

Marketing Challenges and Digital Marketing Strategies of Microentrepreneurs During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Digital marketing plays a pivotal role in expanding products and organizations, especially amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to analyze the marketing challenges faced by microentrepreneurs and how digital marketing strategies alleviated their businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thirty-one microentrepreneurs from the City of Imus, Cavite, participated in the study, providing information as to their demographic profiles, digital marketing strategies, and challenges encountered. The researchers employed purposive sampling and utilized a descriptive-correlational method to assess the relationship between digital marketing challenges and strategies. Questionnaires were distributed to the respondents through Facebook, Messenger, and Instagram, and data were analyzed using SPSS. Findings revealed limited issues related to product demand, loss of customers to competitors, or reaching target consumers, which may be attributed to the convenience and efficiency offered by digital marketing platforms. However, microentrepreneurs need to reassess their marketing approaches to address specific difficulties such as demand fluctuations, competitive pressures, and target consumer preferences. The correlation analysis revealed that there was no significant relationship between price and other variables of the study. However, a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.483$) was observed between platform and promotion, indicating that increased platform utilization is associated with higher levels of promotional activities. Furthermore, while demand showed weak positive correlations with promotion ($r = 0.039$) and price ($r = 0.150$), there was a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.564$) between demand and competitors, suggesting that heightened competition corresponds to increased demand.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Marketing Challenges, Online Media Platforms, Strategies, Microentrepreneurs, Asian Institute of Maritime Studies



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INTRODUCTION

Business plays an important role in the economy of a country. It offers people goods, services and jobs regardless of whether it is a large or a small company. A business creates jobs for people to produce goods and services and sell them to consumers. Today, the pandemic has caused massive damage to small businesses just weeks after it broke out (Bartik et al. 2020). In addition to its impact on public health, COVID-19 has caused significant economic impact that forces small businesses to discontinue.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2015), the country has always had chronic unemployment growth for the past four decades with an unemployment rate estimated at 7.7 percent in June 2021. Because of this challenge, Filipinos either seek employment overseas or set up micro-enterprises and choose to be self-employed entrepreneurs instead. Not only the

latter will provide an income to them, but it will also generate offers for job occupancy for at least 3-10 individuals. Despite the opportunity to put up a micro-enterprise, several challenges may come in the direction of micro-entrepreneurs. Challenges such as lack of social preparation, technical skills, inadequate access to productive resources, and difficulty in sustaining and growing the business (Lazo, 2015).

While Filipinos, in general, have always been passionate and resilient despite struggles and uncertainties, even with all the challenges being thrown, microentrepreneurs in the country are still pushing forward to retain and even create small businesses. However, with the current situation, about sixty percent of microentrepreneurs in the Philippines are now relying on technology to keep their ventures afloat because of the pandemic. Now, digital marketing has become more sought after by business owners because of its convenience

and accessibility during the lockdown. It is increasingly becoming an important source of competitive advantage for small businesses (Aguinaldo, 2020). Junusi (2020) indicated that digital marketing, primarily social media, has been declared to alter consumer behavior, with notable results for firms and brands. It has become an effective tool through the Internet that provides an opportunity for businesses that have limited capital to succeed as international marketers in the early stages of their development.

With the premises presented above, this study aims to explore the marketing challenges encountered by microentrepreneurs and determine their respective digital marketing strategies. It further explored on how digital marketing affected their businesses. Inferentially, the study also determined if their challenges were significantly related to their respective strategies.

LITERATURES

Digital Marketing: A Briefer. According to the American Marketing Association (n.d.), digital marketing refers to any marketing method conducted through electronic devices which utilize some form of a computer, including online marketing efforts conducted on the internet. In the process of conducting digital marketing, a business might leverage websites, search engines, blogs, social media, video, email and similar channels to reach customers. The rapid proliferation of digital marketing can be generally accounted to the advancement of technology where availability of digital products became rampant. Zoltners et al. (2020) articulated that the sales of digital products have been in a prolonged boom, with an increasing proportion of such sales being subscription-based (e.g. SaaS) or consumption-based (e.g. cloud services). This means that most value accrues over time as customers benefit from their purchase and continue and expand purchasing. With this very access, it led the society to be lured of its use and eventually became digital natives (DNs). Henceforth, as more informed customers shift power away from sellers and the ranks of DNs

grow (Zoltners et al., 2020), companies can respond strategically to thrive in this digital-laden society.

