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## DIGITAL MARKETING SKILLS FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS: A CASE STUDY OF ASNAF ENTREPRENEURS


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### Abstract:

This study explores the digital marketing skills required to support sustainable livelihoods among Asnaf entrepreneurs in Selangor, Malaysia. As digital platforms increasingly influence small business operations, Asnaf entrepreneurs are encouraged to adopt digital marketing practices to enhance income stability, market reach, and business resilience. However, there remains limited empirical understanding of the specific digital marketing skills needed by this group based on their lived business experiences and challenges. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this study collected data through semi-structured interviews with selected Asnaf entrepreneurs who actively use digital platforms such as social media, messaging applications, and online marketplaces in managing their businesses. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key skill areas, challenges, and sustainability outcomes. The findings indicate that Asnaf entrepreneurs require essential digital marketing skills, including content creation, ethical online communication, customer engagement, platform management, and basic performance monitoring, to support business continuity and long-term income generation. However, the effective application of these skills is constrained by limited digital

literacy, lack of strategic planning capabilities, time constraints, and restricted access to resources. The study concludes that strengthening digital marketing skills is critical for enhancing the sustainable livelihoods of Asnaf entrepreneurs and promoting their long-term economic participation. The findings offer practical insights for entrepreneurship support agencies, policymakers, and training providers in designing targeted digital marketing interventions that align with the needs of Asnaf entrepreneurs and contribute to sustainable development objectives.

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Digital Marketing Skills, Sustainable Livelihood, Asnaf Entrepreneurs



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## Introduction

Digitalisation has increasingly influenced the way micro and small enterprises conduct marketing activities, communicate with customers, and sustain business operations. Digital marketing enables entrepreneurs to reach wider markets, strengthen customer engagement, and improve income stability through platforms such as social media, messaging applications, and online marketplaces (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). Empirical studies have shown that the effective use of digital marketing contributes to improved business performance and long-term sustainability among small-scale entrepreneurs (Ainin et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2019). From a sustainable livelihood perspective, digital skills are important assets that support entrepreneurs' ability to maintain and enhance income generation over time. Sustainable livelihoods emphasise the capacity of individuals to utilise skills and resources to cope with economic challenges and adapt to changing market conditions (Scoones, 2015). For economically vulnerable entrepreneurs, digital marketing skills have been found to enhance business resilience, especially in environments characterised by limited physical access to markets and financial constraints (Sutter et al., 2019; World Bank, 2019).

In Malaysia, Asnaf entrepreneurs are supported through zakat-based entrepreneurship programmes aimed at promoting self-reliance and reducing long-term dependency on financial assistance. While these programmes have facilitated business start-ups, empirical evidence indicates that many Asnaf entrepreneurs face difficulties in sustaining their businesses, particularly in adapting to digital market demands (Abd Rahman et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). Despite increasing exposure to digital platforms, the application of digital marketing remains limited due to low digital literacy, lack of strategic planning skills, and resource constraints (Ismail et al., 2022; Omar et al., 2021). Existing studies on digital marketing adoption have largely focused on small and medium enterprises, with limited attention given

to marginalised entrepreneurial groups such as Asnaf entrepreneurs. As a result, there is insufficient empirical understanding of the specific digital marketing skills required to support sustainable livelihood outcomes among this group (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that digital entrepreneurship initiatives are inclusive and contextually relevant. Therefore, this study aims to explore the digital marketing skills required to support sustainable livelihoods among Asnaf entrepreneurs in Selangor, Malaysia. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study examines how Asnaf entrepreneurs utilise digital platforms, the key skills they perceive as necessary, and the challenges affecting effective implementation. The findings are expected to provide practical insights for policymakers, zakat institutions, and training providers in designing targeted digital marketing interventions that support long-term livelihood sustainability.

