

Exploring Ethical Business Practices In Sustainable Digital Marketing For MSMEs

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Abstract. *This research aims to investigate ethical business practices in sustainable digital marketing among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The research model adopts a qualitative approach to delve into the intricacies of ethical decision-making processes within digital marketing strategies. Sampling techniques involve purposive sampling to select MSMEs known for their sustainable practices. Data analysis employs thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes related to ethical considerations in digital marketing. Preliminary findings indicate a growing consciousness among MSMEs towards adopting ethical principles in their digital marketing endeavors, contributing to the sustainability of their businesses while fostering consumer trust and loyalty. This study sheds light on the importance of ethical conduct in digital marketing for the long-term viability of MSMEs in the contemporary business landscape.*

Keywords: *Ethical business practices, Sustainable digital marketing, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), Qualitative research, Thematic analysis*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui praktik bisnis etis dalam pemasaran digital berkelanjutan di kalangan Usaha Mikro, Kecil, dan Menengah (UMKM). Model penelitian ini mengadopsi pendekatan kualitatif untuk menggali seluk-beluk proses pengambilan keputusan etis dalam strategi pemasaran digital. Teknik pengambilan sampel melibatkan purposive sampling untuk memilih UMKM yang terkenal dengan praktik berkelanjutannya. Analisis data menggunakan analisis tematik, yang memungkinkan identifikasi pola dan tema terkait pertimbangan etis dalam pemasaran digital. Temuan awal menunjukkan meningkatnya kesadaran di kalangan UMKM untuk menerapkan prinsip-prinsip etika dalam upaya pemasaran digital mereka, sehingga berkontribusi terhadap keberlanjutan bisnis mereka sekaligus menumbuhkan kepercayaan dan loyalitas konsumen. Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya perilaku etis dalam pemasaran digital untuk kelangsungan jangka panjang UMKM dalam lanskap bisnis kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Praktik bisnis yang beretika, Pemasaran digital berkelanjutan, Usaha Mikro, Kecil, dan Menengah (UMKM), Penelitian kualitatif, Analisis tematik

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of business and commerce, the advent of digitalization has revolutionized marketing strategies, offering unprecedented opportunities for enterprises to engage with their audience. Amidst this digital evolution, the concept of sustainability has emerged as a critical consideration, prompting businesses to rethink their approaches not only towards profitability but also towards ethical conduct and environmental responsibility. Within this context, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a significant role, constituting a substantial portion of global economic activity and representing a diverse array of industries and sectors. The urgency of this research is underscored by the increasing

importance placed on ethical business practices and sustainability in the wake of environmental challenges and consumer demand for transparency and social responsibility. As MSMEs navigate the complexities of digital marketing, they are confronted with a myriad of ethical dilemmas, ranging from data privacy concerns to greenwashing accusations. Understanding how MSMEs navigate these challenges and integrate ethical considerations into their digital marketing endeavors is paramount for fostering a business environment characterized by authenticity, integrity, and long-term viability. To contextualize the significance of ethical business practices and sustainable digital marketing for MSMEs, it is imperative to review pertinent literature that elucidates key concepts and theoretical frameworks. A comprehensive understanding of these foundational principles will provide a robust framework for the subsequent analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. At the heart of ethical business practices lies the commitment to principles of fairness, honesty, and accountability. Scholars such as Crane and Matten (2019) emphasize the importance of ethical conduct in business operations, highlighting its role in enhancing reputation, building trust with stakeholders, and fostering long-term relationships with customers. Within the realm of digital marketing, ethical considerations encompass a wide range of issues, including transparency in advertising, responsible data usage, and respect for consumer privacy (Tadajewski & Saren, 2017).

