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EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL MARKETING PRACTICES OF YOUTH ENTREPRENEURS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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Abstract:

This case study explores at how young entrepreneurs may use sustainable digital marketing and how it can help them run their businesses on a daily basis and stay in business for a long time. In a corporate world that is becoming more digital and where online competition is getting tougher, young entrepreneurs need to constantly find a balance between making smart business decisions that are good for the environment and using marketing methods that work. This research employs a qualitative case study methodology, including data collecting through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of youth entrepreneurs across diverse business sectors. The study's findings indicate that sustainability elements are integrated into digital marketing efforts via ethical online communication, responsible content creation, customer engagement centered on consumer needs, and the strategic utilization of digital platforms to manage expenses and mitigate environmental effects. These practices help make the brand more trustworthy, improve relationships with customers, and make the firm more resilient. This survey also finds some important problems, such as not having enough resources, not having enough digital skills, and being under pressure to put short-term sales targets ahead of long-

term sustainability goals. This study shows that sustainable digital marketing is a useful and doable way for managers to help young entrepreneurs' businesses do better and be more competitive. The results of this study provide valuable insights for youth entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship support organizations, and governments in their initiatives to enhance sustainability-oriented digital marketing practices within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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Keyword:

Sustainable Digital Marketing, Youth Entrepreneur, Entrepreneurship Practices, Business Sustainability, Qualitative Case Study



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Introduction

Digital marketing is becoming one of the most crucial things that entrepreneurs do to run their businesses. This is especially true for young entrepreneurs who rely on internet platforms to promote their products, talk to customers, and keep their businesses going. The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed conventional marketing approaches by enabling businesses to penetrate a wider market at a more efficient cost, while also increasing operational efficiency, data-driven decision-making, and customer engagement levels (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kotler et al., 2021; Zahay, 2021).

Also, sustainability is becoming more and more crucial in business and management nowadays. In the realm of entrepreneurship, sustainability encompasses the integration of economic competitiveness, ethical accountability, and the generation of long-term value in corporate operations (Elkington, 1997; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Sustainable digital marketing focuses on responsible communication, clear information sharing, ethical online behavior, and smart use of digital resources to cut down on waste and harm to the environment (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Peattie & Belz, 2010). As consumers become more aware of social responsibility and the value of corporate sustainability, this approach becomes more and more important.

Even though more and more people are realizing how important sustainable digital marketing is, many young business owners still have trouble fully using sustainability concepts in their marketing. Lack of management experience, different levels of digital technical competency, and a lot of pressure to make quick sales often led to the employment of aggressive or less sustainable marketing methods (OECD, 2020; Kraus et al., 2022). Prior research has examined the adoption of digital marketing and its correlation with entrepreneurial performance; however, the majority of these studies have prioritized quantitative outcomes over a

comprehensive understanding of the practical implementation of sustainable digital marketing in actual business contexts.

Thus, this study seeks to investigate sustainable digital marketing techniques among youth entrepreneurs using a case study methodology. This study offers a comprehensive examination of the integration of sustainability features into digital marketing operations, highlighting the advantages of these practices and the problems encountered by youth entrepreneurs, through the lens of actual company experiences. The results of this study are anticipated to enhance the entrepreneurship and management literature, while also offering practical guidance to entrepreneurs, policymakers, and entrepreneurship support organizations in advocating sustainability-focused digital marketing strategies.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the digital marketing practices adopted by Malaysian youth entrepreneurs.
2. To identify the key challenges influencing Malaysian youth entrepreneurs' involvement in digital marketing practices.
3. To examine how these digital marketing practices contribute to business sustainability and long-term entrepreneurial performance.

Literature Review

This literature review examines five key areas related to sustainable digital marketing practices among youth entrepreneurs. First, it discusses about the idea of sustainable digital marketing as the study's main idea. Second, this review looks at how much and how young entrepreneurs are using digital marketing. Third, it looks at how important sustainability factors are in managing a business as an entrepreneur. Fourth, the topic stresses how important it is for businesses to use sustainable digital marketing methods to do better and be more competitive. Lastly, this study talks about the biggest problems that young entrepreneurs have when they try to use sustainable digital marketing methods.

