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Research Article

An Exploratory Study on Digital Marketing Strategies in Micro-Enterprises^a

İbrahim Alkara^b

Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this study is to determine the knowledge and usage status of micro enterprises regarding digital marketing applications, to identify the difficulties they face and to reveal their support needs. In addition, the challenges these businesses face in digital marketing, the tools they use most frequently, their performance measurement methods and their support needs were also examined.

Method: A qualitative exploratory-descriptive research design was employed in this study. The sample comprised 12 micro-enterprises in the Bozüyük district of Bilecik. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide administered to voluntary participants identified through purposive and snowball sampling.

Results or Findings: The findings indicate that all 12 micro-business representatives interviewed actively use digital marketing, although this usage is largely limited to social media platforms. The vast majority of participants prefer visually-oriented platforms, particularly 'Instagram', and view social media advertising as the cornerstone of digital marketing. Whilst this finding may indicate that digital marketing is replacing traditional marketing methods, it is evident that micro-businesses are operating without strategic depth in this area.

Discussion or Conclusion: The process by which micro-enterprises adopt digital marketing is progressing through a superficial engagement driven by necessity. For this reason, in order for micro-enterprises to remain effective by going beyond merely having a digital presence, it is vital that they are supported by an institutional training and support mechanism, rather than relying on individual initiative. Future research could contribute to the literature by using quantitative methods to test the impact of digital marketing investments on financial outcomes.

Keywords: digital marketing, micro business, qualitative research

JEL Codes: M10, M30, M31, M37

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^b Asst. Prof. Dr., Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University, Bozüyük Vocational School, Department of Marketing and Advertising, Bilecik/Türkiye, ibrahim.alkara@bilecik.edu.tr , ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8575-2524> (Corresponding Author)





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Araştırma Makalesi

Mikro İşletmelerde Dijital Pazarlama Stratejileri Üzerine Keşifsel Bir Araştırma^a

İbrahim Alkara^b

Öz

Giriş: Bu çalışma, mikro işletmelerin dijital pazarlama uygulamaları konusundaki bilgi düzeyini ve kullanım durumunu belirleyerek, karşılaştıkları zorlukları tespit etmek ve bu işletmelerin dijital pazarlama uygulama süreçlerinde en sık kullandıkları araçlar, performans ölçüm yöntemleri ve destek ihtiyaçlarını da belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Yöntem: Bu çalışmada nitel keşifsel-betimsel araştırma deseni kullanılmıştır. Örneklem, Bilecik'in Bozüyük ilçesindeki 12 mikro işletmeden oluşmaktadır. Veriler, amaçlı örnekleme ve kartopu örnekleme yaklaşımıyla belirlenen gönüllü katılımcılara yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme kılavuzu uygulanarak yüz yüze görüşmeler yoluyla elde edilmiştir.

Sonuçlar ya da Bulgular: Araştırma sonuçları, görüşmelere katılan 12 mikro işletme temsilcisinin tamamının dijital pazarlamayı aktif olarak kullandığını, ancak bu kullanımın büyük ölçüde sosyal medya platformlarıyla sınırlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğu görsel odaklı platformları, özellikle de "Instagram"ı tercih etmekte ve sosyal medya reklamcılığını dijital pazarlamanın temel taşı olarak görmektedir. Bu bulgu, dijital pazarlamanın geleneksel pazarlama yöntemlerinin yerini aldığını gösteriyor olsa da, mikro işletmelerin bu alanda stratejik bir derinlikten yoksun bir şekilde faaliyet gösterdiği belirlenmiştir.

Tartışma ya da Yapılan Çıkarımlar: Mikro işletmelerin dijital pazarlamayı benimseme süreci, zorunluluktan kaynaklanan yüzeysel bir katılımı ilerlemektedir. Bu nedenle, mikro işletmelerin yalnızca dijital ortamda var olmanın ötesine geçerek etkili kalabilmeleri için, bireysel inisiyatiflere güvenmek yerine kurumsal bir eğitim ve destek mekanizması tarafından desteklenmeleri hayati önem taşımaktadır. Gelecekteki araştırmalar, dijital pazarlama yatırımlarının finansal sonuçlar üzerindeki etkisini belirlemek için nicel yöntemler kullanarak literatüre katkı sağlayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: dijital pazarlama, mikro işletmeler, nitel araştırma

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^b Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Bilecik Şeyh Edebali Üniversitesi, Bozüyük MYO, Pazarlama ve Reklamcılık Bölümü, Bilecik/Türkiye, ibrahim.alkara@bilecik.edu.tr , ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8575-2524> (Sorumlu Yazar)



Introduction¹

In today's competitive business environment, digitalisation has become an increasingly important strategic consideration not only for large-scale companies but also for micro-enterprises struggling to survive on limited resources. Given the high costs and regional limitations associated with traditional marketing methods, digital marketing stands as a key tool that provides cost-effectiveness for small-scale businesses, enables direct customer interaction, and offers equal opportunities to overcome market barriers (Sharabati et al., 2024). In addition to these market barriers, the current technological revolution demands a significant restructuring of business operational efficiency, performance strategies, and client relationship networks (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022). Particularly for resource-constrained small business entities, adopting advanced information communication technologies (ICTs) through web-based networking channels has evolved from a simple option into an important tactical and strategic vehicle to ensure long-term viability (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022; Teixeira et al., 2018). Prior literature on organizational innovation adoption emphasizes that digital transformation requires small firms to deeply balance multi-dimensional determinants such as perceived industrial pressure, top management support, and expectation patterns against technological barriers (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022; Teixeira et al., 2018). Within this framework, integrating digital marketing channels serves as a strategic axis for micro-enterprises to optimize scarce resources, reduce coordination costs, and secure an efficient market positioning layout relative to large corporate entities (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022). Thus, the decision to engage in digital business environments is heavily moderated by the baseline capabilities of the entrepreneur to transform technical constraints into dynamic market opportunities (Teixeira et al., 2018).