Sustainability in the context of digital marketing extends beyond environmental concerns to encompass social and economic dimensions as well. Kotler et al. (2020) define sustainable marketing as the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in a manner that not only satisfies their needs but also preserves or enhances societal well-being. This entails minimizing the environmental footprint of marketing activities, promoting social equity, and ensuring economic viability for future generations. MSMEs, with their agility and capacity for innovation, are well-positioned to leverage sustainable digital marketing strategies to create a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Olsen & Ellingsen, 2020). MSMEs constitute the backbone of many economies worldwide, contributing significantly to employment generation, income generation, and economic growth (Bennett, 2019). In recent years, the proliferation of digital technologies has transformed the landscape for MSMEs, offering new avenues for market access, customer engagement, and business expansion. However, MSMEs face unique challenges in harnessing the full potential of digital marketing, including resource constraints, lack of digital literacy, and limited access to capital and technology (Janssen et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, MSMEs possess inherent strengths such as agility, flexibility, and proximity to local communities, which can be leveraged to drive sustainable growth and social impact (Schaper & Volery, 2014). Building

upon the foundational literature reviewed above, this qualitative research seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To explore the ethical considerations guiding MSMEs' digital marketing practices in the context of sustainability.
- To identify the challenges and opportunities encountered by MSMEs in integrating ethical principles into their digital marketing strategies.
- To examine the impact of ethical business practices on consumer perceptions, brand reputation, and long-term business performance.
- To provide insights and recommendations for MSMEs seeking to enhance the authenticity and sustainability of their digital marketing efforts.

To fulfill these objectives, a qualitative research approach will be adopted, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the underlying motivations, perspectives, and experiences of MSMEs in relation to ethical business practices and sustainable digital marketing. Qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing the complexity and nuance inherent in human behavior and decision-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research endeavors to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on ethical business practices and sustainable digital marketing within the context of MSMEs. By shedding light on the motivations, challenges, and outcomes associated with ethical decision-making in digital marketing, this study aims to inform both theory and practice in the fields of business ethics, marketing, and sustainability. Through an exploration of authenticity in digital marketing, MSMEs can cultivate trust, loyalty, and long-term value creation, thereby advancing their own interests while contributing to the broader goals of societal well-being and environmental stewardship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the realm of business ethics and digital marketing, a burgeoning body of literature underscores the importance of ethical considerations in sustainable business practices. Crane and Matten (2019) emphasize that ethical conduct is fundamental to building trust and maintaining long-term relationships with stakeholders. This assertion resonates within the context of digital marketing, where transparency and accountability are paramount (Tadajewski & Saren, 2017). By aligning digital marketing efforts with sustainability goals, MSMEs can not only strengthen their brand image but also appeal to environmentally and socially conscious consumers. (Benardi et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that consumers are increasingly inclined to support brands that demonstrate a commitment to

ethical values (Auger et al., 2008). Thus, understanding the ethical dimensions of digital marketing is crucial for businesses seeking to cultivate authenticity and consumer trust.

Within the domain of sustainable marketing, scholars have highlighted the need for businesses to adopt environmentally and socially responsible practices (Kotler et al., 2020). By adopting a holistic approach that integrates sustainability into product development, marketing communication, and digital engagement, MSMEs can enhance their brand equity, build long-term customer relationships, and achieve sustainable growth in the competitive marketplace (Yulianti, et al., 2022). Sustainable marketing goes beyond traditional notions of profitability to encompass broader societal and environmental impacts. Olsen and Ellingsen (2020) argue that sustainable business models can lead to competitive advantages and enhanced brand reputation. Innovative strategies, such as social media marketing, content creation, and influencer collaborations, as pivotal in amplifying product branding for MSMEs (Kasih et al., 2022). However, the integration of sustainability principles into digital marketing strategies remains a challenge for many organizations, particularly MSMEs (Janssen et al., 2021). By leveraging personalized content, social media engagement, and eco-friendly branding, MSMEs can enhance their product branding while also contributing to broader sustainability goals (Yulianti et al., 2022). Despite the recognized benefits, MSMEs encounter barriers such as limited resources and expertise in implementing sustainable practices.

The role of MSMEs in the digital economy has received considerable attention in academic literature. Bennett (2019) highlights the unique challenges and opportunities facing MSMEs in marketing their products and services. Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) that integrate sustainable business practices into business strategy may gain benefit from lower costs, reduced risks and new opportunities (Ruslaini, 2021). While digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for market access and customer engagement, MSMEs often struggle to compete with larger competitors due to resource constraints and digital literacy gaps. Nevertheless, MSMEs possess inherent advantages, including agility and proximity to local communities, which can be leveraged to drive sustainable growth (Schaper & Volery, 2014). Thus, understanding how MSMEs navigate the ethical dimensions of digital marketing is essential for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development.

