

Digital Marketing Adoption: Insights from Small and Medium Street Food Vendors

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Abstract - Our study reveals the resource constraints faced by small and medium-sized street food vendors in adopting digital marketing and explores how street food vendors address these challenges. Data were collected through semi structured interviews with 20 street food vendors, then analyzed using qualitative analysis. This study reveals their readiness to adopt digital marketing, the benefits gained from digital marketing, and the challenges in taking digital marketing to the next level. The diffusion of innovation theory is used as a theoretical lens that will help researchers understand this phenomenon. This theory attempts to predict the behavior of individuals and social groups in the process of innovation adoption, by considering four characteristics of innovation, such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and trial. Discussion of these findings leads to insights for academics, culinary SMEs, and policy makers in developing relevant policies to prepare for a sustainable digital economy.

Keywords: Street food; Digital Marketing; DoI Theory; SMEs; Adaption

1. Introduction

Internet-based marketing strategies began to emerge in the late 1990s and accelerated dramatically with the covid 19 pandemic. The new era of digital marketing was marked by the emergence of the social media site Facebook in 2004, the increasing number of internet users, and the variety of devices that can access online information anywhere and anytime (Meyer et al., 2024). Some experts believe that digital marketing techniques can expand their awareness and achieve more effective business results. Digital marketing techniques offer the benefit of low-cost marketing in all market segments and industries, but it seems that many MSMEs have not been able to take advantage of this opportunity, including in the food industry sub-sector, namely small and medium street food traders (Sharma, 2020).

Street food is fast food prepared by street vendors and commonly found in urban centers or busy areas (Gaffar et al., 2022). Indonesian street food, also known as "food kaki lima," is highly popular among most Indonesians. Indonesia's diverse ethnicities, cultures, and languages contribute to a diverse culinary landscape, with a wide variety of foods and drinks, each with its own unique characteristics. The growth of MSME businesses, especially in the food sector in Indonesia, experienced an increase from 2020 to 2021 by 2.54 percent or IDR 775.1 trillion (Kemenprin, 2022). One of the factors driving the rapid growth of the street food business today, among others: the change in people's lifestyles in Indonesia, most of whom have less time to cook, and demand fast food (Rakhmanita A et al., 2025). Low initial capital, low risk and the lack of government regulations on snacks, have also made the street food business grow rapidly. This makes the competition that arises also very high (Lasmana & Kom, 2020).

Competition in the food industry is increasingly fierce. Many have succeeded by opening multiple branches and even turning their businesses into profitable franchises. However, many also fail and ultimately go bankrupt. Consumers are faced with numerous choices. As many as 87% of MSMEs are still struggling to grow and maintain market share against much larger and better-equipped competitors. A sound marketing strategy plays a crucial role in the success of a culinary business. Digital marketing can help MSMEs manage their limited resources (Arfan & Ali Hasan, 2022). The most obvious benefit of digital marketing is its ability to expand and reach a wider and more targeted market. However, this new era of digital marketing has exacerbated or created

challenges for MSMEs. By 2023, according to the Ministry of Trade, 22 million MSMEs will have joined the digital economy, or only 33.6 percent of the total (INDEF, 2023). This means that approximately 66.4% of MSMEs have yet to adopt digital.

Studies investigating the adoption of digital marketing in MSMEs in the street food sector are still very limited. Prior research has largely used quantitative approaches, while qualitative research using in-depth interviews is still very limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how small and medium-sized street food vendors can leverage digital marketing, using alternative media to save costs, and increase their market share. Discussion of these findings leads to insights for academics and policymakers to understand how they have overcome and mitigated these challenges and barriers .

Using the diffusion of innovation theory as a theoretical lens helps researchers understand this phenomenon. This paper is structured as follows. We first present the theoretical foundation of the diffusion of innovation theory that underpins this research. Next, we explain how the research was conducted, specifically the approach to data collection and analysis. Next, we outline the research findings and explain how street food MSMEs adapt to digital marketing. Finally, we conclude by discussing the study's contributions and suggestions for future research.