However, despite the high potential offered by digital marketing, the extent to which micro-enterprises can adopt this process and how they manage it strategically remains a subject of debate in the literature. Recent research indicates that even when micro-enterprises in emerging markets enter digital channels, they are unable to fully integrate these tools into their long-term business plans due to a lack of technical know-how and digital literacy issues (Alharthey, 2023). Similarly, although digital technologies may be more cost-effective compared to traditional marketing, small businesses in particular may face challenges in adopting them, such as limited financial resources for investing in digital infrastructure and tools. Furthermore, they may lack the necessary knowledge and experience to select and implement digital solutions tailored to their specific needs (Zeitschel et al., 2022; Restrepo Morales et al., 2024).

Despite the potential offered by digital marketing, issues such as the extent to which micro-enterprises have adopted this process, the channels they use, and the challenges they face in this process have not been adequately addressed, particularly in the national literature. Adopting a qualitative exploratory-descriptive design, this study examines the digital marketing practices of micro-enterprises, the tools they use, the challenges they encounter, and their expectations for the future. The data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 micro-enterprises located in the Bozüyük district of Bilecik province. The study aims to fill a gap in the literature by identifying micro-enterprise owners' perspectives on digital marketing, the platforms and methods they commonly use, the time and knowledge constraints

¹ Permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University with the decision dated 19.11.2025 and document number 24/02

they face, and their strategic shortcomings. The conceptual framework section of the study explains digital marketing and its tools, followed by the literature review section, which provides examples from previous studies. The subsequent section outlines the methodology used in the research, and the findings section interprets the data obtained.

Conceptual Framework

Digital Marketing

The widespread adoption of the internet, coupled with the proliferation of fast, cost-effective communication channels and the ability to reach global audiences, has compelled marketing managers to fundamentally restructure their strategic frameworks (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Moving beyond traditional paradigms, digital marketing encompasses all promotional and transactional activities executed through interactive platforms, mobile applications, and interconnected digital networks (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Essentially, it represents a comprehensive approach that migrates core marketing processes into dynamic digital environments. In this context, the digital transformation of marketing operations is initiated through continuous web-based market research and consumer insight generation (Verhoef et al., 2021). Consequently, corporate digital ecosystems and web interfaces fulfill entire marketing functions—ranging from automated distribution management and dynamic pricing policies to customized after-sales services—within virtual environments (Ryan, 2020).

Digital platforms bypass traditional red tape, making business-to-consumer exchanges far more direct. This speed gives digitally agile firms a sharp edge: they enter new markets rapidly and capture untapped value (Stephen, 2016). When tied to E-CRM, the domain shifts from broad outreach to precise relationship building. As Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) conceptualize it, digital marketing is less about isolated channels and more about orchestrating digital touchpoints to pull in and keep high-value customers.

This perspective aligns closely with the foundational definition provided by Kannan and Li (2017), who argue that digital marketing has transitioned from a novel tactical term into an overarching, multidimensional concept. It encapsulates the holistic process of leveraging cutting-edge digital technologies to attract prospective buyers, establish strong brand preferences, promote corporate identity, cultivate long-term customer loyalty, and ultimately accelerate sales performance (Kannan & Li, 2017). Businesses that successfully integrate these digital strategies can project their offerings onto expansive global audiences at minimal operational costs, while simultaneously exploiting real-time customer feedback loops (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Driven by rapid technological velocity and the exponential rise of consumer reliance on mobile platforms, modern enterprises are systematically reallocating substantial proportions of their total marketing budgets away from legacy media and toward sophisticated digital marketing instruments (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2021).

In another definition provided by Kannan and Li (2017), digital marketing has evolved from a simple term at its inception into a comprehensive concept that describes the process of using digital technologies to attract customers, build brand preference, promote brands, foster customer loyalty and increase sales (Kannan & Li, 2017). Digital marketing also enables consumers with shared interests and views to form virtual communities. In this way, consumers can make their voices heard more effectively on digital platforms and come together to pool their strength. Furthermore, companies have now recognised the critical importance of establishing a ‘digital relationship’ with customers. Digital technologies and devices such as smartphones, smart products, the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence and deep

learning are expected to bring about significant transformations in consumers' lives in the near future (Kannan & Li, 2017; Alkara, 2020).

Unlike traditional brick-and-mortar approaches, digital marketing channels refer to internet-based systems capable of simultaneously creating, promoting, and delivering unique value from producers to consumers via interactive digital networks. The rapid evolution of fast and cost-effective online infrastructures has altered the way businesses discover, learn, and manage their strategic interfaces with target markets. In the contemporary digital economy, managing a corporate web presence enables small-scale operations to optimize scarce resources, reduce coordination costs, and secure an efficient market positioning layout relative to large corporate entities (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022). Furthermore, utilizing technology-based marketing strategies allows smaller businesses to target niche consumer segments with personalized content, thereby creating real-time interactive experiences that foster trust and customer retention without requiring heavy capital investments. Pereira et al. (2025) conducted a bibliometric analysis of 300 scientific articles examining customer loyalty and retention in the digital environment, finding that emerging technologies—including artificial intelligence and big data—significantly shape customer experience, trust, and engagement. Their findings indicate that personalization and digital innovation, rather than the scale of capital investment, emerge as the fundamental drivers of customer retention, offering businesses of any size strategic insights to strengthen their competitiveness in the digital marketplace (Pereira et al., 2025).

Digital Marketing Tools

Nowadays, digital marketing is carried out using a wide variety of tools. The most popular methods include social media marketing, e-mail marketing, mobile marketing, affiliate marketing, PPC advertising, search engine optimisation (SEO), display advertising, viral marketing and location-based digital marketing. These digital marketing tools are briefly summarised below under the following subheadings (Alkara, 2020).

