between e-commerce platforms and social media remains limited. Sudirjo et al. (2023) emphasize that many MSMEs use social media only as a display channel without linking it to sales transactions, resulting in ineffective marketing. This condition is also visible in Gorontalo MSMEs, where social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram) dominates promotional activities, while e-commerce (Shopee, Tokopedia) remains underutilized.

Although many studies discuss the role of digital marketing in MSME development, most focus on single platforms (either social media or e-commerce) without addressing the integrative framework needed to optimize competitiveness. In the context of Gorontalo, empirical findings from surveys and FGDs show that MSMEs urgently need a contextual model that connects digital readiness, strategic alignment, and platform synergy. This study fills the gap by proposing an Integrative Digital Marketing Model specifically designed for MSMEs in Gorontalo, combining both theoretical insights and practical validation.

Factors Influencing Digital Transformation in MSME

Research highlights that digital transformation in micro, small, and medium enterprises is shaped by a combination of external pressures and internal capabilities. Verhoef et al. (2021) emphasize that several external dynamics drive the need for digital adoption. The availability of digital technologies, such as smartphone-based online payments, supports the growth of e-commerce and helps streamline logistics, ultimately lowering supply chain costs (Hariyanti et al., 2024). Advancements in digital tools also

intensify competition, as they enable firms to reach broader markets, collaborate more effectively with stakeholders, and accelerate innovation in a sustainable manner (Bessonova & Battalov, 2021). This environment requires not only the implementation of technology but also a deeper understanding of its strategic use. In addition, evolving customer behavior, particularly the shift toward online purchasing, further pressures MSMEs to modernize.

Internal factors similarly play a critical role. According to Eller et al. (2020), key determinants include information technology readiness, employee competencies, and the clarity of digital strategy. Effective transformation requires the digitization of information and integrated systems that connect production, logistics, and supply activities within and across firms (Matt & Rauch, 2020). The ability of employees to adopt and utilize digital tools is essential in ensuring smooth implementation. Moreover, digital strategies should reflect four core dimensions, technology use, changes in value creation, organizational adjustments, and financial planning to support a comprehensive transformation process (Matt et al., 2015).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study applied a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of digital marketing practices among MSMEs in Gorontalo. The quantitative component focused on mapping MSME digital adoption, while the qualitative component explored strategic challenges and opportunities through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. The target population consisted of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operating in Gorontalo Regency. The unit of analysis was individual MSME actors actively engaged in production and marketing. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on their experience in utilizing digital platforms. A total of 30 MSMEs responded to the survey, and five MSMEs participated in the FGD sessions, namely: Adilah Cake & Kukis, Mamaca, Azwa Sukses Mulia, Fitrah Gemilang (Soba), and Briya Abon Ikan Dlira. Additionally, representatives from the Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs, as well as academic experts, were included to enrich the discussion.

The data for this study were gathered using multiple techniques to ensure the richness and accuracy of the findings. The first stage involved administering a structured questionnaire to five MSMEs, aiming to capture key information such as business characteristics, patterns of digital platform usage, and the obstacles they frequently encounter. Responses were recorded using a Likert-scale format to allow measurable assessment of perceptions.

To complement the survey results, a focus group discussion was then organized, involving MSME actors, government representatives, and academic stakeholders (Creswell, 2016). This forum enabled an interactive exploration of how MSMEs adapt to digital marketing tools, their readiness in utilizing e-commerce platforms, and the types of support they expect from policymakers to improve digital adoption. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with selected MSME owners and relevant government officers. These interviews served as a validation process, providing deeper insights into issues identified during the survey and FGD sessions while also uncovering contextual factors that influence digital marketing implementation.