Digital Marketing for Microentrepreneurs. The influence of digital marketing on consumer behavior and brand perception is undeniable, with its impact extending across various industries, including tourism. Digital marketing, characterized by its use of digital technologies for targeted communication and customer engagement, has become an essential tool for businesses of all sizes (Kaur, 2017). However, challenges persist, particularly for micro-entrepreneurs, who face hurdles in effectively utilizing digital marketing strategies, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kit, n.d.).

Microfinance strategies, such as dynamic incentives, have shown promise in enhancing microcredit success, providing a means for small groups of individuals to access loans and engage in entrepreneurial activities (Kumar, 2015). Nevertheless, micro-entrepreneurs encounter obstacles in adopting digital marketing practices, including concerns about online security and the risk of fraud, which hinder their ability to leverage digital platforms effectively (Kit, n.d.).

Moreover, the location plays a significant role in shaping the opportunities and challenges faced by microentrepreneurs. Urban areas tend to offer better formalization and networking opportunities, whereas informal micro-entrepreneurs in regions like Mexico and Africa confront barriers such as limited access to capital, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of management experience (Drauschke, 2011).

Digital Marketing in the Philippines. In 2015, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported a total of 900,914 businesses operating in the country, with micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) comprising 99.5% (896,839) of the total, while large enterprises accounted for only 0.5% (4,075). The majority of MSMEs were engaged in wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, accommodation and food service activities,

manufacturing, and other service activities, collectively representing 87% of MSME establishments. The National Capital Region (NCR) housed the largest number of MSMEs, followed by Region 4-A (CALABARZON), Region 3 (Central Luzon), Region 7 (Central Visayas), and Region 1 (Ilocos), which together accounted for approximately 58.44% of all MSME establishments. MSMEs significantly contributed to employment generation, creating 4,784,870 jobs in 2015, comprising 61.6% of all jobs created by businesses that year, with micro-enterprises generating the most jobs at 29.4%, followed by small enterprises at 25.3%, and medium enterprises at 6.8%. Moreover, MSMEs played a crucial role in the country's export sector, contributing 25% to overall export earnings and accounting for 60% of all exporters in the Philippines through subcontracting with larger companies.

Lee-Del Rosario (2019) highlighted the opportunities and challenges of digital marketing in the Philippines, noting that customers now have greater access to information, emphasizing the importance of enhancing the customer journey, and meeting customer expectations for a unique and consistent experience. Viray (2018) echoed the significance of digital marketing advancements in the Philippines, supported by the country's increasing internet and social media usage, with Filipinos spending the highest average time on the internet and social media globally. However, Aruna (2015) pointed out that micro-enterprises face challenges such as limited access to banking finance, lack of appropriate technology, marketing issues, resource constraints, and shortage of skilled manpower, which hinder their ability to fully leverage digital marketing opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Design, Population and Sampling. Employing descriptive-correlation as design, and purposive sampling as technique in selecting the samples, the study outsourced 31 microentrepreneurs as respondents of the study with business operation at Imus, Cavite, Philippines. Existing microentrepreneurs were

specifically chosen to be the respondents of the study as they represent the micro-sized industries which have been affected by the Covid- 19 pandemic.

By profile, majority of the respondents were male (23 or 74.2%) under the age brackets of 16 to 25 years old (61.3%) and 16 to 20 years old (19.4%). In terms of industry, 9 (29%) operates under the accommodation and food industry, another 9 (29%) belongs to the e-commerce industry, and 7 (22.6%) from the wholesale and retail trade industry.

Instrumentation. A self-made instrument was used in eliciting the data of the study. Prior to the main questions, preliminary questions were reflected to elicit 3 profile variables: age, gender, and industry. Results of these variables were included in the population background. After this, the first part yields the marketing challenges faced by the respondents based on 3 aspects: demand, competitors, and target consumers. The second part aims to determine the marketing strategies implemented based on three areas: price, promotion, and platform. A 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree) was used to specifically measure the degree to which the experiences of the microentrepreneurs will be gauged.

Initial validation of the instrument was done by the Thesis Adviser while final review was undertaken by a Business Management Faculty and a Statistician. Refinements were made as a result of the validation. Lastly, the instrument was converted into an online questionnaire via Google Forms for practicality and convenience in gathering data.