The adoption process is defined as the process by which individual/business adopters move from awareness to full acceptance of a new innovation (Rogers, 2003). Initially, the innovation-decision process described a model of how people choose to adopt or reject a technology or service. Several studies on the adoption of new products and innovations have attempted to explore why some users adopt and continue using a product, while others do not (Nugraha et al., 2022). Therefore, this study will use this theory to show how digital marketing will be adopted by small and medium street food vendors. DoI is a generic, transferable theory that allows for acceptance across disciplines (Xia et al., 2022). This theory is very important because it has influenced various other adoptions (Bharadwaj & Deka, 2021; Bokolo, 2023; Call & Herber, 2022; Enkel & Wintgens, 2025) . Previous studies believe that innovative adoption is preceded by how someone views an innovation , there are five characteristics that influence the level of adoption of an innovation, namely relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, observability, and trialability (Verhoef & Langerak, 2001).

The term relative advantage describes the expected benefits of digital marketing for companies, such as operational efficiency and effectiveness, reduced time, increased competitiveness, increased revenue, new markets, and interactive communication between consumers and companies. The next characteristic is compatibility. This is the most important aspect influencing technology acceptance. Technology will be implemented if it is compatible with appropriate business infrastructure and procedures, and meets company goals and customer expectations (Qashou & Saleh, 2018). The third characteristic of innovation is complexity, where technology is more easily adopted and understood if it is perceived as easy to use and understand than technology that requires more effort to master (Teixeira et al., 2018). The final characteristic of innovation is trialability, which refers to the extent to which an innovation can be tested on a small scale before being fully adopted. Trialable innovations are more likely to be adopted because individuals can reduce the risk of uncertainty associated with the innovation.

Studies on innovation adoption have been applied at both the individual and organizational levels (Bokolo, 2023; Enkel & Wintgens, 2025). Evert Rogers's theory of innovation (DoI) is arguably the most influential in understanding how an innovation infiltrates a population. However, there is still a lack of research on the application of this theory in micro and informal businesses such as street food vendors. Although several studies have been conducted to analyze DoI in informal businesses (Okour et al., 2021), it remains unclear how micro and small street food vendors, especially in developing countries, perceive and consider the attributes of their innovations to solve their tasks more quickly or more easily. A quantitative study by (Patil et al., 2022a) analyzing the relationship between DoI characteristics and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) theory on digital marketing adoption by SMEs in India. They found that the results showed that relative advantage, compatibility, cost, and perceived usability increased digital marketing adoption.

2. Research Methods

This research was conducted at a community culinary center in South Tangerang, Indonesia. Tangerang is located in a metropolitan area with the potential to attract investors in the industrial, trade, creative economy, and tourism sectors, which can be used as capital to accelerate urban development. Furthermore, South Tangerang has the potential for rapid economic growth. Selecting this city as a sample is appropriate due to the large number of long-established small-to-medium street food vendors that have survived to this day.

This study employed a qualitative research approach. This qualitative research design is appropriate because currently there is little insight into how MSMEs, particularly small and medium-sized street food vendors, overcome challenges and mitigate barriers to digital marketing adoption. A qualitative approach is recognized as beneficial in research, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the complex psychosocial issues faced by MSMEs (Rijal Fadli, 2021).

2.1. Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews with 20 street food vendors. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with the respondents' consent, transcribed, and translated. Initial questions focused on the challenges and barriers to digital marketing adoption. However, upon further investigation, many unexpected issues related to resource constraints emerged. These questions aimed to elicit responses to the key drivers of digital technology adoption. The street food vendors we selected varied, selling dim sum, gado-gado, various fried foods, satay, and others. These vendors have been in business for more than five years, and their selling prices range from Rp 2,000 to Rp 35,000. The culinary business profile is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Informants

No	Culinary Business	Age	Education	Experience
1	Noodle vendor	23	Bachelor	5
2	Dimsum vendor	26	Senior High School	8
3	Ice tea vendor	27	Senior High School	7
4	Drinking vendor	32	Senior High School	10
5	Batagor vendor	38	Senior High School	12
6	Meatball vendor	41	Senior High School	15
7	Mpek-mpek vendor	43	Senior High School	20
8	Martabak vendor	45	Senior High School	15
9	Fried rice vendor	47	Senior High School	17
10	Coffe vendor	48	Junior High School	32
11	Nasi uduk vendor	49	Bachelor	8
12	Fruit salad vendor	50	Junior High School	32
13	Gado-gado vendor	52	Senior High School	31
14	Chicken porridge vendor	53	Senior High School	27
15	Satay vendor	55	Junior High School	30
16	Fried food vendor	58	Junior High School	38
17	Traditional snack 'ketan bakar' vendor	61	Junior High School	40
18	Chicken fried vendor	63	Senior High School	39
19	Home made food vendor	63	Elementary School	40
20	Traditional snack 'kerak telor' vendor	64	Junior High School	42