The variables examined in this research focus on three dimensions of digital marketing practices. Digital readiness was assessed by evaluating the availability of digital infrastructure and human resource capabilities in each enterprise. Platform utilization was measured through the intensity and purpose of engagement on widely used social media and e-commerce platforms. Challenges and barriers were identified through survey indicators and supported by thematic analysis of qualitative data, capturing issues such as logistics constraints, limited digital content expertise, and lack of strategic alignment in marketing practices. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to map patterns of digital platform usage and readiness. Qualitative data from FGDs and interviews were analyzed thematically to identify recurring issues, patterns, and best

practices. Integration of both datasets was conducted through triangulation, ensuring the validity and reliability of findings.

RESULTS

Utilization of Digital Platforms in MSME

The respondents in this study consisted of five MSMEs that actively participated in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). These MSMEs represent diverse business sectors in Gorontalo, with the majority engaged in the culinary industry. Survey results further revealed that 70% of the MSMEs operate in the culinary field, including traditional snacks, processed foods, and catering services. Meanwhile, 20% are involved in craft-based businesses such as souvenirs, handicrafts, and household products, and the remaining 10% run service-oriented enterprises. Based on Table 1, more than half of the MSMEs (56%) have been operating for over five years, indicating a relatively stable level of sustainability. On the other hand, 44% are relatively new enterprises that have been running for less than five years, reflecting both entrepreneurial dynamism and the presence of early-stage challenges. From the perspective of entrepreneur demographics, women play a significant role, as female entrepreneurs account for 60% of the respondents, while male entrepreneurs represent 40%.

Regarding educational background, a large portion of the respondents have at least completed high school, and some are university graduates. This educational profile suggests that MSMEs in Gorontalo hold potential for adapting to digital literacy initiatives, although many still require structured training and mentoring to optimize digital practices. In terms of digital readiness, nearly all respondents own and utilize smartphones for business purposes. However, only a few have specific human resources dedicated to managing digital marketing, meaning that most entrepreneurs continue to rely on themselves to handle promotional activities (Sari & Ahmad, 2022).

Table 1. Profile of MSME Respondents

Characteristics	Category/Indicator	Percentage (%)
Business Sector	Culinary	70
	Craft	20
	Services	10
Years in Operation	> 5 years	56
	≤ 5 years	44
Gender of Entrepreneur	Female	60
	Male	40

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) offered a more comprehensive understanding of the profiles of participating MSMEs by exploring their unique business characteristics, strategies, and challenges. One of the notable cases is Adilah Cake & Kukis, a home-based culinary business that was initially promoted only through word-of-mouth. Over time, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the business shifted to digital channels such as Facebook and WhatsApp, which became essential for maintaining customer engagement and sustaining sales.

Similarly, Mamaca, which specializes in processed foods, expanded its product line into snacks and catering services. Despite this growth, the enterprise faces considerable barriers related to high shipping costs and packaging durability (Amornkitvikai et al., 2022). These structural obstacles limit its ability to reach wider markets, especially outside Gorontalo. Another important participant, Azwa Sukses Mulia, operates in the distribution and services sector. This business plays a strategic role by establishing a delivery service that not only benefits its own operations but also supports other MSMEs in distributing their products (Akpe et al., 2023). Its experience highlights the crucial importance of logistics as an enabling factor for MSME competitiveness. From the traditional snack industry, Fitrah Gemilang (Soba) represents a family heritage business that has been passed down to young entrepreneurs. Leveraging Facebook Pro and Shopee, this MSME has attempted to expand its reach. However, similar to Mamaca, it

continues to struggle with high shipping fees, which reduce its competitiveness in broader markets. Finally, Briya Abon Ikan Dlira stands out as a success story among the respondents. Specializing in fish processing, this MSME has successfully integrated its website, social media platforms, and e-commerce marketplaces. This digital synergy has enabled the business to penetrate not only the national market but also international buyers, demonstrating the potential of well-executed digital marketing strategies. Together, these cases reflect the diversity of MSMEs in Gorontalo in terms of business types and levels of digital adoption. At the same time, they underscore the common challenges of logistics and human resource limitations, while also showcasing success stories that serve as role models for others in navigating the digital economy.