Data Gathering. With the ongoing global pandemic, efforts to obtain necessary data were limited. Therefore, the researchers sent the online questionnaire to the corresponding microentrepreneurs through Facebook, Messenger, and Instagram. A preliminary cover letter was sent indicating the objectives of the study. It also includes statements on ethical considerations such as confidentiality of the results and anonymity of the respondents. They were given a number of days to answer the

close-ended questions. After the collection of data, the questionnaires were collated, tabulated, and submitted to the statistician for statistical treatment. The researchers then analyzed and interpreted the statistical results.

Data Analysis. Using SPSS (v28), the researchers analyzed the data utilizing the following statistical tools. Weighted mean was used to elicit the descriptive data relative to the marketing challenges and digital marketing strategies of the microentrepreneurs. On the other hand, Pearson Correlation Analysis was used to elicit if significant relationship exists between the marketing challenges and digital marketing strategies.

RESULTS

Marketing Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Demand. The results in Table 1 revealed that most respondents ($M = 4.16$) agree that it's hard to sell without social media, seeing its value for improving company image, aiding customer service, and facilitating word-of-mouth marketing. Additionally, they agree ($M = 3.90$) that bulk orders aren't a daily occurrence. Despite this, they disagree ($M = 2.55$) that their products lack demand, suggesting confidence despite moderate sales.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics on the Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Demand (N=31)

| | Indicators | Mean | Interpretation |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------|------|-------------------|
| 1 | I find it difficult to make a sale without social media. | 4.16 | Agree |
| 2 | I do not experience bulk orders every day. | 3.90 | Agree |
| 3 | I do not find my product in demand. | 2.55 | Disagree |
| 4 | I do not get my expected sales every day. | 3.48 | Agree |
| 5 | I do not believe digital marketing is in demand. | 1.71 | Strongly Disagree |
| | Average Weighted Mean | 3.16 | Moderately Agree |

Respondents also agree ($M = 3.48$) that daily sales expectations aren't always met, reflecting the challenges faced by small enterprises. Finally, the overall interpretation ($M = 3.16$) indicates a moderate agreement that demand poses a significant challenge for micro-entrepreneurs.

Marketing Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Competitors. Based on the findings in Table 2, respondents moderately agree ($M = 2.68$) that they lose customers due to highly competitive competitors. However, they strongly disagree ($M = 1.74$) that they are frequently compared negatively to competitors, suggesting a more positive perception of their brand.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics on the Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Competitors (N=31)

| | Indicators | Mean | Interpretation |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------------------|
| 6 | I lose customers because of highly competitive competitors. | 2.68 | Moderately Agree |
| 7 | I am often compared to my competitors negatively. | 1.74 | Strongly Disagree |
| 8 | I have plenty of competitors in the market where I sell the same product. | 4.13 | Agree |
| 9 | I do not have better digital marketing strategies unlike my competitors. | 2.35 | Disagree |
| 10 | I only use one digital platform to promote my products unlike my competitors. | 2.77 | Moderately Agree |
| | Average Weighted Mean | 2.74 | Moderately Agree |

Additionally, they disagree ($M = 2.35$) that their digital marketing strategies lag behind competitors', showing confidence in their approach. While they moderately agree ($M = 2.77$) that they use only one digital platform for promotion. Overall ($M=2.74$), micro-entrepreneurs perceive competition as a moderate challenge in their operations.

Marketing Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Consumers. The findings reflected in Table 3 reveal that respondents moderately agree ($M = 3.06$) that advertising based on customer demographics poses as a challenge due to varying preferences and trends. However, they disagree ($M = 2.42$) with the notion of having a limited consumer base within Imus, Cavite, indicating a diverse clientele. Similarly, they disagree ($M = 2.13$) with the idea of having few customers outside Imus, Cavite, suggesting a broader reach. Furthermore, they disagree ($M = 2.48$) that their location lacks advantage for customers. Overall ($M=2.41$), micro-entrepreneurs perceive consumer-related challenges in digital marketing as relatively low.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics on the Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Consumers (N=31)

| | Indicators | Mean | Interpretation |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------------------|
| 11 | I find it difficult to advertise my products/services based on my customers demographics. | 3.06 | Moderately Agree |
| 12 | I do not have a wide range of consumers within Imus, Cavite. | 2.42 | Disagree |
| 13 | I do not have much customers outside Imus, Cavite. | 2.13 | Disagree |
| 14 | I do not retain customers after their first purchase from me. | 1.94 | Disagree |
| 15 | I do not consider my location an advantage for my customers. | 2.48 | Disagree |
| | Average Weighted Mean | 2.41 | Disagree |