Concept of Sustainable Digital Marketing

Sustainable digital marketing is the deliberate use of digital platforms and technologies to reach marketing goals while following the rules of ethics, honesty, and long-term social and environmental responsibility. Sustainable digital marketing is different from traditional digital marketing since it focuses on long-term goals like visibility and sales. Instead, it includes sustainability into online communications, content creation, and customer interactions (Belz & Peattie, 2012). This method makes ensuring that marketing efforts are in accordance with responsible consumption, giving out correct information, and using resources more effectively.

Also, digital technology helps the sustainability agenda by cutting down on the consumption of physical materials and making it easier and cheaper to deploy data-driven marketing techniques (Kotler et al., 2021). As more people become aware of ethical and environmental challenges in business, sustainable digital marketing is becoming more and more important, especially for small firms and startups.

Digital Marketing Adoption Among Youth Entrepreneurs

Since their generation is comfortable with digital technologies, social media, and other online ways to talk to people, young entrepreneurs are generally seen as active users of digital marketing. Digital marketing helps young entrepreneurs reach more people, talk directly to clients, and do marketing for less money than traditional techniques (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Some common ways to market are through social media, making digital content, using messaging apps to talk to customers, and using e-commerce sites.

However, previous research has indicated that young entrepreneurs that utilize digital marketing do it largely informally and for day-to-day tasks, not for long-term planning. A lot of entrepreneurs focus on basic marketing without having a defined plan, keeping an eye on their performance, or thinking about how to make their business last in the long run (Kraus et al., 2022). This shows that even while digital platforms are used a lot, digital marketing as a strategic and long-term instrument has not yet reached its full potential.

Sustainability in Entrepreneurial Business Management

A triple bottom line paradigm that includes economic success, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship is widely used to talk about sustainability in business (Elkington, 1997). Sustainable entrepreneurship, from a company management standpoint, prioritizes long-term value creation, ethical decision-making, and stakeholder engagement over mere short-term profit maximization (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011).

When it comes to marketing management, approaches that focus on sustainability can make a brand more trustworthy, boost customer trust, and make an organization more resilient. Transparent communication and responsible customer interaction help create long-term connections with customers. This is especially important for young entrepreneurs who work in a very competitive digital industry (Kotler et al., 2021). So, using sustainability principles in digital marketing not only meets ethical obligations, but it also helps businesses expand in a sustainable way.

Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Digital Marketing

Sustainable digital marketing has many benefits, but young entrepreneurs still have trouble using it. Limited financial resources and varying levels of digital abilities often hinder the use of more advanced marketing tools and access to professional experience (OECD, 2020). Also, young entrepreneurs who don't have much management experience may have trouble using sustainability ideas in their digital marketing plans.

Also, the temptation to make quick sales and grow quickly might lead to the use of aggressive or unscrupulous digital marketing methods. The fierce competition in the online market can also make long-term sustainability less important, especially for entrepreneurs who are just starting out (Kraus et al., 2022). This situation makes it evident that we need to give specific training, methodical direction, and strong policy support to encourage digital marketing methods that are good for the environment.

Previous Related Studies and Framework Adaptation

Previous studies on digital marketing and entrepreneurship have predominantly concentrated on adoption and performance outcomes through quantitative methodologies. Although these studies have provided substantial insights into the subject, elucidations on the use of sustainability principles in quotidian digital marketing practices remain insufficient, especially among young entrepreneurs. There is a dearth of empirical studies investigating actual business experiences and the practical problems of implementing sustainable digital marketing, especially in poor nations and emerging economies.