### ***Research Objectives:***

1. To explore the digital marketing skills utilised by Asnaf entrepreneurs in managing their business activities through digital platforms.
2. To examine the challenges faced by Asnaf entrepreneurs in applying digital marketing skills to support business continuity and income generation.
3. To identify how digital marketing skills contribute to sustainable livelihood outcomes among Asnaf entrepreneurs in Selangor, Malaysia.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Digital Marketing and Micro-Entrepreneurship***

Digital marketing has become an essential component of micro-entrepreneurship, particularly for businesses operating with limited financial and physical resources. Empirical studies show that digital platforms such as social media, messaging applications, and online marketplaces allow micro-entrepreneurs to market products at lower cost, communicate directly with customers, and compete beyond local markets (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014; Ainin et al., 2020). For micro and informal businesses, digital marketing reduces reliance on traditional intermediaries and enhances market visibility (Kraus et al., 2019). Research focusing on small-scale entrepreneurs in emerging economies indicates that digital marketing adoption positively influences sales growth, customer engagement, and business continuity (Omar et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of digital marketing is closely linked to entrepreneurs' skill levels rather than mere access to digital platforms. Studies consistently report that limited digital competencies restrict the ability of micro-entrepreneurs to fully benefit from online marketing tools (Chatterjee et al., 2021).

### ***Digital Marketing Skills and Business Sustainability***

Digital marketing skills refer to the practical abilities required to plan, implement, and manage online marketing activities effectively. Empirical literature identifies several core skill areas, including content creation, online communication, customer engagement, platform management, and basic performance monitoring (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). These skills enable entrepreneurs to maintain consistent online presence, build customer trust, and respond to market feedback. Studies have shown that entrepreneurs with stronger digital marketing skills demonstrate higher levels of business sustainability, reflected in stable income, customer retention, and adaptability to market changes (Ainin et al., 2020; Kraus et

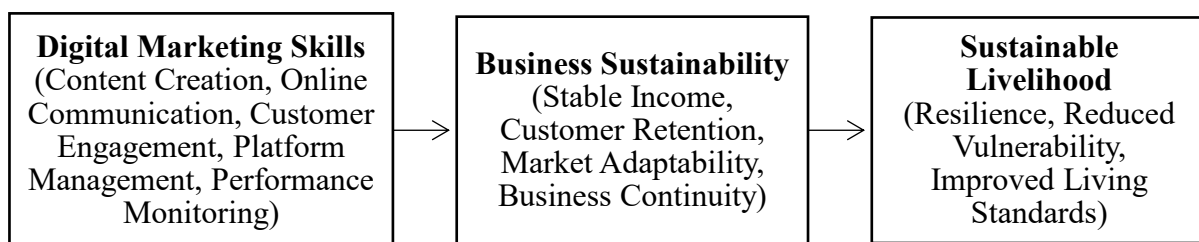
al., 2019). In contrast, insufficient skills often result in inconsistent content, ineffective customer interaction, and limited strategic use of digital platforms, reducing the long-term impact of digital marketing efforts (Omar et al., 2021).

### ***Sustainable Livelihood Perspective***

The sustainable livelihood framework emphasises the importance of skills and capabilities as key assets that support long-term income generation and resilience (Scoones, 2015). From this perspective, digital marketing skills can be viewed as livelihood assets that enhance entrepreneurs' capacity to cope with economic shocks, market uncertainties, and competitive pressures. Empirical evidence suggests that skill-based interventions contribute more significantly to livelihood sustainability than short-term financial assistance alone (Sutter et al., 2019). In the context of micro-entrepreneurship, sustainable livelihoods are closely associated with the ability to generate consistent income, reduce vulnerability, and gradually improve living standards (UNDP, 2021). Digital marketing skills support these outcomes by enabling entrepreneurs to diversify customer bases, expand sales channels, and maintain business operations during periods of disruption, such as economic downturns or movement restrictions (World Bank, 2019).

### ***Asnaf Entrepreneurs and Digital Capability Challenges***

Asnaf entrepreneurs in Malaysia operate within zakat-supported entrepreneurship programmes designed to promote self-reliance and socio-economic mobility. Empirical studies indicate that while these programmes have been effective in facilitating business start-ups, many Asnaf entrepreneurs struggle to sustain their ventures in the long term (Abd Rahman et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). One recurring issue identified in the literature is limited digital capability, particularly in marketing-related activities. Recent studies highlight that Asnaf and low-income entrepreneurs face challenges such as low digital literacy, limited access to digital devices, lack of strategic marketing knowledge, and time constraints due to multiple livelihood responsibilities (Ismail et al., 2022; Omar et al., 2021). Although many Asnaf entrepreneurs actively use social media and messaging applications, their usage is often informal and unstructured, focusing on basic posting rather than strategic marketing (Hassan et al., 2021). Moreover, empirical research on digital entrepreneurship in Malaysia has largely concentrated on SMEs and urban entrepreneurs, leaving a gap in understanding the specific digital marketing skill needs of Asnaf entrepreneurs (Chatterjee et al., 2021). This gap limits the effectiveness of existing training programmes, which are often adapted from SME-focused models that may not suit the realities of Asnaf entrepreneurs.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Digital Marketing Skills to Sustainable Livelihood Among Asnaf Entrepreneurs**