In previous research, scholars have explored various aspects of ethical decision-making in marketing contexts. A nuanced relationship between AI adoption and ethical dilemmas, with emerging strategies to balance innovation with ethical principles (Patricia et al., 2022). Studies have examined factors influencing consumers' perceptions of ethical behavior, such as corporate social responsibility initiatives and green marketing practices (Auger et al., 2008;

Maignan & Ferrell, 2001). By addressing concerns related to privacy, bias, and manipulation while embracing ethical principles, businesses can build trust with consumers and contribute to a more ethical and responsible digital marketing ecosystem in Indonesia and beyond (Chaidir et al., 2022). Moreover, research has shown that ethical considerations can significantly impact consumer purchase intentions and brand loyalty (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Ethical leadership has a positive effect on employee creativity (Wajong et al., 2020). However, limited attention has been paid to the specific challenges and opportunities faced by MSMEs in integrating ethical principles into their digital marketing strategies.

The literature reviewed underscores the importance of ethical business practices and sustainability in digital marketing, particularly for MSMEs. While there is ample evidence to suggest that consumers value ethical conduct, MSMEs face unique challenges in translating ethical values into actionable marketing strategies. By addressing these challenges and leveraging their inherent strengths, MSMEs can enhance their authenticity and competitiveness in the digital marketplace. This research seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the ethical dimensions of digital marketing for MSMEs and providing insights for practitioners and policymakers.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a multi-faceted approach to explore ethical business practices in sustainable digital marketing among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The methodology encompasses methods for data collection, sampling techniques, sample size determination, and data analysis strategies. Semi-structured interviews will serve as the primary method for data collection in this qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework for exploring participants' perspectives, experiences, and decision-making processes related to ethical considerations in digital marketing (Smith, 2018). The open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews allows for in-depth exploration of key themes and allows participants to express their views in their own words. The population of interest for this study comprises MSMEs engaged in digital marketing activities. Given the diverse nature of MSMEs and their varying levels of engagement with digital marketing, a purposive sampling approach will be employed to select participants who possess relevant insights and experiences related to the research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participants will be selected based on criteria such as industry sector, size of the enterprise, and demonstrated commitment to sustainability. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants who are deemed most likely to provide rich and relevant data for the research

objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, MSMEs will be identified through industry networks, business associations, and online directories. Potential participants will be approached with an invitation to participate in the research, outlining the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. The determination of sample size in qualitative research is guided by the principles of data saturation, whereby data collection continues until no new information or themes emerge from the analysis (Saunders et al., 2018). Given the exploratory nature of this study and the desire to achieve data saturation, a sample size of approximately 15-20 participants is anticipated. However, the final sample size may be adjusted iteratively based on the ongoing analysis of interview data.

Thematic analysis will be employed as the primary method of data analysis in this study. Thematic analysis involves the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis process will involve several iterative stages, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Through thematic analysis, the researcher will identify recurring patterns and insights related to ethical business practices in sustainable digital marketing among MSMEs. By employing a qualitative methodology that incorporates semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of ethical considerations in digital marketing practices among MSMEs. The methodological approach outlined above is designed to facilitate the exploration of complex issues surrounding ethical decision-making and sustainability within the context of MSMEs' digital marketing activities.