This study utilizes the Sustainability Marketing Framework established by Belz and Peattie (2012), which underscores ethical marketing practices, the production of customer value, and long-term sustainability. This framework is adapted to fit the study's focus on the digital marketing strategies of young entrepreneurs in Malaysia. We look at sustainability dimensions including ethical communication, responsible content generation, and customer-centric customer involvement. We also look at corporate sustainability results from a triple bottom line viewpoint (Elkington, 1997). This modified framework offers a contextually relevant analytical structure for comprehending sustainable digital marketing techniques and their impact on long-term entrepreneurial performance.

This study modifies the Sustainable Marketing Framework put forth by Belz and Peattie (2012) to enhance its applicability to the context of youth entrepreneurs in Malaysia, as indicated by the literature review. Figure 1 shows the updated framework by showing the input parts, sustainable digital marketing techniques, and business sustainability outcomes.

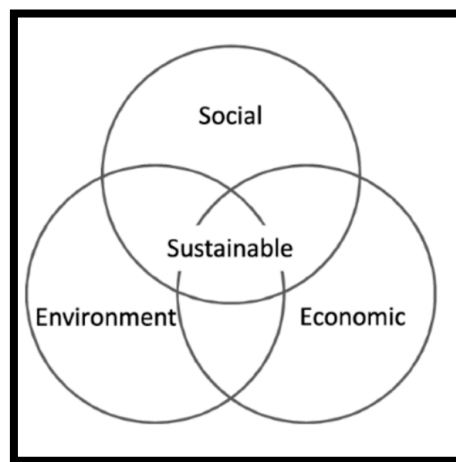


Figure 1: Triple Bottom Line Perspective Underpinning Sustainable Digital Marketing

Adapted from Elkington (1997) and applied in the context of sustainability marketing by Belz and Peattie (2012)

This image shows the Triple Bottom Line view of sustainability, which includes social, environmental, and economic aspects. This study utilizes the Triple Bottom Line as the foundational sustainability framework for analyzing sustainable digital marketing techniques among adolescent entrepreneurs. Adapted from Elkington (1997) and Belz and Peattie (2012).

Table 1: Summary of Literature Themes

Theme	Key Focus	Key Sources
Sustainable Digital Marketing	Ethics, transparency, long-term value	Belz & Peattie (2012); Peattie & Belz (2010)
Youth Digital Marketing Adoption	Platforms, engagement	Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2019)
Sustainability in Entrepreneurship	Triple bottom line	Elkington (1997); Schaltegger & Wagner (2011)
Implementation Challenges	Skills, resources, short-term pressure	OECD (2020); Kraus et al. (2022)

Research Gap

Past studies on digital marketing and entrepreneurship has predominantly concentrated on adoption rates, technology utilization, and performance metrics via quantitative methodologies and firm-level evaluations. Although these studies offer valuable insights into the advantages of digital marketing, there remains a paucity of explanations regarding the actual application of sustainability principles in daily digital marketing practices, especially among young entrepreneurs. Moreover, the sustainable marketing approach presented by Belz and Peattie (2012) is predominantly utilized in established firms, receiving scant empirical scrutiny in the context of small, resource-limited entrepreneurship.

In Malaysia, studies on youth entrepreneurship have concentrated mostly on entrepreneurial objectives, skill enhancement, and the assessment of program efficacy, rather than on the specific management strategies employed by youth entrepreneurs for sustainable digital marketing. There is currently not enough qualitative information to explain how young entrepreneurs reconcile the success of digital marketing with their moral duties, long-term sustainability, and the intense competition of the internet market. Moreover, current research seldom amalgamates sustainable marketing viewpoints with digital marketing methodologies within a cohesive analytical framework.

Consequently, a distinct study gap exists regarding the engagement of youth entrepreneurs in Malaysia with sustainable digital marketing techniques, the hurdles encountered in their implementation, and the relevance of these practices in fostering long-term business sustainability. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a qualitative case study methodology informed by a modified Sustainable Marketing Framework, aiming to offer insights derived from practical application and to enhance the current literature in the domains of entrepreneurship and digital marketing.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative multi-case study methodology, encompassing three examples (examples A–C), to investigate sustainable digital marketing strategies among youth entrepreneurs in Malaysia and their contribution to business management and long-term sustainability. The qualitative technique was selected due to its capacity for comprehensive examination of intricate and context-sensitive phenomena, specifically concerning entrepreneurs' genuine experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes in the

execution of digital marketing and sustainability (Yin, 2015). Since there are currently not many empirical studies on sustainable digital marketing among young entrepreneurs in

Malaysia, the case study method makes it possible to get a deep and contextual understanding that is hard to get using quantitative approaches alone.

