Optimizing Digital Marketing Strategies to Improve Business Competitiveness of Commercial Administration Students

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Abstract: Digital technology has profoundly transformed business activities, and one of the most profoundly impacted fields is marketing. In the current business context, digital marketing has become one of the essential sources of competitive advantage, expanding market reach, and building long term customer loyalty. For student businesses more precisely, businesses run by students in the Business Administration Study Program digital marketing presents both tremendous opportunities and significant challenges. The majority of these student enterprises are limited by inexperience, poor training, low financial capital, and low institutional support, which hinders their ability to utilize digital means effectively. The study investigates how student companies can improve their competitiveness through the optimization of digital marketing strategies. With the use of a qualitative research method, the data were collected through in depth interviews with student entrepreneurs and direct observations of digital marketing practices employed by professionals. The results demonstrate that digital marketing tools like social media, search engine optimization (SEO), and email marketing significantly enhance brand awareness, customer engagement, and sales performance. Furthermore, when students adopt a more comprehensive and consistent digital marketing strategy, the overall business performance is bound to improve. The study emphasizes the need for additional support from universities in the form of training courses, workshops, and hands on tools to promote digital entrepreneurship among students. Ultimately, the study contributes theoretically and practically by offering insights into the strategic role played by digital marketing in micro enterprises and offering actionable recommendations to students, educators, and policymakers looking to boost entrepreneurial outcomes in universities.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; Commercial Administration Students; Business Competitiveness; Social Media; SEO; Email Marketing.

A. Introduction

Communication and information technology has fundamentally transformed marketing strategies, particularly with the use of electronic media. In today's business world, digital marketing is no longer a choice but a fundamental survival and growth tool. Its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, as well as interactive nature, make it even more suitable in highly competitive markets. Not only large enterprises but also microbusinesses, including student businesses, increasingly utilize social media, websites, and other digital channels as strategic means to engage with customers, build brands, and support business operations. This has revolutionized value creation and delivery, emphasizing customer-centered and data-driven approaches.

Despite their entrepreneurial potential, the majority of student entrepreneurs face serious challenges in formulating and executing successful marketing strategies. Students in the Study Program of Commercial Administration, for instance, acquire basic theoretical knowledge of current business practice, yet often without platform-specific practical experience. Time constraints, low technical competence levels, and limited availability of digital tools are limitations that prevent them from fully exploiting the digital marketing opportunities. As it is, despite being innovative and agile, student businesses have their growth often stunted by operational and strategic inadequacies in digital marketing.

The gap between academic knowing and entrepreneurial doing forms the basis of the need to more fully understand how students apply digital marketing in real businesses. While there is extensive literature on the utilization of digital marketing among corporations and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), studies on student entrepreneurship are relatively fewer. As an attempt to address the gap, this research seeks to explore how and why digital media are used by university students, as well as the opportunities and challenges they experience. By drawing from Porter's Model of Competitive Advantage, which emphasizes differentiation and cost leadership, and digital entrepreneurship theory, which examines entrepreneurial behavior under technology-mediated environments, this study conceptualizes digital marketing as a vehicle to increase visibility, customer engagement, and overall business performance.

Three principal digital marketing strategies social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and email marketing are at the center of this question considering they are affordable, low in cost, and flexible enough to be utilized by small student-owned businesses. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp Business allow students to directly engage with customers, build communities, and communicatively convey brand messages in real time. SEO renders products and services visible, generate organic traffic via keyword optimization, quality content creation, and search engine-friendly website architecture. Email marketing, on the other hand, constructs customer relationships for the long term by delivering individualized updates, promotion, and information of value to customers, thereby increasing customer loyalty and transaction value.

Methodologically, the study follows a descriptive qualitative approach, making use of direct observation of student entrepreneurs' marketing practices and in-depth interviews. Triangulation of data through cross-checking with digital marketing professionals and institutional perspectives was employed to enhance credibility and ensure that the findings are indeed representative of the experiences of the participants. Such methodological rigour enables the distillation of best practices and observations of structural issues faced by students.