Mobile Marketing

The Mobile Marketing Association (MMA) defines mobile marketing as "*a set of applications that enables organisations to establish interactive and relevant communication and engagement with their target audiences via any mobile device or network.*" Aydin-Gokgoz et al. (2022) traced how these vehicles have developed into essential tools for contemporary business communication and advertising over the past decade, enabling organizations to establish interactive engagement with their target markets through wireless networks. Drawing on a database of 178 articles published in leading marketing journals, their review demonstrates that as handheld smart devices and smartphone applications become integrated into consumers' daily lifestyles, mobile-oriented campaigns offer advertisers a highly persuasive and cost-effective vehicle to send direct responses, streamline internal operations, and connect with ideal clients regardless of time and place parameters, while also reshaping consumer-to-firm, firm-to-consumer, and firm-to-firm marketing relationships more broadly (Aydin-Gokgoz et al., 2022).

Social Media Marketing

With the advancement of information technology, social media has provided consumers with ease and convenience in communication in their daily lives, whilst also becoming the most effective and convenient communication tool for businesses in their corporate marketing activities. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram enable businesses to

reach potential customers from various demographic groups through corporate posts, regardless of time and place, to develop existing customer relationships and to acquire new customers (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Kotler and Keller (2016), on the other hand, describe it as "a platform where consumers can interactively share text, visual, video and audio content both with one another and with businesses" (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Alkara & Çalışkan, 2023). In summary, whilst socialising and self-expression are among the primary motivations for people's use of social media, there are also other objectives such as networking, accessing information and economic benefits (Kavak et al., 2020).

E-Mail Marketing

Companies use email to inform their customers and target audiences about their products, services, and other corporate developments. As Eze et al. (2021) note, e-mail marketing is an important digital marketing tool—particularly for micro-scale businesses—that enhances basic customer loyalty and makes it easier to offer special deals directly to the target audience.

Content Marketing

Content marketing encompasses systematic corporate efforts to create, distribute, and automate multimedia-focused, interactive brand content that directly addresses specific consumer questions. Du Plessis (2022) conducted a scoping review of twelve years of academic literature on content marketing's effect on online consumer behavior, synthesising evidence on how digital brand content—including blogs, infographics, and multimedia assets—shapes consumer engagement across various touchpoints. The review found that by leveraging innovative web-based assets and visual storytelling frameworks, this strategy effectively shifts the emphasis of market competition from intrusive advertising behaviours toward building reliable consumer relationships, fostering trust, and capturing high-quality organic prospects (Du Plessis, 2022).

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

SEO means improving the ranking of a web page in Internet by optimizing digital content to increase visibility, traffic, and brand authority across search engines. By optimizing web content, selecting relevant keywords, and building a robust backlink profile, micro-businesses can benefit from organic consumer searches; this allows them to direct highly interested prospects to the sections of their web platforms tailored to their target audience and enables them to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Kovalenko & Kuzmenko, 2020).

PPC Advertising

PPC (Pay-Per-Click) is a digital marketing tool in which advertisers design website advertising campaigns targeting specific audiences via other websites or search engines, and pay per click for the traffic generated. Rezaei et al. (2024) examined this tool empirically within a retail banking context, finding that PPC advertising enables advertisers to swiftly target specific customer segments, enhance online and localized visibility, schedule ads for particular times and places, and maintain better budget and cost control while generating immediate, measurable results. Their path analysis further revealed that customers' attitude toward PPC advertising significantly affects both their continuous search intentions and their intentions to use the advertised services, underscoring PPC's effectiveness as a performance-based digital marketing tool (Rezaei et al., 2024). Consequently, this mechanism provides resource-constrained small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with granular, real-time autonomy over the temporal distribution, messaging frequency, and operational budgetary thresholds of

their digital promotional campaigns, enabling them to maximize their market efficiency despite significant financial and human resource constraints (Ritz et al., 2019).

Display Ad

Display advertising involves the presentation of visual brand content—such as banners, images, and video—on third-party websites and applications, enabling firms to reach broad audiences through behavioral targeting (Bayer et al., 2020). As one of the most popular types of online advertising, display ads can target specific consumer characteristics to enhance advertising effectiveness. The first online advertisement was published in 1994 as an AT&T banner in HotWired magazine, at a time when there were approximately 30 million internet users (Wang et al., 2017). Display advertising utilise interactive tools, banners, visual formats, and short video structures to function as a virtual counterpart to traditional billboard advertising, across content-rich websites to capture consumer attention. Giombi et al. (2022) conducted a scoping systematic review of studies examining how interactive advertising features—including website banners, pop-ups, and social network ads—influence consumer engagement, recall, and comprehension. Their findings indicate that while interactive features can enhance consumer engagement, evidence regarding their effect on ad recall and comprehension remains mixed, suggesting that micro-enterprises must carefully calibrate interactivity levels when tailoring brand messaging to different consumer segments and communication channels in order to meaningfully improve baseline ad recall outcomes (Giombi et al., 2022).

Location-Based Digital Marketing

Location-based marketing utilizes advanced technological infrastructures to capture a consumer's real-time geographical position and behavioral data to deliver highly relatable, localized marketing notifications. Garcia (2022) explored this proximity-oriented approach through the development and evaluation of a geomarketing application employing geofencing technology, whereby immediate, context-specific commercial updates are transmitted directly to consumers' mobile devices when they enter predefined geographical target zones. The usability analysis revealed that while performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and hedonic motivation were significant factors driving user acceptance of such location-based marketing applications, businesses must also carefully manage issues related to security, privacy, advertisement relevancy, and notification overload in order to effectively transform the customer journey without alienating targeted consumers (Garcia, 2022).