This study is based on the Sustainable Marketing Framework, which was adapted from Belz and Peattie (2012). It provides a conceptual framework for looking at how ethical values, limited resources, digital skills, and market pressures affect the creation and use of sustainability-focused digital marketing practices in a business setting.

Research Design and Case Selection

A multiple-case study approach was employed to augment the depth of analysis and facilitate comparisons among examples, adhering to the guidelines of qualitative research in examining intricate and contextually dependent phenomena (Yin, 2018). We used purposive sampling to choose the instances such that they would directly help us meet the goals of the study. This study specifically examined youth-owned enterprises managed by individuals aged 18 to 40 years who actively utilized digital marketing platforms, including social media, online marketplaces, and messaging applications. Only businesses that had been running for at least two years were considered to make sure they had enough experience. All of the participants said they were willing to undergo in-depth interviews and submit business-related information. Three youth-owned firms were chosen as individual case studies (instances A–C) so that a thorough study and systematic comparisons between the instances could be done.

Table 2: Profile of Three Youth Entrepreneur Cases (Case A–C)

Case	Sector	Years in Operation	Main Digital Platforms Used	Nature of Business
Case A	Retail	3 years	Instagram, WhatsApp	Product-based
Case B	Services	5 years	Facebook, Website	Service-based
Case C	Food	2 years	TikTok, Shopee	Product-based

Data Collection Methods

Primary data was collected via semi-structured interviews with teenage entrepreneurs serving as business owners or principal decision-makers. The semi-structured interview style was selected to facilitate adaptable examination of participants' perspectives, while guaranteeing organized discussions addressing topics connected to digital marketing methods, sustainability considerations, and management challenges (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were done in Malay or English, depending on what worked best for the participants. The interview guide emphasized several critical aspects, including utilized digital marketing platforms, ethical and sustainability considerations in online communication, resource and capacity limitations, results achieved from implementing sustainable digital marketing, and difficulties in reconciling short-term sales objectives with long-term sustainability aims.

To enhance data triangulation and bolster the trustworthiness of the study findings, document analysis was performed alongside the interviews. The documents examined comprised social media posts, websites, online advertising materials, and specific business records that illustrated the entrepreneurs' digital marketing initiatives and sustainability procedures. Researchers were able to corroborate what they learned in interviews and learn more about how sustainability principles are put into practice in digital marketing by looking at documents (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns and themes across qualitative data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. The thematic analysis followed four main stages:

Stage 1: Familiarization with the data

The researcher examined and reviewed interview transcripts and papers to achieve a thorough comprehension of the data and to discern preliminary concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Stage 2: Initial coding

Initial codes were generated manually to capture meaningful segments of data related to digital marketing practices, sustainability elements, and entrepreneurial challenges (Saldaña, 2016).

Stage 3: Developing themes

Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader themes reflecting recurring patterns across cases, such as ethical communication, customer engagement, digital capability constraints, and sustainability outcomes.

Stage 4: Reviewing and refining themes

Themes were refined and linked back to the research objectives and the adapted Sustainability Marketing Framework to ensure analytical coherence and theoretical alignment.