Lastly, this research aims to develop a conceptual model linking digital marketing adoption, institutional support, and competitiveness of businesses. It is a hypothesis that competitiveness of student-owned enterprises can be significantly enhanced through the uptake of well-developed, context-specific digital marketing strategies. In this regard, universities/colleges role in this endeavor becomes crucial as they can provide technical skills training, mentorship, and access to essential digital tools. These interventions not only bridge the theory-practice divide but also produce a new generation of e-entrepreneurs who are able to thrive in an increasingly technology-reliant market.
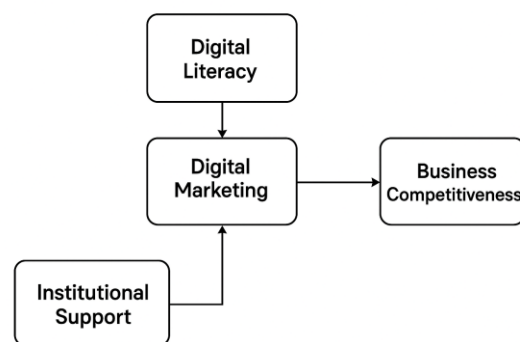

Figure 1. Model Business Competitiveness

B.   Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study method to explore the ways in which student entrepreneurs enrolled in a Commercial Administration program utilize digital marketing tools in a strategic manner to make their businesses more competitive. Indonesia, with over 200 million internet users, provides a fertile field in which small businesses are increasingly utilizing media like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp to engage with customers, sell products, and build brand identity. The case study approach was selected to facilitate in-depth exploration of individual motivations, behaviors, and strategies within a

real-world setting, in acknowledgment of the intricate relationship between entrepreneurial inclination and academic obligation.

The uptake of digital marketing practices by student enterprises is situated within a broader discourse of youth entrepreneurship and digital innovation in emerging economies. To situate and validate field data contextually, researchers drew upon extant scholarly literature across peer-reviewed journals in digital marketing, entrepreneurial education, and small business competitiveness. These informed the development of interview protocols and analysis frameworks, permitting comparison, coherent and organized, between participant practice and theoretical frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Engagement Theory.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten student entrepreneurs who are currently operating digital-enabled businesses. Participants were chosen purposively to ensure that they met the criterion of active digital marketing use and had businesses that were already operational across various industries. Including food and beverages, daily consumer goods, hobby-based services, and handmade crafts. Participants were invited through class announcements and peer referrals, following qualitative necessities for information-rich case selection. The variation in business types enabled cross-sectoral learnings about customer engagement behaviors and digital channel usage preferences.

The interviews took 30 to 60 minutes, as per the convenience of participants, either in-person or via video calls online. The interview schedule covered entrepreneurial motivations, early adoption of the platforms, digital methods used (e.g. promotional postings, influencer collaborations, paid advertising), planning actions taken (e.g. editorial calendars or posting habits), sources of learning (formal training or

peer-based informal learning), problems encountered (technical or resource-based), perceived marketing outcomes, and institutional support from the university. Interviewers used probing techniques to obtain more detailed responses and altered question order based on the flow of conversation. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with no new conceptual insights forthcoming in later sessions.

To strengthen validity through triangulation, researchers conducted direct observations of each entrepreneur's digital presence. Public social media profiles and business communication via messaging apps were observed to note the frequency of posting, content formats (text, image, video), engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares), and brand consistency across platforms. Field notes documented both strategic considerations and aesthetic choices in content creation. Observational data complemented interview findings by offering behavioral data that could be analyzed alongside verbal accounts.

Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Data were thematically analyzed, using an inductive coding process. Researchers coded for recurring keywords and phrases, grouped codes, and synthesized emerging themes characterizing participants' digital tool selection, content creation strategies, implementation issues, business impact, and institutional support needs. To enhance analytic rigor, coding schemas were reviewed by multiple researchers and were refined iteratively through debate.

Ethical standards were rigorously followed throughout the research. The respondents were told the purpose of the research, how data would be handled, and their rights—such as the right to decline participation or withdraw at any point. Written informed consent was obtained from all the respondents. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription in order to ensure anonymity. Because the study did not involve vulnerable populations or sensitive personal data, it was not required to seek formal approval from the university's ethics board, according to institutional policy.