Viral Marketing

Online marketplaces have rapidly transformed traditional sales methods through the interactive relationships offered by the internet. The development of the internet has altered the dynamics between source and recipient in communication, transforming consumers into active participants and making the process reciprocal and Kanna interactive. Dinh and Lee (2025) demonstrated that viral marketing leverages established social communication networks to promote exponential brand growth, product acceptance, and cost-effective message dissemination, finding that emotional engagement moderates the relationship between consumers' social and personal motivations and their participation in consumer online brand-related activities (COBRAs). By encouraging consumers to act as organic brand advocates who actively share their personal purchase experiences and product reviews online, this word-of-mouth strategy allows firms to trigger favorable customer behaviors, reduce marketing costs, and capture broad digital markets rapidly through authentic, emotionally resonant content (Dinh & Lee, 2025).

Literature Review

This section examines the concept of micro-enterprises and outlines the objectives and findings of previous international and national studies in this field.

Thirtawati et al. (2025) examined the marketing communication strategies of six agricultural social enterprises in Indonesia through a qualitative descriptive approach combining in-depth interviews with SWOT analysis. The findings revealed that limited funding and difficulties in sustaining customer engagement were the most significant barriers to effective marketing communication, while opportunities emerged through digital media utilization and stakeholder collaboration. The study further emphasized that social enterprises often struggle to move beyond ad-hoc, resource-constrained communication efforts toward a more strategic and consistent use of digital channels (Thirtawati et al., 2025).

Luo et al. (2025) employed a quantitative research design to examine the impact of short-form video content on consumer purchase intention on social media platforms, utilising structural equation modelling (SEM) via SPSS and AMOS. In the study, data collected via an online questionnaire from 372 Chinese consumers were analysed to test the effects of short video content characteristics—usefulness, ease of use, and entertainment—on consumer trust and purchase intention, drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework. The results of the analyses revealed that all three content characteristics significantly influenced both consumer trust and purchase intention, with entertainment emerging as a particularly strong driver of engagement on platforms such as TikTok and Douyin (Luo et al., 2025).

Fu et al. (2024) investigated the adoption of social media marketing among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and its impact on business performance, employing the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework. Survey data were collected from 508 SMEs in Indonesia and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. The findings revealed that technological factors—particularly perceived advantage, complexity, and cost—created notable hesitancy among SME owners toward adopting social media marketing. In contrast, organizational factors such as top management support and employee capability, together with environmental pressures from consumers and vendors, were found to significantly drive adoption (Fu et al., 2024).

Matosas-López (2024) examined whether customer engagement (CE) on social media can serve as a predictor of operating revenue among small and medium-sized enterprises, drawing on a sample of 100 Spanish SMEs analyzed over an eight-year period. Employing Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) time-series modeling, the study distinguished between enterprises managing their social media internally with non-specialized staff and those outsourcing this function to specialized professionals. The findings revealed that CE on social media could not reliably forecast operating revenue when social networks were managed internally by non-specialized personnel. However, when social media management was outsourced to specialists and combined with complementary digital marketing actions such as SEO, SEM, and email marketing, CE emerged as a significant predictor of revenue growth (Matosas-López, 2024).

Buvar and Gati (2023) examined the adoption processes of digital marketing tools among 181 micro-enterprises with limited resources in Hungary, using an online survey method within the framework of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The study also investigated the impact of external information sources (such as Facebook groups and blogs), which represent informal, problem-based learning methods, and the trust placed in digital marketing professionals on the use of digital tools. The data obtained were tested using

Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), and unlike other studies, no linear relationship was found between the ‘perceived ease of use’ and the ‘perceived usefulness’ of digital marketing tools. However, trust in digital marketing consultants and professionals was identified as the factor that most significantly accelerates adoption by making the technology perceived as both easier to use and more beneficial (Buvar and Gati, 2023).

Ritz et al. (2019) examined the motivations of small business managers to run their own digital marketing campaigns by integrating the ‘Do-It-Yourself (DIY)’ behaviour model with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Data from an online survey of 250 small business managers who manage their own promotional activities was analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The research found that the DIY model, developed for consumer behaviour, is also applicable to commercial activities. It was determined that businesses undertake these activities in-house because they find external professional services costly or because packaged services do not fully align with the business ethos; furthermore, a strong sense of control and a desire for self-development were found to be present during the execution of the process (Ritz et al., 2019).

Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) examined the current level of use, objectives and barriers to the use of digital marketing tools in SMEs in Finland using a mixed-methods research design. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 16 different marketing managers in the first phase was supported by quantitative data collected via an online survey from 421 SME representatives in the second phase. According to the results, despite the general prevalence of digitalisation, it was found that approximately 46% of SMEs admitted to misusing digital marketing. It was found that most businesses use social media as a one-way announcement tool rather than an interactive dialogue tool; time constraints, staff shortages and a lack of expertise were identified as the major internal barriers delaying technological integration (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

A review of the international literature reveals that research on digital marketing in micro-enterprises has primarily focused on topics such as the adoption of new technologies, integration with technological and digital developments, strategy development, and the measurement of performance success; it has been established that these studies have been unable to implement effective digital marketing strategies due to obstacles such as insufficient resources, inadequate levels of digital marketing knowledge, and the limited capabilities of businesses, preventing them from implementing effective digital marketing strategies. Subsequent studies have focused on the adoption of emerging digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and the various factors influencing them; however, recent research has been observed to focus more on the factors influencing digital marketing success in micro and small businesses, strategic improvements aimed at enhancing competitive strength, and specific methods used to achieve measurable results.