2.2. Data analysis

Interview analysis was conducted using an inductive approach, collecting interview data into several codes. A priori codes created included, for example, 'readiness to adopt marketing innovation,' 'benefits of adopting marketing innovation,' 'use of digital media,' and 'challenges to adopting marketing innovation.' Sections of each interview were marked and highlighted before final themes were agreed upon. Although time-consuming, the coding process allowed emerging themes to be discussed in more depth among the researchers.

3. Result and Discussion

The interviews provided interesting insights into SMEs' views on the factors influencing their readiness to accept the adoption of marketing innovations, the benefits received during adoption, and how they respond to the challenges of further innovation.

3.1 Readiness to Adopt Digital Marketing for Street Food Vendors

In this digital era, consumers are in control, more discerning, and research products before making a purchase. They compare competitors with reviews scattered across the internet, thus uncovering all the information (L. Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, companies need to innovate in marketing strategies to build brand loyalty and maintain relationships with consumers. This shift has forced small and medium-sized street food vendors to be ready to adopt digital marketing. All informants expressed readiness to embrace digital media marketing despite their limited capabilities and small budgets. For example, most of the vendors interviewed recruited additional employees to help handle orders and social media advertising or empowered family members.

“Our biggest obstacle is prioritizing time resources to monitor social media activity.” “...We recruit young employees who understand social media” (Dimsum vendor).

“We rely on kids to manage online marketing for our business” (Home made food vendor).

The varying adoption rates of digital marketing media across different age demographics have left many street food vendors feeling unable to keep up with these marketing changes. Many SMEs rely solely on specific social media platforms for their marketing efforts. Most small and medium-sized street food vendors are currently aged around 40 and above and have not yet become digital natives, fully adapting to the new social media and

digital marketing tools. Field findings indicate that few actively seek formal training on how to use these tools effectively.

“Social media like Facebook and WhatsApp are easier to use than other digital marketing options and there is a familiarity with them” (Batagor vendor).

“To effectively utilize the potential of digital marketing, we also partner with agencies, such as GoFood and Shopee Food and make the most of them” (Chicken fried vendor).

3.2 Benefits of Digital Marketing in Increasing Sales from Traditional Marketing

All informants acknowledged that using digital marketing can provide greater benefits. All respondents noted increased sales and increased customer visits as the primary reasons for implementing digital marketing.

"After registering on the Google Review application, the number of consumer visits increased" (Mpek mpek vendor).

"The number of orders increased from orders received through marketplaces, GoFood, and Shopee Food."

"I felt like I had to do digital marketing. This industry is changing so fast and everyone has done it" (Mpek-mpek vendor).

Proper adoption of digital marketing can provide cost and efficiency advantages over traditional marketing. However, some informants focus solely on increasing sales and profit margins between digital and traditional marketing strategies.

“While implementing digital marketing, we get cheap promotion costs” (Dimsum vendor).

“We don't pay for advertising on Facebook and posting on whatsapp Groups”.

They aren't yet aware of other benefits of digital marketing, such as regularly reviewing customer traffic and setting optimally targeted marketing goals. This bias can be countered by educating street food vendors about the benefits of digital marketing. They need to invest time in better understanding how online marketing works, how consumers engage with it, and how to monitor engagement so they can be confident that digital marketing is helping them achieve their goals.

"We have a desire to use these online tools more. We realize that if we don't learn how to implement digital marketing quickly, it could kill our business"(Dimsum vendor).

"I don't spend enough time thinking about anything other than trading operations. I feel like I'm too time-poor and don't know what to look for".

3.3 Challenges for Street Food Vendors in Using Digital Marketing

For many MSMEs, the rapid pace of marketing change means there's not enough time to absorb and implement all available media. This is because most MSMEs don't yet understand the importance of online marketing and are still focused solely on production. Many MSME products lack effective branding, packaging, and labeling.

“When we tried to enter online media, we couldn't prepare attractive packaging and branding” (Dimsum vendor).