All raw data transcripts of interviews, observation records, and analytical notes—were kept on secure encrypted drives with access limited to the research team. These documents can be provided upon request for checking, replication, or further study. The instruments developed, including the interview guide and observation checklist, are non-proprietary and replicable and can be applied in future research. The methodological design offers nuanced qualitative insight into how student entrepreneurs innovatively and adaptively apply digital marketing strategies in their businesses, capturing both potential and constraints in contemporary youth-led enterprise development.

C. Result and Discussion

Among the key findings, a majority of student entrepreneurs saw digital marketing not just as a promotion medium but as a key business driver that raises awareness, establishes credibility, and generates sales. They started businesses while studying for various reasons – primarily financial independence, the ability to experiment with class learnings in practice, and taking local entrepreneurial opportunities. One of our respondents, who operates a pre-order homemade pudding business, related that she wanted "to earn my own income and make good use of my free time. Besides, I saw an opportunity because many people around me enjoy pudding as a refreshing and practical snack." Her use of Instagram and WhatsApp for customer coordination and product showcase has enabled her to grow her customer base beyond her immediate network, affirming the strong role of

free digital platforms in early-stage business expansion. Overall, our respondents leveraged free digital channels (e.g., social media accounts) to acquire initial customers and subsequently scaled up their outreach, as posited by previous research on student startups.

With regards to platform use, the students used a varied combination of digital platforms. WhatsApp Business was used extensively, particularly for pre-order organization and keeping in contact with repeat customers. Its immediacy and personal nature suited it to peer-to-peer selling to known networks.

Instagram was the most favored for product businesses. Its visual nature (posts, stories, reels) allows students to showcase their products in an appealing and interactive way, which aids in establishing engagement and brand identity. Another seller of handcrafted accessories underscored: "Instagram allowed me to reach customers beyond my campus, but WhatsApp is crucial in gaining the trust of repeat customers." Facebook was used by many students to tap into older age groups or specialized hobby communities, while TikTok was mentioned as a budding interest given its potential for virality among younger consumers. Several respondents indicated the hope to break beyond social media into e-commerce platforms like Shopee or Tokopedia, which aligns with scholarship highlighting the advantages of multi-platform approaches to microbusiness growth.

The majority of participants indicated a lack of formal digital marketing training; rather, they were mostly self-trained. They acquired skills through viewing online tutorials (particularly on YouTube), reading inspiring small business social media accounts, and sharing tips with colleagues. Some replicated marketing strategies of profitable nearby microbrands that they admired. Consequently, their technical skills commonly originated from experimentation through trial-and-error and not from classwork,

echoing research by Sunggara et al. (2024) that constrained digital literacy continues to hinder numerous small business owners. This disparity between theoretical learning and skills practice serves to emphasize the need for focused institutional intervention, as noted in Maghfiroh et al. (2024), who support campus-based digital marketing training.

Content creation and scheduling habits differed between the students. Several confessed that a lot of their posting was ad hoc – published whenever they had free time or felt creatively inspired. However, others took a more strategic route: they developed content calendars, scheduled product photoshoots in advance, and aligned posts with important dates such as payday cycles, holidays, or pre-order deadlines. The more organized students – especially those on Instagram – considered their grid aesthetics, caption style, and best times to post. For instance, the pudding-business owner discussed how she scheduled most posts in advance of her order windows but left space for the odd spontaneous post to keep her followers interested. These results are consistent with Sulistiyowati & Rahmawati's (2024) finding that visual presentation and regular content are key to maintaining engagement .

All respondents concurred that digital marketing had a quantifiable positive effect on their business. Several reported discernible jumps in sales volume, customer queries, and general brand recognition once they started posting regularly. Those who posted frequently and replied promptly to customer messages reaped the most rewards. In line with marketing theory, presence on multiple complementary channels also seemed beneficial: participants who combined Instagram with WhatsApp and/or Facebook tended to engage more customers than those using a single platform. These findings support the findings of Chasanah et al. (2021), who found multi-channel digital

presence to be an important predictor of microbusiness visibility and performance.