The contemporary strategic configuration of digital and interactive marketing capabilities within the micro-enterprise ecosystem often exhibits a highly reactive, superficial, and short-term operational posture (Eze et al., 2021). Because micro-scale operations are consistently bedeviled by acute financial limitations, poor institutional infrastructure, and gaps in technical know-how, these firms traditionally target digital platforms that promise instantaneous sales conversions or quick, low-cost customer interactions (Gao, 2025). Consequently, Gao (2025) enhanced the traditional Technology Acceptance Model by incorporating consumer engagement as a critical mediating construct—reflecting the resource constraints and rapidly evolving market conditions characteristic of firms in developing economies such as China and Kazakhstan. Empirical investigation using structural equation

modelling and regression analysis across 390 firms in these emerging countries revealed a highly fragmented outcome: while the implementation of digital marketing tools and investment in digital marketing technologies related directly and positively to business performance, the effect sizes for direct tool implementation remained comparatively modest, with consumer engagement and the resulting capacity for digital transformation emerging as far stronger and more consistent predictors of firm success than the mere adoption of any single marketing channel (Gao, 2025).

In particular, limited research has been found in the national literature in recent years that examines the experiences of micro-enterprises in digital marketing processes using a qualitative research approach. Unlike studies in the national literature, this study focuses on digital marketing processes in micro-enterprises. The primary aim of the study is to determine micro-enterprises' levels of digital marketing knowledge, the tools they use, their practices, and the challenges they face.

Method

Research Design, Sample and Data Collection Process

This study employed a qualitative exploratory-descriptive research design. Qualitative research is a process that centres on participants' perspectives, aims to uncover truths through in-depth analysis, and is conducted using techniques such as observation, interviews and document analysis. The main designs of qualitative research include narrative, ethnography, theory building, case study and phenomenology (Creswell, 2017). Sample sizes vary significantly depending on the design; for instance, Creswell suggests a range of 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological studies. In this study, the qualitative exploratory-descriptive research design was chosen in order to obtain valid data in line with the study objectives and purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed direct, in-depth experience regarding the phenomenon under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final sample comprised 12 participants. Given the qualitative, descriptive nature of the study and the rich, extensive narratives obtained from individual interviews, this group size was deemed adequate to achieve sufficient descriptive depth without imposing predetermined numerical thresholds (Malterud et al., 2016)

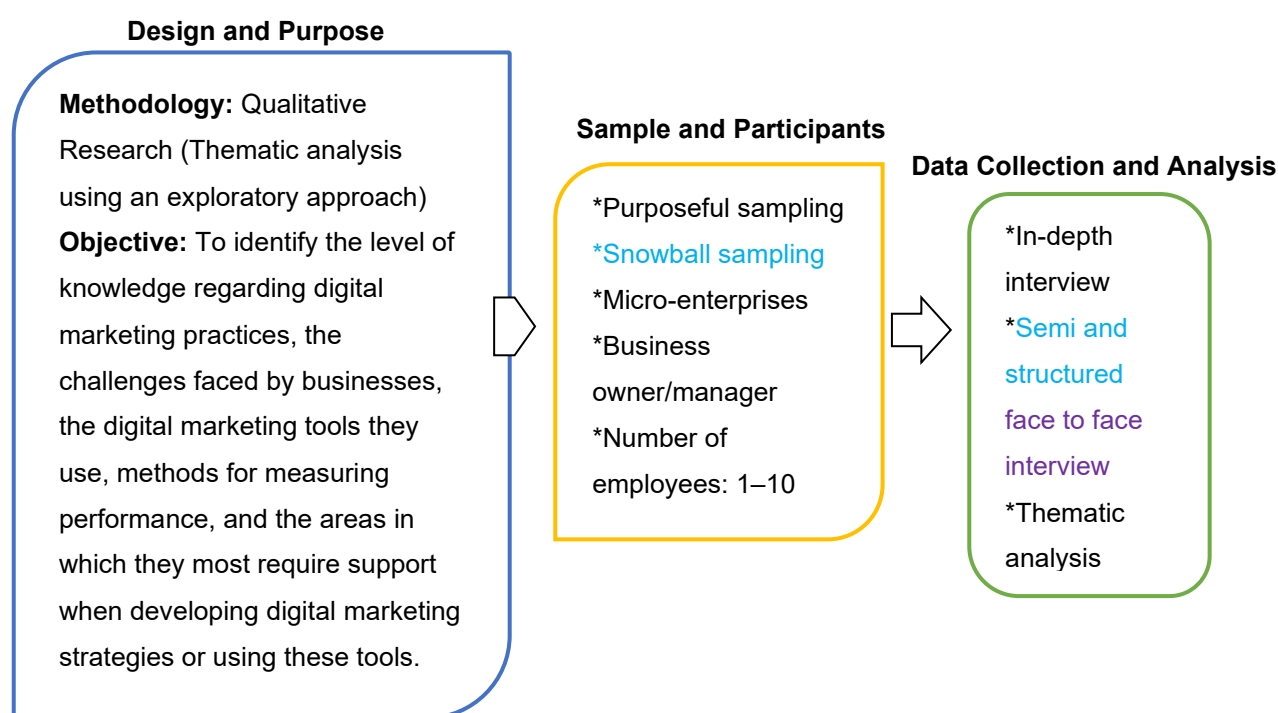
The research design has been structured around the defined research questions and theoretical framework; through the selected qualitative method, the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject under investigation by drawing on the participants' own experiences. In line with this, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to serve the research objective. In addition, closed-ended questions were asked separately in the interview guide to obtain current demographic information about the businesses. The flexible structure offered by this method enabled participants to express their views freely. Thanks to this design, which is fundamentally exploratory in nature whilst also possessing descriptive characteristics, comprehensive answers were sought to the research questions outlined below.

- What is the level of knowledge regarding digital marketing practices among micro-enterprises?
- Which digital marketing tools are most commonly used by micro-enterprises?
- What challenges do micro-enterprises face when implementing digital marketing processes?