Trustworthiness of the Study

This study employed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and validity as delineated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ascertain the reliability of the findings. Triangulating data from interviews and document analysis, as well as the researcher's continued interaction with participants to develop a deeper grasp of the business setting under study, increased credibility. Transferability was facilitated by including comprehensive and contextual explanations of the study environment, participants, and cases, so allowing readers to evaluate the relevance of the study findings in analogous circumstances. At the same time, dependability and validity were taken care of by keeping a structured audit trail that keeps track of the outcomes and steps taken during data collection, coding, and analysis. This method made the study process more open and helped reduce bias on the part of the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Before this investigation was done, it got ethical approval. Before the interviews, everyone was given a clear description of the study's goal and scope, and they all signed a written consent form. To keep participants' identities and privacy safe, pseudonyms were used and any business information that may be used to identify them was taken out of the study transcripts and reports. All data collected were securely maintained and utilized exclusively for academic and research purposes, in compliance with research ethics requirements.

Findings and Discussion

Table 3: Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Description	Supporting Framework Element
Ethical Communication	Honest, transparent messaging	Sustainability Marketing
Customer Engagement	Relationship-based interaction	Customer value creation
Resource Constraints	Limited tools & skills	Framework input constraints

This section discusses the results of the qualitative case study, which looked at the digital marketing practices of Malaysian youth entrepreneurs, the problems that made them less likely to get involved, and how these practices helped their businesses stay open and do well in the long run. The debate combines real-world evidence with what is already known and the modified Sustainability Marketing Framework.

Digital Marketing Practices Adopted by Youth Entrepreneurs

The study's results indicate that young entrepreneurs in Malaysia utilize digital marketing as a fundamental management strategy, rather than only a promotional instrument. This study supports the idea that digital marketing is an important part of making management decisions and helps businesses do well in the long term (Zahay, 2021). People often utilize social media apps like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, as well as online markets and basic websites. These platforms are the main ways to promote products, talk to customers, share content, and manage orders. Digital marketing enables young entrepreneurs to access a broader market at a relatively low cost, while facilitating direct engagement with clients (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). One participant stressed the significance of relationship-oriented engagement by asserting, “We respond personally to customers and focus on building relationships, not just selling products” (Case A, Retail).

This study also indicated that most of the people who took part used elements of sustainability in their digital marketing. These principles involve responsible content development, ethical online communication, clear product information, and not making false promises. These approaches are in line with the core ideas of sustainable marketing, which stress being honest, giving customers value, and establishing trust over time (Belz & Peattie, 2012). These results indicate that sustainable marketing can be successfully implemented in small and youth-led enterprises, rather than being confined to large or established entities. One participant said, "We make sure that the information shared online is true and easy to understand because customer trust is more important than short-term sales" (Case B, Services).

Challenges Influencing Youth Entrepreneurs' Involvement in Digital Marketing

Even while young entrepreneurs use digital platforms a lot, they still have to deal with a number of problems that make it hard to keep digital marketing going and consistent. Financial limitations were recognized as a significant obstacle hindering the utilization of advanced digital tools, paid advertising, and access to professional marketing services. Also, participants said they had different levels of digital abilities, especially when it came to analytics, content development, and campaign evaluation. This made it harder for them to use more methodical and data-driven marketing methods. One business owner said, "We want to improve our digital

marketing, but our budget and skills make it hard to plan more organized campaigns" (Case C, Food).

Another big problem was that management put a lot of pressure on employees to focus on short-term sales goals. In a very competitive internet market, entrepreneurs often feel that they need to focus on making money right away, which makes them less likely to think about long-term sustainability. This finding aligns with prior research that emphasizes the conflict between short-term firm survival and the adoption of sustainable business practices among entrepreneurs (Kraus et al., 2022; OECD, 2020). Within the Sustainable Marketing Framework, these problems signify resource and capability limitations that directly influence digital marketing choices and methodologies.

Contribution of Sustainable Digital Marketing to Business Sustainability

The study's results show that long-term use of sustainable digital marketing strategies is good for firm sustainability and entrepreneurial performance. Participants said that honest communication and open involvement have made customers trust them more and made business connections stronger. This is especially important for young entrepreneurs, since trust and reputation are two of the most important things that keep clients in the digital business world.