“We haven't been able to create unique value in the product”.

The digital world is changing rapidly, and small-to-medium street food vendors must continually learn and adapt to new technologies, media, and marketing trends to stay competitive. Currently, some informants are only adopting simple digital marketing tools like Facebook and WhatsApp, and are hesitant to experiment with other platforms.

"So far, we have not had time to respond to consumer reviews on Google media" (Chicken fried vendor).

“We haven't dared to experiment with new marketing platforms or techniques, such as influencer marketing and short videos on social media” (Dimsum vendor).

The next challenge is to have the courage to allocate a budget for paid advertising on social media and use the Periodic Evaluation tool, then gradually increase the budget according to the results obtained.

“We haven't been able to budget for tools like Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, or other analytics tools to track and analyze digital campaign performance” (Fruit salad vendor).

3.4. Discussion

This section will discuss how the results of this study are explained from the perspective of DoI theory. DoI is a theory that describes the process of change. This theory attempts to predict the behavior of individuals and social groups in the process of adopting innovation, by considering personal characteristics, social relationships, and the characteristics of the innovation. Rogers (2003) stated that the term diffusion describes the process by which individuals or groups in society adopt new technologies or replace old technologies with new ones. Digital marketing is a social innovation. Thus, digital marketing aims to change the pattern of relationships between society and the environment. Digital marketing should be understood as: a) playing a vital role in the digital era because it allows businesses to reach a global audience at a relatively lower cost compared to traditional marketing, b) drastically expanding the potential market, c) enabling direct interaction with customers through

social media and other platforms, which can increase customer loyalty and engagement, d) Businesses that use digital marketing can continue to operate and reach customers around the clock, even outside of normal business hours, e) can build and strengthen their brand image consistently

Our findings indicate that small and medium-sized street food vendors are highly prepared to embrace digital marketing changes in line with the changing business environment. This preparedness can create value for them through the implementation of business strategies focused on sustainable business performance. This finding is consistent with those found in other industries grappling with the adoption of marketing innovations using quantitative approaches (Patil et al., 2022b). The study concluded that awareness of digital marketing tools was considered quite good, related to websites, email marketing, e-commerce, and social media marketing for business sustainability. Further in the study, the authors provide considerations for MSMEs to broaden their understanding of the marketing mix and implement a wider range of online marketing tools. Small and medium-sized street food vendors should recognize and address gaps in their digital and marketing knowledge, be willing to learn new skills, and invest the necessary time to implement and monitor marketing activities.

As Rogers points out, innovation characteristics contribute to the level of adoption readiness. There are four perceived innovation characteristics of digital marketing that may influence the adoption and use of services by small and medium-sized street food vendors. These four attributes are relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and trial.

Interview results indicate increased sales, wider market share, and increased customer visits during the implementation of digital marketing. This relative advantage appears to be an attractive characteristic for street food vendors in adopting digital marketing innovations. This aligns with research (Mamun, 2018) that suggests that micro and small businesses tend to quickly adopt an innovation if it is perceived to have a relative advantage for them. These findings confirm that SMEs' capacity to understand economic benefits, initial costs, reduced inconvenience, time and effort savings, and immediate rewards play a significant role in innovation adoption.

According to diffusion theory, innovations must meet certain criteria to be (easily) adopted. One of these is clear economic benefits. An innovation must have advantages or added value compared to the existing system to encourage users to accept and use it. Most informants attest to the benefits of digital marketing for businesses, as it is believed to increase sales and traffic, and is also superior due to its potential cost-savings if adopted.

The primary reason small and medium-sized street food vendors continue to adopt digital marketing is its compatibility with their business preferences for sustainability. Digital marketing provides them with the opportunity to expand their market share and attract consumers who prefer to shop online. Digital marketing is an innovation that aligns with current information technology developments. This is consistent with research (Faisal & Idris, 2020) explaining that adapting a company's work methods, coupled with the implementation of supply chain technology that fully aligns with current conditions, allows more companies to adopt this SCT innovation.

Meanwhile, research conducted (Deng et al., 2023) explains that organisations often face difficulties when using technology, moreover, when certain technologies are not compatible with users or organizations, they generally refuse to adopt these technological innovations. Factors that drive compatibility include: the level of user or organizational needs, existing values, and past experiences. Compatibility is also seen as a challenge for small and medium street food vendors who are just starting to adopt digital marketing. However, they also believe that businesses must have a compatible system to adapt to these changes in consumer behavior.