- In which areas do micro-enterprises require the most support when developing digital marketing strategies and using digital marketing tools?
- How do micro-enterprises measure the effectiveness of the digital marketing strategies they implement?

Figure 1.

Research design



Note. This figure was created by the author via using Ms word software.

The sample for this study consists of 12 micro-enterprises in the Bozüyük district of Bilecik. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted with a semi-structured interview guide and Before taking part in the interview, the participants agreed to support the study by completing the informed consent forms. The research process is illustrated in Figure 1.

The study aims to reveal the levels of knowledge and usage of digital marketing among micro-scale businesses. Furthermore, the challenges these businesses face in digital marketing, the tools they use most frequently, their performance measurement methods, and their support needs were also examined. Although the topic of digital marketing is widely covered in the literature, the lack of studies focusing on micro-scale businesses is noteworthy.

Data Collection Process

Since snowball sampling method was used in this study as a data collection method, the permission has been obtained from Ethics Committee of the Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University with a decision on the date of 19.11.2025 and document number 24/02. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained before the

interviews. The data collection process was carried out between 20 November 2025 and 15 December 2025 through face-to-face interviews with businesses.

Each interview lasted between 50 and 75 minutes on average. Although micro-enterprises constituted the unit of analysis, 11 interviews were conducted with business owners and one interview was conducted with an employee representing the enterprise. As it was necessary for the business representatives taking part in the study to have sufficient knowledge of the business in order to answer the questions, interviews were conducted with business owners and employees who, on their behalf, possessed a sufficient level of knowledge about the business.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a deductive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytical stages. Initial themes were derived from the research questions, while additional patterns emerging from the data were considered during repeated readings of the transcripts. The analysis phase began with the careful listening to and transcription of the interview audio recordings; during this process, the statements were transcribed verbatim. To protect the participants' confidentiality, each was assigned a unique code number. In accordance with the research questions and the structure of the semi-structured interview form, a deductive approach was adopted, and the main themes were established prior to the analysis. Taking into account the volume of data and the scope of the study, and without the need to use any software packages, the transcribed texts were read repeatedly; the coding was conducted manually by the researcher. Following the initial coding, the transcripts and theme classifications were reviewed again to assess consistency between the raw data, codes, and themes. An audit trail documenting the coding and theme-development decisions was maintained to ensure the scientific validity and reliability of the research, the study did not rely on a single method; in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four fundamental criteria, strategies of member validation, detailed (thick) description, audit trail and reflexivity were integrated not only into the data collection and analysis stages but throughout the entire research process.

Validity and Reliability

The research process was conducted with great care, taking into account four fundamental elements (credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability) to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. In qualitative research, the primary aim is to explore in depth individuals' epistemological feelings, perceptions and the process of meaning-making (Kocaman, 2024). Participants' statements were supported by direct quotations, and interpretations were presented in a manner consistent with the data, thereby strengthening the reliability and credibility of the research in the study. These procedures were used to strengthen the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. Furthermore, the inclusion of participants from different sectors and with varying statuses has increased data diversity, thereby contributing to the clearer identification of common patterns and divergent experiences during the thematic analysis process. To enhance the transferability of the findings, the research setting, participant characteristics, data-collection process, and analytical procedures were described in detail to ensure that the findings can be transferred to other contexts. A 'participant interview table' was created to take into account the participants' micro-enterprises; sector, title, interview location, date and duration during the analysis process, and is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1*Characteristics of the Participants and Enterprises*

Companies interviewed	Sector and Title
P 1	Retail Jewellery, Business Owner
P 2	Retail (Clothing), Employee
P3	Retail, services (Stationery), Business owner
P4	Restaurant, café, business owner
P5	Retail (Silver Jewellery), Business owner
P6	Restaurant, café, business owner
P7	Restaurant, café, business owner
P8	Pet shop, business owner
P9	Pet shop, business owner
P10	Restaurant, café, business owner
P11	Service sector, Hairdresser, business owner
P12	Restaurant, café, business owner

Note. Created by the author using Ms Word software.

Findings

In this section of the study, the in-depth interviews conducted with businesses have been summarised under a total of four common themes and presented in tabular form. These are presented under the following headings: General Digital Marketing Profile of Micro-Enterprises; Use of Digital Marketing Platforms and Methods; Challenges Faced in Digital Marketing and Support Needs; and Content Strategies and Future Vision.

The General Demographic Profile and Business Profiles of the Participants

An analysis of the demographic characteristics of the business owners and the employee who participated in the interviews, representing the 12 micro-enterprises involved in the study, reveals that their ages range from 24 to 60. The majority of participants were business owners with staff numbers ranging from 1 to 10. Seven of the businesses were established before 2018, whilst five were established more recently (in 2022 or later). The main sectors in which they operate are classified as Restaurants/Cafes, Retail and Services. Statements regarding participant profiles and the purposes of digital marketing usage are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2*The Demographic Profile and General Digital Marketing Profile of Micro-Enterprises*

Partici pant	Age / Gender / Role	Sector	Year of Establis hment	Numb er of staff	Web site	Digital Marketing Objectives
P1	41/F/ Business Owner	Retail (Jewellery)	2012	1	No	Retaining existing customers
P2	42/M/Employee	Retail (Clothing)	2016	2	Yes	To increase sales
P3	60/M/Business Owner	Retail (Stationery)	2013	4	Yes	To increase brand awareness and sales
P4	35/M/ Business Owner	Restaurant/ Café	2018	3	Yes	To increase sales
P5	47/F/ Business Owner	Retail (Silver Jewellery)	2023	1	No	Brand awareness, increasing sales, customer loyalty, acquiring new customers
P6	32/M/ Business Owner	Restaurant/ Café	2023	2	No	To increase brand awareness
P7	35/M/ Business Owner	Restaurant/ Café	2023	1	Yes	To increase sales
P8	24/M/ Business Owner	Retail (Petshop)	2023	10	Yes	Brand awareness, increasing sales, customer loyalty, acquiring new customers
P9	48/F/ Business Owner	Retail (Petshop)	2010	2	No	Brand awareness, to boost sales
P10	37/M/ Business Owner	Restaurant/ Café	2022	8	No	To increase brand awareness
P11	38/F/ Business Owner	Retail	1997	5	Yes	Brand awareness, acquiring new customers, retaining existing customers
P12	59/M/ Business Owner	Restaurant/ Café	2009	1	No	Brand awareness, increasing sales, customer loyalty, acquiring new customers

Note.Created by the author using Ms. Word software.