The study reveals varying levels of digital platform utilization among MSMEs in Gorontalo. Table 2 summarizes the adoption of three primary digital platforms: social media, e-commerce, and websites.

Table 2. Utilization of Digital Platforms by MSMEs

MSME Name	Social Media (FB/IG/WA/TikTok)	E-Commerce (Shopee/Tokopedia)	Website	Level of Adoption
Adilah Cake & Kukis	Facebook, WhatsApp	Local marketplace only	None	Basic
Mamaca	WhatsApp	Shopee	None	Intermediate
Azwa Sukses Mulia	Facebook	None	Free website	Intermediate
Fitrah Gemilang (Soba)	Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok	Shopee	None	Intermediate
Briya Abon Ikan Dlira	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook	Shopee, Tokopedia	Professional website	Advanced

The data indicate that social media has become the most widely used digital platform among MSMEs in Gorontalo. Almost all respondents reported relying heavily on Facebook and WhatsApp as their primary promotional channels. These platforms were chosen mainly because of their accessibility, familiarity, and cost-effectiveness, which allow entrepreneurs to reach customers without requiring significant investment (Mukherjee & Hollenbaugh, 2019). In several cases, younger business owners also adopted Instagram and TikTok to broaden their market reach, particularly targeting younger demographics who are active on these platforms.

By contrast, the adoption of e-commerce platforms remains relatively limited. Only Mamaca and Fitrah Gemilang (Soba) reported actively using Shopee, while Briya Abon Ikan Dlira utilized both Shopee and Tokopedia. Most of the other businesses expressed concerns about structural and technical barriers, such as high shipping costs, weak competitiveness compared to cheaper products from other regions, and limited skills to optimize marketplace features (Amornkitvikai et al., 2022). These challenges restricted their ability to fully benefit from e-commerce platforms, despite recognizing their potential for expanding sales.

The use of websites was even more exclusive. Among the participants, only Azwa Sukses Mulia and Briya Abon Ikan Dlira maintained websites. However, their approaches differed significantly. Azwa relied on a free website with minimal functionality, which was mainly used for basic product information and contact. In contrast, Abon Ikan invested in a professional website that served not only as a branding tool but also as a gateway for international transactions. This disparity highlights that while many MSMEs acknowledge the importance of having an online presence, only a few possess the capacity and resources to sustain more advanced digital tools (Bessonova & Battalov, 2021).

Taken together, these findings illustrate a tiered pattern of digital adoption among Gorontalo MSMEs. At the basic level, businesses such as Adilah Cake & Kukis depend almost entirely on social media promotion. At the intermediate level, MSMEs like Mamaca and Fitrah Gemilang (Soba) combine social media with partial e-commerce

utilization. Finally, at the advanced level, Briya Abon Ikan Dlira demonstrates full integration by employing social media, e-commerce, and a professional website, enabling the business to reach both national and international markets. This heterogeneity in adoption levels underscores the need for tailored strategies in developing MSME digital capabilities. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, interventions must be adapted to the different stages of digital readiness, ensuring that each business receives the appropriate support to move progressively toward greater competitiveness in the digital economy (Akpe et al., 2023).

Challenges in E-Commerce Utilization

Although many MSMEs in Gorontalo have successfully registered their products on major e-commerce platforms such as Shopee and Tokopedia, their level of utilization remains far from optimal. Several challenges were identified in this study that restrict their ability to fully leverage digital marketplaces. High logistics costs emerged as the most dominant issue, where shipping fees often exceeded product prices, making online purchases unattractive for consumers outside the region. Additionally, limited human resources were found to hinder consistent store management, as most businesses relied solely on the owner to handle digital operations, resulting in delayed responses and infrequent updates (Permana et al., 2024). Weak digital literacy further contributed to the problem, as some MSMEs struggled with basic online selling skills, including content management and customer engagement strategies.