Still, the students also reported major challenges in maintaining their digital marketing activities. The most frequent challenge was time management. Juggling classes, product development, and marketing responsibilities was a constant challenge, resonating with Chasanah et al.'s (2021) findings on student entrepreneurs' dual-role pressures. Several interviewees reported that content design, caption writing, video editing, and responding to inquiries took much more time than anticipated. Technological limitations were another challenge: some students had older smartphones or limited data plans, which made it difficult to take high-quality photos or post regularly. Sustaining audience interest over time was also challenging for most, with several reporting plateauing follower growth or reduced post reach due to platform algorithms. Others reported "content fatigue," having insufficient inspiration or resources to develop new, attention-grabbing posts on a regular basis.

In terms of institutional support, most students reported that their university did not offer any specific instruction in digital marketing. Beyond general marketing theory in classes, they had had limited hands-on instruction in the use of social media or e-commerce platforms. Most indicated that they would be very interested in practical workshops on issues such as social media algorithms, paid online ads, and mobile content development. They also wanted the university to be able to provide subsidized access to premium design software or even photographer services – one student, for instance, specifically asked for mentorship from a digital marketing expert and subsidies for food photography in order to professionalize her content. These recommendations mirror calls in the literature for universities to incorporate more experiential digital skill development into

entrepreneurship education. In spite of these limitations, the students exhibited considerable resilience and innovativeness. They persisted with evolving platform features, sought feedback from customers, and identified innovative approaches to developing engaging content with minimal budgets. That they managed to balance business activities with maintaining academic work attests to a rising generation of entrepreneurs who are not only digitally literate but also entrepreneurially inclined. These observations portend considerable opportunities for universities to support student entrepreneurship through experiential digital-skill development, access to industry mentorship, and institutional support for student businesses.

D. Conclusion

This study has given an extensive overview of the way in which student entrepreneurs of the Commercial Administration Study Program are adopting and leveraging the concepts of digital marketing in a bid to develop the competitiveness and visibility of their businesses. From the qualitative examination of ten interviews and complementary observations, there is no doubt that student entrepreneurs are leading the way in making use of digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and even business websites on the internet. They not only use them to promote their products and services but also to develop an online presence, engage with customers, and experiment with content initiatives according to their market niches.

The study concludes that digital marketing has a direct and measurable impact on the success of student businesses. Students who were frequent posters on Instagram, for instance, experienced significant increases in engagement and sales inquiries, showing how ongoing visual storytelling develops brand awareness and

customer interaction. WhatsApp was particularly effective for retaining customers through personalized messaging, and Facebook provided access to niche audiences. Although fewer students had utilized TikTok or online shopping platforms like Shopee, those who were interested in scaling up indicated their potential to increase reach and customer base diversification. These findings confirm that the tactical utilization of more than one platform results in better key performance indicators (KPIs) like brand awareness, customer engagement, and sales conversion.

Despite such promising outcomes, students experience a series of problems that undermine their ability to optimize the utilization of digital marketing. Time management remains the greatest issue, as students have to balance school with creating content, dealing with customer service, and managing inventories. Not having access to good devices, stable internet, and paid advertising services also makes it difficult for them to compete. The lack of visual branding experience also prevents some from coming up with content on par with the professionalism of established digital brands. These findings stress the necessity for targeted support in closing design and strategy implementation gaps.

It is also interesting to note that most students acquired digital marketing competencies informally, from peer networks, online tutorials, and trial and error, reflecting a persistent divide between academic theory and practice. This gap implies the need for more structured, experiential training that equips students with platform-specific skills and prepares them for a rapidly evolving digital economy. Mentorship programs, workshops on algorithmic marketing, access to premium content creation software, and simulation-based training could significantly enhance their entrepreneurial performance and readiness.

Theoretical implications: This research contributes to digital entrepreneurship theory by highlighting how institutional support and digital literacy can drive the adoption and maximization of digital marketing strategies. It suggests a conceptual model in which platform-specific competencies, resource access, and mentorship are facilitators that fuel business competitiveness for student-led businesses. This model offers a foundation for subsequent research exploring how educational interventions can influence the scalability and sustainability of student startups within online marketplaces.

In conclusion, online marketing remains a primary driver of growth and success for student businesses. Through enabling the development of digital skills within formal programs, resource allocation, and industry collaboration, universities can be leaders in creating the next generation of business leaders. Equipped with the right tools, mentors, and experiential learning opportunities, student entrepreneurs are positioned to thrive in a digital economy and play an important role in contributing to local and national economic development.

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