Digital Marketing Strategies Used by the Micro entrepreneurs in terms of Price. In Table 4, the result of offering different kinds of products or services at different prices, with a weighted mean of 4.48, shows that the respondents strongly agree that they particularly use such strategy. The consideration of overall production cost and markup also interpreted a strong agreement by the respondents with a 4.74 weighted mean. However, with a 3.16 weighted mean, respondents moderately agree that they adjust prices according to the reviews of their customers. This result might be borne out of fundamental concept that price must cover both costs and profits.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics on the Marketing Strategies Used by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Price (N=31)

| | Indicators | Mean | Interpretation |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------------------|
| 16 | I offer different kinds of products or services at a different price. | 4.48 | Strongly Agree |
| 17 | I consider overall production cost and markup to set my price for products/services. | 4.74 | Strongly Agree |
| 18 | I adjust my prices according to the reviews of my customers. | 3.16 | Moderately Agree |
| 19 | I bundle my products for a single price. | 3.58 | Agree |
| 20 | I create more value or quality to our product to justify our prices. | 4.77 | Strongly Agree |
| | Average Weighted Mean | 4.15 | Agree |

With an average weighted mean of 4.15, the respondents agree that price is one of the strategies microentrepreneurs utilize in terms of marketing.

Digital Marketing Strategies Used by the Microentrepreneurs in terms of Promotion. The respondents strongly agree with a weighted mean of 4.39 (Table 5) that they post promotions and discounts on social media of their products as one of their strategies. Excellent social

media marketing may push companies to new heights by developing loyal brand advocates and even generating leads and income. They also agree, with a 3.87 mean, that offering free delivery for consumers that live nearby is considered to be a strategy. The researchers believe that the respondents as well as the customers undoubtedly appreciate free delivery. Free delivery is a terrific way to attract new consumers. It can persuade fresh clients or customers' existing in the selling process to become regular clients. Though, it is not necessarily a primary strategy considered by the micro-entrepreneurs. The respondents agree (M=3.65) that they post their products/services with coupon and gift card offers through social media. Coupons may be used to attract new customers, boost existing customer engagement, and generate additional revenue for a business while digital coupons can be distributed through promotional announcements on a company's website and social media activity.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics on the Marketing Strategies Used by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Promotion (N=31)

| | Indicators | Mean | Interpretation |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------|
| 21 | I post promotions and discounts on social media for my products. | 4.39 | Strongly Agree |
| 22 | I offer free delivery for consumers who are in nearby areas. | 3.87 | Agree |
| 23 | I post my products/services, coupons, and gift cards through social media. | 3.65 | Agree |
| 24 | I give discounts and promotions of my products/services to my loyal consumer | 4.55 | Strongly Agree |
| 25 | I ask my consumers to post our product for extra promotion. | 3.74 | Agree |
| | Average Weighted Mean | 4.04 | Agree |

They also strongly agree to give discounts and promotions of their products/services to loyal customers with a 4.55 mean. Discounts may assist a company in growing its client base thus increasing sales; exploring targeted and seasonal approaches, as well as off-season promotions, may assist in determining which is best for the business. The respondents asked their consumers to post their product for an extra promotion which resulted in an agreement with a 3.74 mean. This may be because not every customer is actively posing in their social media account. Overall, respondents agree (M=4.04) that promotion is one of the strategies microentrepreneurs

utilize in terms of digital marketing. These suggest that the microentrepreneurs strongly agree about using social media and other online and remote platforms in their businesses and further agree that they have considered adjusting prices based on customer reviews or providing more quality to justify the prices. Moreover, this also indicates that they also agree about using different forms of promotions like free delivery and discounts among others. Many micro-entrepreneurs are leaning towards the efficiency and availability of digital marketing with almost all respondents agreeing that this is a strategy that seems to be effective in terms of price, platform, and promotion.

Digital Marketing Strategies Used by the Microentrepreneurs in terms of Platform. With an average weighted mean of 4.25, respondents agree that the platform is one of the strategies microentrepreneurs utilize in terms of digital marketing. The respondents strongly agree ($M=4.94$) that using different social media like Facebook, and Instagram, to post their products/services is an effective way to use when it comes to platform. The researchers believe that businesses may use social media to communicate directly with their target customers. Social media marketing is low-cost and provides brands with quick access to billions of active consumers. For these reasons, social media has proven to be one of the most efficient online marketing mediums not just for big companies but also for microentrepreneurs with not much funds for marketing and brand disposition.