On the competitive side, MSMEs in Gorontalo faced intense price pressure from similar products sold at significantly cheaper prices, reducing profit margins and discouraging long-term investment in digital expansion. Packaging and product durability also posed constraints for certain product categories, where suboptimal packing materials affected item quality during shipment, leading to customer dissatisfaction and lower repeat purchases (Amornkitvikai et al., 2022). Together, these findings illustrate the multifaceted barriers that continue to impede successful e-commerce adoption among MSMEs in Gorontalo and emphasize the need for comprehensive support programs that strengthen digital capability, enhance logistics access, and provide guidance to improve product competitiveness in broader markets. Based on Table 3, these e-commerce constraints show that the problem is not only access to platforms, but also concerns logistics cost structures, human resource capacity, digital skills, and product competitiveness.

Table 3. Main E-commerce Challenges Faced by MSMEs

MSME Name	Main Challenge in E-commerce Utilization
Adilah Cake & Kukis	Limited HR for managing the marketplace (only 1 admin)
Azwa Sukses Mulia	Low digital literacy, lack of a clear strategy
Briya Abon Ikan Dlira	High shipping costs, shortage of skilled digital personnel
Mamaca	Shipping costs are higher than the product value, and there is intense price competition
Fitrah Gemilang (Soba)	Limited admin capacity, logistical barriers for outside orders

The qualitative data from the FGD and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key issues. Four major themes emerged that capture the core challenges and opportunities in optimizing digital marketing among MSMEs in Gorontalo. Table 4 shows the themes from the thematic analysis.

Table 4. Themes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Illustrative Evidence (FGD/Interview)
Digital Readiness	Varying levels of digital literacy and human resource capacity among MSMEs	A representative of MSME Fitrah Gemilang/Soba stated that the business has only one administrator, and that the administrator does not always fully understand how to conduct effective online promotion.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Evidence (FGD/Interview)
Platform Synergy	Weak integration between social media, e-commerce, and websites	The owner of MSME Mamaca explained that Facebook is used for promotional purposes. However, transactions through Shopee rarely occur due to high shipping costs.
Government Role	Expectation of support in logistics, infrastructure, and marketplace facilitation	A representative of MSME Briya Abon Ikan Dlira indicated that the availability of shipping subsidies would enable their products to compete more effectively in the Java market.
University Collaboration	Involvement of students and researchers in assisting digital marketing	The owner of MSME Adilah Cake & Kukis reported that their Instagram promotional activities became more active when the business was supported by student interns.

The first theme, digital readiness, reflects the uneven preparedness of MSMEs to adopt digital marketing. While some actors are relatively advanced, such as Abon Ikan, which has integrated social media, e-commerce, and a professional website, most remain at the basic stage of using Facebook and WhatsApp. The lack of skilled digital personnel is a major bottleneck, often resulting in inconsistent online activity and low-quality content (Matt et al., 2015). The second theme, platform synergy, highlights the disconnection between platforms. Many MSMEs use social media for promotion but fail to link these efforts to e-commerce transactions or website branding. As a result, awareness is not effectively converted into sales. This weak synergy reduces the overall impact of digital marketing strategies.

The third theme, government role, underscores the critical need for policy support (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). MSMEs repeatedly pointed out that high shipping costs limit their competitiveness in national markets. They also mentioned the discontinuation of previous government e-commerce initiatives due to limited technical resources, emphasizing the need for more sustainable interventions. The fourth theme, university collaboration, reveals opportunities for academic partnerships. MSMEs valued student internships and researcher involvement, which provided affordable and skilled support in content creation, digital promotion, and website management. These collaborations also foster knowledge transfer and build long-term digital capacity for MSMEs. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping MSME digital marketing in Gorontalo. They illustrate that while MSMEs show willingness to adopt digital practices, structural support from government and partnerships with universities are crucial for advancing from digital adaptation to digital optimization.

Preliminary Model of Digital Marketing Optimization

Based on the survey, FGD, and case study findings, this study proposes a preliminary model of digital marketing optimization tailored to the conditions of MSMEs in Gorontalo. The model emphasizes three interconnected components: digital readiness, strategic alignment, and platform synergy. Table 5 shows the components of the preliminary model.