## ***Research Gap***

While prior studies confirm the importance of digital marketing for small business performance and sustainability, there is limited empirical evidence that specifically examines the digital marketing skills required to support sustainable livelihoods among Asnaf entrepreneurs. Existing research tends to focus on adoption levels rather than skill application and lived business experiences. Therefore, an in-depth qualitative exploration is needed to identify relevant skill areas, contextual challenges, and sustainability outcomes from the perspectives of Asnaf entrepreneurs themselves. Addressing this gap will contribute to the literature on inclusive digital entrepreneurship and inform the design of targeted, livelihood-oriented digital marketing interventions.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study adopts and adapts the Digital Capability Framework (DigComp) proposed by the European Commission to examine the digital marketing skills required to support sustainable livelihood outcomes among Asnaf entrepreneurs. In this study, the Digital Capability Framework is contextualised to reflect the lived business experiences of Asnaf entrepreneurs and the requirements of micro-enterprise sustainability.

## ***Methodology***

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the digital marketing skills that support livelihood sustainability among Asnaf entrepreneurs. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the experiences, perspectives, and business realities of participants in real contexts, especially when involving groups with specific socioeconomic backgrounds. Qualitative studies are appropriate when the objective of the study is to understand the meanings, processes, and experiences of individuals in depth, rather than to measure the relationship between variables statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design allows researchers to examine phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and contexts are not very clear (Yin, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon studied is digital marketing skills, while the context is the business of Asnaf entrepreneurs in a zakat-based entrepreneurship program in Selangor. This design allows researchers to examine how digital skills are applied in real business situations and how they affect income and business sustainability.

## ***Data Collection***

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with Asnaf entrepreneurs who actively use digital platforms such as social media, messaging apps, and marketplace platforms in managing their businesses. Semi-structured interviews allowed researchers to use guiding questions while providing space for participants to share their experiences openly and in detail, thus producing rich and contextual data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Study participants were selected using purposive sampling, a selection method that focuses on individuals with experience and knowledge relevant to the focus of the study. Selection criteria included Asnaf entrepreneurs who were registered in zakat support programs, running micro or small businesses, using at least one digital platform for marketing, and having at least one year of business experience. This approach ensured that participants were able to provide meaningful information regarding the use of digital marketing skills in their businesses (Patton, 2015). Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online depending on the participant's suitability.

With the participant's permission, the interview session was recorded to ensure data accuracy. Interview questions focus on the types of digital marketing skills used, how those skills help the business, the challenges faced, and the contribution of digital skills to revenue and business sustainability.

### ***Data Analysis Method***

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of the interview recordings. The researcher then read the transcripts repeatedly to understand the overall data and the context of the participants' experiences. Next, initial coding was conducted by identifying units of meaning related to digital skills, usability challenges, and outcomes related to sustainable livelihoods. These codes were then grouped into categories and subsequently formed main themes. This process was carried out iteratively, where themes were reviewed and refined to be consistent with the original data. This approach allowed findings to emerge from the data inductively, in line with qualitative research practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To increase the reliability of the study, the researcher conducted member checking by sharing a summary of findings with several participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretation. In addition, the researcher maintained an audit trail that systematically recorded the data collection and analysis process. These steps helped to increase the credibility and transparency of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Findings**

Thematic analysis of the interview data identified several key themes related to digital marketing skills and their role in supporting the sustainability of Asnaf entrepreneurs' livelihoods. Overall, the findings indicate that digital marketing skills help increase business visibility and income generation opportunities, but the level of application of these skills is still basic and non-strategic. This finding is in line with previous research that emphasizes that the effectiveness of digital marketing among small entrepreneurs depends on the level of skills, not just access to digital platforms (Chatterjee et al., 2021).