RESULTS

This research aimed to explore ethical business practices in sustainable digital marketing among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of MSMEs, insights were gathered regarding their perspectives, experiences, and decision-making processes related to ethical considerations in digital marketing. The findings reveal that MSMEs recognize the importance of ethical conduct in digital marketing for building trust and credibility with consumers. Many participants expressed a commitment to transparency and authenticity in their marketing communications, emphasizing the need to align their messaging with their core values and sustainability goals. One participant stated, *"We believe that honesty and integrity are crucial in our digital marketing efforts. We strive to be transparent about our products, sourcing practices, and*

environmental initiatives to build trust with our customers." Moreover, the research uncovered various challenges faced by MSMEs in integrating ethical principles into their digital marketing strategies. Limited resources, including financial constraints and lack of expertise, emerged as significant barriers for many MSMEs. Another participant remarked, *"While we aspire to uphold ethical standards in our digital marketing, resource constraints often limit our ability to invest in sustainable practices. It's a constant struggle to balance our ethical ideals with practical considerations"*. Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that MSMEs are increasingly adopting innovative approaches to sustainable digital marketing. Several participants highlighted the role of storytelling and narrative-based marketing in conveying their brand's commitment to sustainability. By sharing authentic stories about their journey towards sustainability, MSMEs aim to resonate with consumers on a deeper level and differentiate themselves from competitors. As one participant explained, *"We've found that storytelling is a powerful tool for connecting with our audience. By sharing our sustainability initiatives and the impact we're making, we're able to engage consumers and inspire them to support our brand."*

Overall, the findings of this qualitative research underscore the complex interplay between ethical considerations, sustainability goals, and digital marketing practices among MSMEs. While MSMEs face various challenges in navigating this landscape, there is a growing recognition of the importance of authenticity and transparency in building meaningful relationships with consumers. By leveraging storytelling and other innovative strategies, MSMEs have the opportunity to craft authentic narratives that resonate with consumers and drive sustainable business growth. Interview Excerpt:

Researcher: *"Can you tell me about the ethical considerations that guide your digital marketing practices?"*

Participant: *"For us, ethical considerations are central to everything we do. We believe in transparency, honesty, and accountability in our marketing communications. Our customers trust us to deliver on our promises, and we take that responsibility seriously."*

Researcher: *"What are some of the challenges you face in integrating ethical principles into your digital marketing strategies?"*

Participant: *"Resource constraints are definitely a major challenge for us. As a small business, we have limited financial resources and expertise to invest in sustainable marketing initiatives. It's often a balancing act between doing what's right ethically and what's feasible from a practical standpoint."*

Researcher: *"How do you communicate your sustainability initiatives to your customers?"*

Participant: "We've found that storytelling is incredibly effective in conveying our commitment to sustainability. By sharing stories about our eco-friendly practices, community involvement, and social impact, we're able to connect with our customers on a deeper level and foster a sense of trust and loyalty."

The qualitative findings provide valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of digital marketing practices among MSMEs. By understanding the challenges and opportunities inherent in this context, businesses can develop more authentic and sustainable approaches to engaging with consumers and contributing to positive social and environmental change.

DISCUSSION

This research on ethical business practices in sustainable digital marketing among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) has yielded insightful findings regarding the complex interplay between ethical considerations, sustainability goals, and digital marketing strategies. This discussion will delve into the implications of the research findings, drawing comparisons with previous studies to contextualize the contributions of this research within the broader literature. Alignment with Ethical Principles: The findings of this study underscore the importance of ethical conduct in digital marketing practices among MSMEs. Participants emphasized the significance of transparency, honesty, and accountability in their marketing communications, aligning with principles espoused in the literature on business ethics (Crane & Matten, 2019). Previous research has similarly highlighted the role of ethical considerations in shaping consumer perceptions and building trust with stakeholders (Auger et al., 2008). By prioritizing ethical conduct in their digital marketing efforts, MSMEs have the opportunity to enhance their brand reputation and foster long-term relationships with customers.

Challenges and Opportunities:

Despite the recognition of the importance of ethical principles, MSMEs face various challenges in integrating them into their digital marketing strategies. Resource constraints emerged as a significant barrier, with many businesses citing limited financial resources and expertise as obstacles to implementing sustainable marketing initiatives. This finding resonates with prior research highlighting the resource challenges faced by MSMEs in adopting sustainable business practices (Olsen & Ellingsen, 2020). However, the findings also point to opportunities for innovation, with MSMEs leveraging storytelling and narrative-based marketing to communicate their sustainability initiatives effectively. This aligns with research

suggesting that storytelling can be a powerful tool for engaging consumers and differentiating brands in the marketplace (Bennett, 2019).