Table 5. Components of the Preliminary Model

Component	Description	Expected Outcome
Digital Readiness	Building MSMEs' literacy in digital tools, training staff to manage content and online transactions	Consistent digital presence and improved marketing professionalism
Strategic Alignment	Policy support from government (e.g., shipping subsidies, promotional events), and collaboration with universities	Reduced structural barriers, stronger ecosystem support
Platform Synergy	Integration of social media (awareness), e-commerce (transactions), and websites (branding)	Enhanced competitiveness, wider reach, and global market access

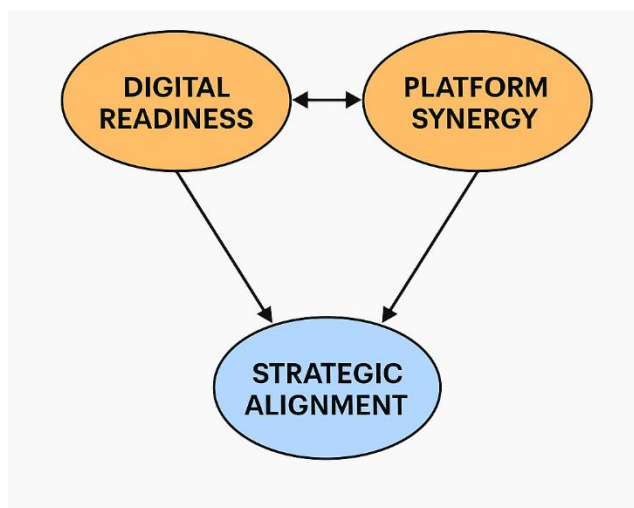


Figure 1. Preliminary Model of Digital Marketing Optimization for MSMEs in Gorontalo

Figure 1 shows the preliminary model for optimizing digital marketing in MSME. The first component, digital readiness, addresses the capacity of MSMEs to adapt to the digital era (Akpe et al., 2023). Training programs, workshops, and mentoring are essential to enhance skills in managing social media campaigns, optimizing e-commerce listings, and maintaining websites. Without readiness, digital adoption risks remaining superficial and inconsistent. The second component, strategic alignment, highlights the importance of collaboration between MSMEs, government agencies, and universities. Shipping subsidies, promotional festivals, and access to research-based knowledge are examples of policies and interventions that can reduce external barriers. University collaboration, in particular, offers affordable human resource support through student internships and knowledge transfer.

The third component of the model, platform synergy, serves as its central foundation. This concept emphasizes that successful digital marketing does not rely on a single platform but rather on the strategic integration of multiple digital channels. Social media plays a key role in fostering product awareness and maintaining active engagement with customers, while e-commerce platforms enable seamless transactions and broader market access (Hariyanti et al., 2024). At the same time, business websites strengthen professional branding and support global visibility. When these three platforms operate in a coordinated manner, MSMEs can progress beyond basic digital adaptation, where social media is used merely for promotion toward full digital optimization supported by structured knowledge transfer and enabling policies. This synergy ultimately enhances competitiveness and sustainable digital growth for MSMEs.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the heterogeneous adoption of digital marketing among MSMEs in Gorontalo. While some actors, such as Briya Abon Ikan Dlira, demonstrate advanced integration of social media, e-commerce, and websites leading to international expansion, the majority remain in the basic to intermediate stages, relying heavily on Facebook and WhatsApp for local promotion. This reflects national data showing that only around 22 million of Indonesia's 65 million MSMEs have engaged with digital platforms.

One of the dominant themes emerging from the study is the issue of digital readiness. The limited capacity of MSMEs in terms of digital literacy and human resources echoes previous findings that MSME competitiveness is often constrained by managerial and technological gaps (Sari & Ahmad, 2022; Hermansyah et al., 2025; Yuwono et al., 2025). Similar to the results of Faisal (2024), this study found that training and mentoring are critical for sustaining consistent digital engagement. Without adequate digital readiness, MSMEs risk remaining in an adaptation phase without achieving optimization.