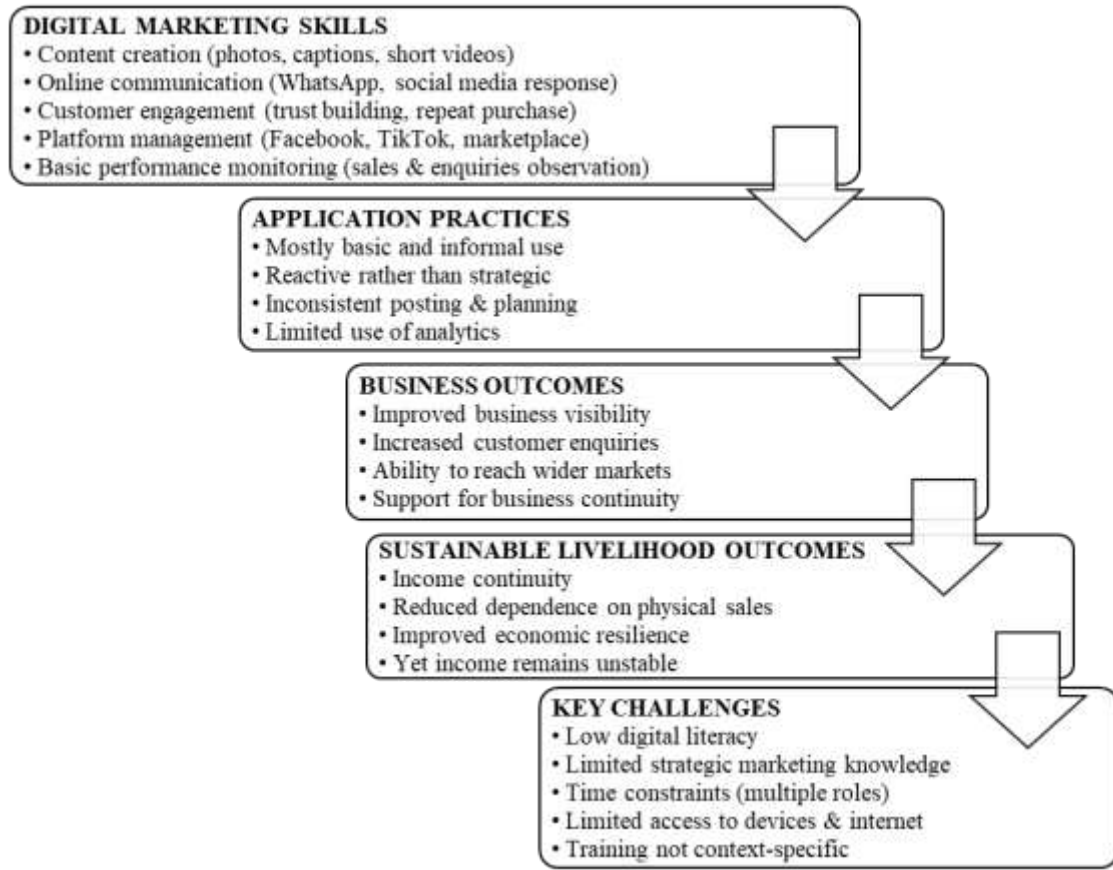
The first theme that emerged was content creation skills. Most participants stated that they promote products through images and short videos on social media. Participants who were more creative in delivering content reported increased customer inquiries and sales. This supports the view that engaging digital content can increase customer engagement and market visibility (Dwivedi et al., 2021). However, some participants admitted that they uploaded content spontaneously without planning, indicating that its use was still non-strategic. This situation is in line with the findings of Omar et al. (2021) who found that many micro entrepreneurs use social media in a basic way without a clear marketing strategy.

The second theme is online communication and customer engagement. Participants emphasized the importance of quick responses via WhatsApp and social media to maintain customer interest. Friendly service and continuous communication were seen to help build customer trust. This finding is consistent with the literature showing that effective digital communication improves customer relationships and brand loyalty (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). However, the communication practiced was more reactive than proactive, without a long-term customer relationship management strategy.

The third theme involves digital platform management. Some participants use various platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and marketplace, but marketing activities are not carried out consistently. Promotions are usually made when sales decline or new stock arrives. This pattern indicates that platform management skills are still limited, in line with the study by Kraus et al. (2019) which states that small entrepreneurs often face difficulties in maintaining a consistent digital presence.