Participants' Use of Digital Marketing and Their Strategies

During the interviews, participants were asked about their use of digital marketing and were then asked to select the channels they use most frequently. All participants stated that they use digital marketing. The most popular digital marketing platform used by businesses was

Instagram, which all 12 participants actively use. Instagram is followed by Facebook. Whilst the majority of participants do not use a website, those who do have a website generally stated that they also actively use social media platforms.

Table 3

The Most Popular Digital Marketing Platforms and Methods

Participant	Platforms Used	The Most Active Platform	Web site	The-Most Popular Methods	Email Marketing Usage
P1	Facebook, Instagram	Facebook	No	Social Media Advertising	No
P2	Facebook, Instagram, Google my Business	Instagram	yes	Social Media Advertising, Online Reviews	No
P3	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube	Instagram	yes	Social Media Advertising	No
P4	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter	Instagram	yes	Social Media Advertising, Online Reviews	No
P5	Instagram	Instagram	No	Social Media Advertising	No
P6	Instagram	Instagram	No	Social Media Advertising	No
P7	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	Instagram	yes	Social Media Advertising	No
P8	Facebook, Instagram	Instagram	yes	Social Media Advertising	No
P9	Instagram	Instagram	No	Social Media Advertising, Online Reviews	No
P10	Instagram	Instagram	No	Social Media Advertising	No
P11	Facebook, Instagram	Facebook	yes	Social Media Advertising, Online Reviews	No
P12	Instagram	Instagram	No	Social Media Advertising	No

Note. Created by the author using Ms. Word software.

As can be seen in Table 3, the digital marketing method most preferred by participants was ‘social media advertising’, with all 12 participants stating that they regarded social media advertising as the most important digital marketing method. This was followed in second place by online reviews and customer feedback. It was stated that email marketing, one of the oldest digital marketing tools, was not used by any of the participants.

Participants were also asked a separate question regarding their knowledge and usage of local SEO. Although all participants stated that local marketing is very important, it was found that they did not have sufficient knowledge of local SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) and Google My Business. For example, 11 out of 12 participants stated that they did not use local SEO. P6 emphasised just how low the level of knowledge on this subject was, saying, What is Google My Business? I’ve never heard of it before. Furthermore, in response to the question

“Do you need local SEO?”, P10 replied, We don’t need it. These findings regarding local SEO demonstrate that, micro-business owners recognise the importance of local awareness and visibility but yet they do not know which tools they should use or how they use them effectively.

Participants’ Challenges in Digital Marketing and an Assessment of Their Success

In the next section, participants were asked to describe the challenges they faced in their digital marketing activities, their support needs, and how they assessed their own performance. They were also asked whether they had set aside a specific budget for digital marketing activities. The participants’ responses are summarised in Table 4. In general, participants indicated that they had encountered various challenges. The most frequently cited challenges were:

- Lack of time: More than half of the participants stated that they were unable to allocate sufficient time to digital marketing.
- Lack of digital marketing knowledge: Approximately one-third of the participants have stated that they lack knowledge and strategy in this area.
- Challenges in content creation: It appears that creating regular and engaging content is a challenge. (Approximately one-third of the participants stated that “they struggled to produce content on a regular basis.”)
- Insufficient budget: Although there were participants who set aside a budget, the budget itself was cited as a source of difficulty. Only four of the participants (P3, P4, P7, and P8) indicated that they were able to regularly allocate a budget for digital marketing.

When participants in the field of digital marketing were asked to evaluate themselves in terms of success, the responses varied among participants. While 5 of the participants (P3,P4,P6,P7,P8) stated that they are progressing successfully, 3 (P2,P5,P12) said they think they are failing, and another 4 business (P1,P9,P10,P11) representatives responded they are undecided. This situation also suggests that micro-enterprises lack sufficient knowledge in measuring and evaluating their digital marketing implementation processes, assessing the effectiveness of their investments, and obtaining clear results.

As can be understood from the participants' statements, micro-enterprises indicated that they most need support in the following areas of digital marketing: Professional services (more than half of the participants) the majority of participants stated that they need professional agency or consultancy services; Secondly, while there is need for training and guidance; in third place were the representatives of the participating companies experiencing knowledge gaps emphasized the importance of training and guidance in this field and Software/tool support the need for tools and software that would facilitate digital marketing was also expressed.