Another important finding is the lack of platform synergy. MSMEs in Gorontalo tend to treat social media, e-commerce, and websites as separate tools, leading to fragmented marketing efforts. This aligns with Sudirjo et al. (2023), who observed that partial adoption of digital platforms results in limited sales conversion. By contrast, successful integration of these platforms as demonstrated by Abon Ikan creates a seamless customer journey from awareness to transaction, improving competitiveness in both domestic and international markets.

The study also highlights structural barriers, particularly high shipping costs, which discourage MSMEs from competing in national e-commerce markets. This finding supports Tec et al. (2024), who emphasized that logistical challenges significantly reduce MSME competitiveness outside Java. The discontinuation of government-supported digital marketplaces due to human resource constraints also illustrates the fragility of institutional support mechanisms. Policy interventions such as shipping subsidies and digital infrastructure investment are therefore critical to level the playing field for MSMEs in peripheral regions like Gorontalo (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

The involvement of universities in MSME digitalization, primarily through student internships and research-based assistance, emerged as a notable opportunity. This finding complements the value co-creation perspective proposed by Kunitzky (2021), which stresses the role of collaborative partnerships in shaping market value. By leveraging university resources, MSMEs gain access to affordable human capital and innovative knowledge, while students acquire practical experience (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). This collaboration strengthens the triple helix model of innovation involving government, academia, and industry.

The findings of this study provide important implications for strengthening the digital transformation of MSMEs in Gorontalo. Although most businesses are already familiar with social media, their limited engagement with e-commerce platforms and weak integration across digital channels indicate the need for more targeted and structured interventions. Government policies that support logistics improvement, such as shipping subsidies or regional fulfillment centers, could significantly reduce market access barriers and enhance competitiveness at the national level. Likewise, capacity-building programs are essential to improve digital literacy, content management skills, and platform optimization among MSME actors. Collaborative initiatives between local government, universities, and the private sector can also play a strategic role in providing sustainable digital assistance, including internships, training, and technology mentoring. Strengthening these ecosystem components would not only help MSMEs transition from basic digital presence to fully optimized digital marketing practices but would also support their long-term resilience and expansion into broader markets.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the utilization of digital marketing among MSMEs in Gorontalo with a focus on the integration of social media and e-commerce platforms. The findings revealed that while most MSMEs are still at the basic or intermediate stages of adoption, relying primarily on Facebook and WhatsApp for promotion, successful cases such as the Briya Abon Ikan Dlira MSME demonstrate the potential of integrated platforms to expand into national and international markets. Several barriers were identified, including high shipping costs, limited digital human resources, weak infrastructure, and a lack of sustained government support. At the same time, MSMEs expressed strong expectations for subsidized logistics, promotional events, training programs, and collaborations with universities. These findings emphasize that digital transformation for MSMEs is not solely dependent on individual initiative but requires systemic support from multiple stakeholders.

The proposed preliminary model of digital marketing optimization, encompassing digital readiness, strategic alignment, and platform synergy offers a practical direction for MSMEs in Gorontalo to progress from basic digital adaptation toward full optimization, thereby enhancing competitiveness in broader markets. To support this transformation,

policymakers are encouraged to improve logistics efficiency through targeted subsidies, strengthen capacity-building initiatives, and ensure the availability of sustainable digital infrastructure, while universities should expand collaborative programs such as internships, research-based assistance, and technology transfer schemes. MSMEs themselves are advised to adopt more advanced digital tools, integrate their online platforms strategically, and continually develop digital marketing capabilities within their workforce. However, this study is limited by a relatively small sample size and a focus on a single regional context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample across multiple regions, incorporate longitudinal analysis to track digital maturity over time, and examine additional factors such as financial literacy and digital ecosystem support to refine and validate the proposed model.

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