Furthermore, the findings show that digital performance monitoring is still minimal. Almost all participants do not use analytical data to assess marketing effectiveness. Performance is assessed based on the number of inquiries or daily sales. This reliance on general observations indicates a low level of data literacy, as also reported in the study by Ainin et al. (2020). From a livelihood sustainability perspective, participants acknowledged that digital marketing helps maintain income streams, especially when physical access to markets is limited. Online marketing allows them to reach customers outside their local area and reduces their reliance on physical sales. The role of digital skills as a livelihood asset is in line with the livelihood sustainability perspective that emphasizes the importance of skills in increasing economic resilience (Scoones, 2015). However, income remains unstable for some participants, indicating that basic skills alone are not sufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. This finding supports the argument that skills-based interventions have a greater impact on sustainability than financial assistance alone (Sutter et al., 2019).

Finally, several key challenges were identified, including low digital literacy, time constraints due to multiple role responsibilities, limited devices and internet access, and lack of knowledge of marketing strategies. Participants also stated that the training they had previously received was too general and not adapted to the realities of microbusiness. This finding is in line with the studies of Hassan et al. (2021) and Ismail et al. (2022) who emphasized that Asnaf entrepreneurs need more practical and targeted contextual training. Overall, the study findings show that although Asnaf entrepreneurs have started to apply digital marketing, the use is still at a basic level. Digital marketing skills have been proven to contribute to business continuity, but their impact on livelihood sustainability depends on the level of skill mastery and appropriate training support.



**Figure 2: Summary Of Key Findings on Digital Marketing Skills and Sustainable Livelihood Among Asnaf Entrepreneurs**

### Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that digital marketing skills are crucial in supporting business continuity and livelihood sustainability among Asnaf entrepreneurs, particularly by enhancing business visibility and customer interaction through digital platforms (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014; Ainin et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of digital marketing is shown to depend more on skill levels and strategic application than mere access to technology (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Core skills such as content creation, online communication, customer engagement, platform management, and basic performance monitoring were identified, consistent with prior studies (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), although their application remains basic and reactive, limiting long-term business impact (Omar et al., 2021). From a livelihood sustainability perspective, the findings support the view that skills function as key livelihood assets that enhance economic resilience and income continuity (Scoones, 2015), especially when physical market access is constrained (World Bank, 2019; Sutter et al., 2019). Nevertheless, persistent income instability highlights that foundational skills alone are insufficient without more strategic and context-specific training, reinforcing the need for inclusive, livelihood-oriented digital marketing interventions tailored to the realities and capabilities of Asnaf entrepreneurs (Hassan et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2022).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that digital marketing skills are a critical element in supporting business continuity and livelihood sustainability of Asnaf entrepreneurs in Selangor. Although the majority of Asnaf entrepreneurs have started using digital platforms in their business activities, the application of digital marketing skills is still at a basic and non-strategic level. Skills such as content creation, online communication, and platform management help increase business visibility and maintain revenue streams, but their impact on long-term livelihood sustainability is limited without deeper and structured mastery of skills. From a theoretical perspective, this study supports the livelihood sustainability perspective that emphasizes the role of skills as an important asset in increasing economic resilience. From a practical perspective, this study emphasizes that the development of digital capabilities among Asnaf entrepreneurs needs to focus on the application of skills that are strategic and contextual, in line with the reality of micro-businesses. Based on the study findings, it is recommended that entrepreneurship support agencies and zakat institutions develop digital marketing training programs that are more targeted, practical, and tailored to the level of digital literacy as well as the time and resource constraints of Asnaf entrepreneurs, with an emphasis on the application of skills in real business situations. Entrepreneur development programs should also integrate simple digital performance monitoring elements to improve basic data literacy and assist in the assessment of marketing effectiveness. In addition, policy support through the provision of access to devices, stable internet infrastructure, and ongoing post-training support are essential to ensure consistent application of skills and long-term impact on livelihood sustainability. Finally, further research is recommended to develop a livelihood-based digital marketing model specific to the Asnaf context and assess the long-term impact of skills development on improving livelihoods through longitudinal studies.

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- Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the IIUM Research Ethics Committee (IREC), approval number [IREC 2024-206]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.
- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Fatin Husna Suib was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Farahana Mohd Nazri handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Amirah Ahmad Suki contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.
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