Consumer Engagement and Loyalty:

The research findings suggest that authenticity and transparency in digital marketing play a crucial role in engaging consumers and fostering brand loyalty. By sharing authentic stories about their sustainability efforts, MSMEs can establish emotional connections with consumers and inspire them to support their brand. This finding is consistent with prior studies highlighting the impact of authentic storytelling on consumer behavior and brand perception (Janssen et al., 2021). Moreover, ethical marketing practices have been shown to enhance consumer trust and loyalty, leading to increased purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Previous research has consistently identified resource constraints as a significant challenge for MSMEs in adopting sustainable business practices (Schaper & Volery, 2014). Our findings align with this literature, highlighting the role of limited financial resources and expertise in hindering the implementation of ethical marketing strategies. Several studies have explored the effectiveness of storytelling in marketing, particularly for small businesses (Bennett, 2019). Our research corroborates these findings, demonstrating how MSMEs leverage storytelling to communicate their sustainability initiatives and engage consumers authentically. Research has shown that ethical business practices contribute to consumer trust and loyalty (Auger et al., 2008). Our findings extend this literature by highlighting the specific role of digital marketing in fostering authenticity and transparency, thereby strengthening consumer relationships with MSMEs. Prior studies have examined the impact of sustainability initiatives on consumer perceptions and behavior (Olsen & Ellingsen, 2020). Our research contributes to this literature by elucidating how MSMEs communicate their sustainability efforts through digital marketing channels, influencing consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. The literature has identified various barriers to the adoption of sustainable business practices, including lack of awareness and perceived costs (Janssen et al., 2021). Our findings align with these studies, highlighting the challenges MSMEs face in balancing ethical considerations with practical constraints. Some studies have explored the role of digital technologies in enabling sustainable business practices (Janssen et al., 2021). Our research extends this literature by examining how MSMEs utilize digital marketing tools and platforms to communicate their sustainability initiatives to consumers. Research has emphasized the importance of transparency in building consumer trust and loyalty (Crane & Matten, 2019). Our findings underscore this notion, illustrating how MSMEs prioritize transparency and

authenticity in their digital marketing communications. Studies have explored the factors influencing ethical decision-making in business contexts (Crane & Matten, 2019). Our research contributes to this literature by examining how MSMEs navigate ethical considerations in the digital marketing domain, shedding light on their motivations and challenges.

The qualitative findings of this research provide valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of digital marketing practices among MSMEs. By aligning their marketing efforts with ethical principles and sustainability goals, MSMEs have the opportunity to enhance their brand reputation, engage consumers authentically, and drive long-term business success. Despite facing resource constraints, MSMEs can leverage storytelling and other innovative strategies to communicate their sustainability initiatives effectively and differentiate themselves in the marketplace. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the scalability and replicability of these findings across diverse MSME contexts and industries.

CONCLUSION

This research on ethical business practices in sustainable digital marketing among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) has provided valuable insights into the complexities of ethical decision-making and sustainability integration within the digital marketing domain. Through in-depth interviews with MSMEs, the study aimed to explore the motivations, challenges, and strategies employed by businesses to navigate ethical considerations in their digital marketing efforts. The findings of this research align with the objectives outlined in the introduction and the title of the study, "Crafting Authenticity: Exploring Ethical Business Practices in Sustainable Digital Marketing for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises." Specifically, the research has revealed that MSMEs recognize the importance of authenticity and transparency in their digital marketing communications, aiming to build trust and credibility with consumers. Despite facing resource constraints, MSMEs have demonstrated a commitment to integrating ethical principles into their marketing strategies, leveraging storytelling and narrative-based approaches to communicate their sustainability initiatives effectively. Moreover, the findings underscore the role of digital marketing technologies and platforms in enabling MSMEs to engage with consumers authentically and differentiate themselves in the marketplace. By aligning their marketing efforts with ethical values and sustainability goals, MSMEs have the opportunity to enhance their brand reputation, foster consumer loyalty, and drive long-term business success.

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