In addition, respondents strongly agree that using social media as a platform attracts more consumers with a 4.97 mean. This result suggests that people may use social media to communicate with one another and decide what they want to buy. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and others make it simple for customers to see rapid product evaluations, how much a product costs, and what influencers recommend.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics on the the Marketing Strategies Used by Microentrepreneurs in terms of Platform (N=31)

| | Indicators | Mean | Interpretation |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------------------|
| 26 | I use different social media like Facebook, and Instagram, to post my products/services. | 4.94 | Strongly Agree |
| 27 | I find it very convenient to communicate with my consumers via Facebook, Messenger and Instagram. | 4.97 | Strongly Agree |
| 28 | I easily sell my products through Facebook live. | 2.77 | Moderately Agree |
| 29 | I use social media platform to attract more consumers. | 4.97 | Strongly Agree |
| 30 | I use other platforms such as Lazada and Shopee. | 3.61 | Agree |
| | Average Weighted Mean | 4.25 | Strongly Agree |

Lastly, respondents all agree that they use other platforms such as Lazada and Shopee with a 3.61 mean. Since it is a fierce e-commerce competition, both companies continue to provide tremendous sales and seller perks to gain market dominance. It is not surprising that microentrepreneurs lean towards these two platforms.

Relationship Between Marketing Challenges and Digital Marketing Strategies. In Table 7, results revealed that there is no correlation between price and any other variable in the study, as indicated by a lack of correlation coefficients in the price row/column. The correlation coefficient between platform and promotion is $r=0.483$, indicating a moderate positive correlation. This suggests that as the use of platforms for marketing increases, so does the implementation of promotional activities.

Table 7

Pearson's Correlation Statistics of Relationship Between Marketing Strategies Used and Challenges Faced by Microentrepreneurs (N= 31)

| | Price | Platform | Promotion | Demand | Competitors | Consumers |
|-------------|--------|----------|-----------|--------|-------------|-----------|
| Price | -- | | | | | |
| Platform | -0.172 | -- | | | | |
| Promotion | 0.045 | .483* | -- | | | |
| Demand | 0.150 | 0.117 | 0.039 | -- | | |
| Competitors | 0.108 | -0.134 | -0.184 | 0.564* | -- | |
| Consumers | -0.003 | -0.218 | -0.048 | 0.251 | 0.535* | -- |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Similarly, there is a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.483$) between promotion and platform, reinforcing the relationship between utilizing platforms for promotion. Demand

shows weak positive correlations with promotion ($r=0.039$) and price ($r=0.150$), indicating that as promotion and price increase, there is a slight increase in demand. However, these correlations are relatively weak. On the other hand, there is a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.564$) between competitors and demand, suggesting that as competition increases, there is a corresponding increase in demand. Additionally, there is a weak negative correlation ($r=-0.134$) between competitors and platform, implying that as competition increases, there may be a slight decrease in platform usage. Consumers exhibit weak positive correlations with demand ($r=0.251$) and competitors ($r=0.535$), indicating that as demand and competition increase, there is a slight increase in consumer engagement. However, there is a weak negative correlation ($r=-0.218$) between consumers and platform, suggesting that as platform usage increases, there may be a slight decrease in consumer engagement.

DISCUSSION

The study conducted on microentrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic found that respondents acknowledged the importance of adjusting prices based on customer reviews and delivering higher quality products to justify their value. Despite facing challenges posed by indefinite lockdowns in certain areas, microentrepreneurs demonstrated resilience and innovation in overcoming business and marketing barriers. The findings revealed limited issues related to product demand, loss of customers to competitors, or reaching target consumers, which may be attributed to the convenience and efficiency offered by digital marketing platforms. Consequently, the researchers concluded that the utilization of digital marketing would continue to be effective and evolve in the future.

The correlation analysis revealed that there was no significant relationship between price and other variables studied. However, a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.483$) was observed between platform and promotion, indicating that increased platform utilization is

associated with higher levels of promotional activities. Furthermore, while demand showed weak positive correlations with promotion ($r = 0.039$) and price ($r = 0.150$), there was a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.564$) between demand and competitors, suggesting that heightened competition corresponds to increased demand.

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