Also, using digital platforms effectively has helped lower operating expenses and cut down on the need for traditional marketing materials, which is good for both the economy and the environment. This study aligns with the triple bottom line concept, which posits that sustainability-oriented marketing fosters economic viability, social trust, and environmental responsibility concurrently (Elkington, 1997; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). The findings of this study demonstrate that sustainable digital marketing is not only feasible for young entrepreneurs to adopt but also functions as a strategic management methodology that enhances firm resilience and competitiveness. Overall, the results of this study suggest that sustainability in digital marketing is shown not only by being good for the environment, but also by being honest in communication, focusing on the needs of customers, and being able to stay in business for a long time among young entrepreneurs.

Synthesis with the Sustainability Marketing Framework

In general, this study's results show that the Sustainable Marketing Framework can be used in Malaysia to help young people start their own businesses. Important parts of the framework, like entrepreneurial principles, consumer expectations, resource availability, and the digital environment, were found to have a big effect on how sustainability-oriented digital marketing

works and what it achieves. This study demonstrates that although the framework retains conceptual relevance, it necessitates adaptation to the local environment to accurately represent the resource limits, skill deficiencies, and competitive pressures typically encountered by teenage entrepreneurs. By incorporating these contextual elements, the framework is better able to explain sustainable digital marketing techniques in situations where young people run small businesses.

Conclusion

This study provides a qualitative insight into the ways Malaysian youth entrepreneurs adopt and execute sustainable digital marketing in their business operations. The results show that young entrepreneurs are actively incorporating sustainability concepts into their digital

marketing efforts by using ethical online communication, responsible content creation, customer-focused consumer involvement, and efficient use of digital platforms. These practices enhance brand trust, fortify customer relationships, and bolster business resilience,

thereby corroborating previous research that highlights the strategic significance of sustainability-oriented marketing in the digital realm (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Kotler et al., 2021).

Simultaneously, this study highlights persistent obstacles that hinder the systematic execution of sustainable digital marketing. Entrepreneurs often can't afford to invest in making high-quality content or long-term sustainability projects since they don't have enough money or people. This makes them publish material less often and use a more reactive marketing strategy. Also, inequalities in digital abilities affect how platforms are used strategically, leading to an emphasis on basic marketing tasks instead of audience segmentation or performance monitoring. The need to make quick sales, especially in very competitive online markets, can also push some business owners to use aggressive marketing strategies that could hurt their long-term goals for ethics and sustainability. This research indicates that sustainability-oriented behaviors are frequently influenced by actual and operational limitations, rather than by entrepreneurs' lack of understanding or intention.

Overall, the study's findings demonstrate the significance of the Sustainability Marketing Framework in elucidating sustainable digital marketing practices among youth entrepreneurs, while also highlighting the necessity for contextual adaptation to address resource limitations and operational challenges. This research enhances the digital marketing and entrepreneurship literature by incorporating the concept of sustainable marketing inside the realm of youth entrepreneurship, utilizing qualitative evidence derived from practical applications. From a practical standpoint, the results of this study offer direction to youth entrepreneurs in reconciling ethical obligations, consumer involvement, and resource optimization with business imperatives. This study also provides significant insights for entrepreneurship support agencies and policymakers in developing more focused training and support initiatives to tackle capacity-building and structural limitations, thereby promoting the ongoing implementation of sustainability-oriented digital marketing strategies among youth entrepreneurs.

Recommendations

This study suggests that young entrepreneurs should take a more strategic and sustainability-focused approach to digital marketing by including ethical standards, creating long-term value

for customers, and regularly evaluating performance in their online marketing efforts. It is also suggested that politicians and agencies that help entrepreneurs create more focused training programs that teach not only the technical parts of digital marketing but also the basics of sustainability, ethical communication, and strategic planning. These kinds of programs can help young entrepreneurs deal with the lack of skills and resources they often have (OECD, 2020; Kraus et al., 2022). Future research should broaden the parameters of this study by employing longitudinal designs or mixed-method approaches to evaluate the enduring effects of sustainable digital marketing practices on entrepreneurial performance in other contexts.

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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). 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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