Although digital marketing is considered easy to use for some small-to-medium street food vendors, several informants in this study had never accessed the internet at home. A small proportion had no prior experience using the internet. Consequently, some of them lacked confidence in their ability to use the internet or adopt digital marketing. A similar situation was also observed in the study (Thompson & Hamilton, 2025), which found that the complexity of innovations present in organic production, in the form of key production and certification regulations, hindered farmers aged 50 and over. The trader's age and habits also appeared to play a significant role in hindering adoption. Close relatives, such as their children, may be able to help increase the likelihood of digital marketing adoption.

Younger informants with higher levels of education are more likely to use digital marketing than older informants. In addition to demographic factors, lack of access to computers or the internet, or low computer/internet skills, can negatively impact the acceptance and adoption of digital marketing among informants.

In this study, informants indicated that they continued using digital marketing after trial use. Some of them progressed to more advanced levels of available digital marketing tools. Informants believed that trial use before implementing digital marketing was important to assess its capabilities and tailor its use to their needs. By conducting trials, they could determine whether it suited their tasks and interests. This suggests that trial use can help most people make decisions about adopting an innovation.

The results of this study are consistent with (X. Zhang et al., 2015) the evidence that trial and error appear to be an important factor in determining an individual's decision to continue using an IT innovation after it has been adopted. In DoI theory, trial and error refers to the user's ability to test a new technological innovation before making a decision to implement it permanently. This characteristic of innovation, namely trial and error, can help

small and medium-sized street food vendors who will try digital marketing innovations on a limited scale to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the innovation, thereby reducing the uncertainty and risks associated with adopting new innovations, so that the use of the innovation is in accordance with business needs and can be implemented optimally.

4. Conclusion

The readiness to adopt digital marketing by small and medium-sized street food vendors is not only a matter of survival, but also a catalyst in accelerating the process towards a digital economy as initiated by the government, opening up new opportunities in marketing and operational strategies that are more modern and flexible. The Indonesian government currently considers the spread of technology as a critical path to digital economic growth, particularly the spread to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). However, SMEs face weaknesses related to a lack of technological and financial resources that can cause problems not only in their ability to acquire technology but also in their ability to absorb it into their businesses. This study contributes insights to better prepare SMEs, particularly the street food vendor subsector, for digital marketing adoption. Overall, the findings indicate that properly adopted and maintained digital marketing is an effective and cost-effective way for SMEs to sustain their businesses.

This research contributes to DoI theory, particularly by developing a model at the MSME level. The rate of adoption by MSMEs may differ significantly from that of large enterprises, and the absorptive capacity of the recipient enterprise will determine the extent to which the technology is adopted. Our research reveals interesting facts: in the context of micro and small enterprises, high relative profitability and low complexity are factors that encourage MSMEs to adopt digital marketing innovations. However, overall, they are still in the early knowledge stage of the innovation decision process, and only a few informants have advanced the adoption of available digital marketing tools.

The research results show that street food vendors are ready to adopt digital marketing, albeit in a simple manner. Street food vendors are considering several factors in facing this digital era. First, they are ready to embrace this marketing innovation, as many consumers now search for products and shop online. This presents an opportunity for small and medium-sized street food vendors to follow this trend and remain relevant in an increasingly competitive market. Second, technological advancements have forced businesses, including culinary businesses, to shift towards digitalization. Therefore, it is crucial for culinary entrepreneurs to improve their digital literacy. Third, digital marketing provides flexibility in adapting strategies to suit their needs and budget, which can then be scaled as the business grows.

This research was conducted in a small region of Indonesia, namely South Tangerang City. These findings may only be comparable to the same population group. Qualitative studies in other suburban areas would enrich the research results and provide a better understanding of digital marketing adoption by small and medium-sized street food vendors in other regions. Despite providing new insights, our study was limited in terms of the sample size of street food vendors we interviewed. Therefore, future research could increase the sample size by expanding the study to other sectors, such as retail and services. A quantitative research approach could also be adopted to examine the correlations among the key determinants of digital marketing adoption using the TAM or UTAU theoretical framework.

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