Table 4*Challenges in Digital Marketing and Support Needs*

Participant	Challenges in Digital Marketing	Monthly Budget	Performance Review	Support Needs
P1	Do not have	Do not have	indecisive	Education and guidance
P2	lack of time	Do not have	Failed	Education and guidance
P3	lack of time	5,000 TL and over	Successful	Professional services
P4	The difficulty of creating content, Lack of time	500-1500 TL	Successful	Professional services, Software/tool support
P5	Difficulty in reaching the target audience	Do not have	Failed	Professional services
P6	Lack of information, lack of time	Do not have	Successful	Education and guidance
P7	Not enough time	1500-5000 TL	Successful	Professional services
P8	Lack of time, difficulty in reaching the target audience	5,000 TL and over	Successful	Training and guidance, Software/tool support
P9	Insufficient budget	Do not have	indecisive	Professional services, Budget increase
P10	Insufficient budget, lack of information, difficulty in producing content	Do not have	indecisive	Education and guidance
P11	Insufficient budget, lack of information, difficulty in producing content	Do not have	indecisive	Education and guidance, Professional services
P12	Difficulty in reaching the target audience, Difficulty in producing content	Do not have	Failed	Training, Professional services, Software support

Note.Created by the author using Ms. Word software.

5 of the 12 businesses participating in the research consist of newly established businesses founded between 2022 and 2023. The perspectives of these new businesses toward digital marketing differ from those of more established ones. For example:

- Businesses established in 2023, such as P5 and P6, stated that they have allocated no budget at all for digital marketing.
- In contrast, businesses also founded in 2023 and operating in similar sectors (Restaurant/Café and Services), such as P7 and P8, allocate monthly budgets of 1,500–5,000 TL and above 5,000 TL, respectively.

This situation demonstrates that digital marketing has not yet become a standardized investment item among new businesses, and that the decision to allocate a budget depends on the personal initiative and vision of the business owner.

Participants' Content Strategies and Vision for the Future

Participants were asked about topics covering their content strategies and future visions in the subsequent questions. Looking at social media content strategies, 7 of the 12 participants stated that (P2,P3,P4,P5,P7,P8,P12) product promotions are the content that receives the most engagement. Customer reviews/feedback also stand out as an important source of engagement (P1,P4,P6,P7,P8,P9,P11). Regarding content creation, (P2,P4,P5,P7,P9,P11,P12) 7 of the participants indicated that they experience difficulties, 4 of the participants (P2,P9,P11,P12) stated that they occasionally face challenges, and 4 of the participants (P1,P3,P6,P8) (reported having no problems at all. In terms of social media advertising, 4 of participants (P3,P4,P7,P8) are actively running ads, while 5 of participants (P2,P5,P9,P11,P12) stated that they have not yet advertised but they are considering trying it in the future. 3 of participants (P1, P6, P10) stated that they had no experience with social media advertising and did not plan to run ads in the future. The expressions used and answers given by the businesses regarding questions about their content strategies and future visions are presented below in Table 5.

Table 5

Content Strategies and Future Vision

Participant	Content Creation Challenges	Most Engaging Content	Social Media Ads	Lack of Growth on Social Media	Future Plans
P1	No	Customer Reviews	No experience, not interested	Regular content sharing	No changes are planned
P2	Sometimes	Product presentations	No experience, but willing to give it a go	Regular content sharing	A budget increase is planned
P3	No	Product presentations	Use Ads regularly	Advertising budget	Revising the digital strategy
P4	Yes	Product presentations, Customer reviews	Use Ads regularly	Not enough time	Revising the digital strategy
P5	Yes	Product presentations	No experience, but willing to give it a go	Regular content sharing	No changes are planned
P6	No	Customer Reviews	No experience, not interested	Regular content sharing	No changes are planned
P7	Yes	Product presentations, Customer reviews	Use Ads regularly	Not enough time	Revising the digital strategy
P8	No	Product presentations, Customer reviews	Use Ads regularly	Sufficient interaction	Being active on different platforms
P9	Sometimes	Customer Reviews	No experience, but willing to give it a go	Regular content, Advertising budget	Being active on different platforms

P10	Yes	No answer	No experience, not interested	Regular content, Advertising budget, Sufficient engagement	No changes are planned
P11	Sometimes	Customer Reviews	No experience, but willing to give it a go	Regular content, Advertising budget	Being active on different platforms
P12	Sometimes	Product presentations	No experience, but willing to give it a go	Not enough time	Being active on different platforms, Revising the digital strategy

Note.Created by the author using Ms. Word software.

Looking at their future goals, 4 of the participants stated that “they have no changes planning in near future (P1,P5,P6,P10); the other 8 participants (P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12) plan to change their digital marketing strategies. In addition, four of these businesses (P8, P9, P11, P12) aim to be active on different platforms.

Discussion and Limitations

Discussion

When compared to studies based on SMEs’ digital marketing practices within the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework, the findings of this study are generally consistent. While previous studies have shown that perceived ease of use and perceived benefits are key determinants of technology adoption, this study found that participants’ perception of Instagram as a digital marketing tool and their active use of it indicated a high perceived ease of use. However, the study also revealed that email and local SEO were not used for marketing purposes, and that the perceived benefits of more complex tools remained limited among participants. This finding supports the results of a study by Alharthey (2023) conducted on micro-enterprises in emerging markets.

From a Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) perspective, the technological barriers (inadequate digital literacy), organisational constraints (time, budget, single-person operations), and environmental factors (limited peer adoption within the district) identified in this study collectively explain why adoption remains confined to low-complexity, high-visibility platforms. This resonates with Zeitschel et al. (2022), who found that cost sensitivity and knowledge gaps remain persistent adoption barriers for micro-firms regardless of geographic context.

The thoughts and opinions of business representatives participating in the study regarding digital marketing reflect a needs-based approach rather than an opportunity-based one, as seen in the study by Restrepo Morales et al. (2024). However, the findings of the study suggest that, in order to develop and implement a more strategic approach to digital marketing in micro-enterprises located in relatively smaller regions, not only must individual capacities be developed, but institutional and structural support may also be necessary.

Limitations

There are various limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the findings of this study. As the sample consists of micro-businesses from the Bozüyük district of Bilecik province, this may create selection bias because the participating businesses may not

represent all micro-enterprises in Bozüyük. The findings are context-specific and are not intended for statistical generalisation. However, the detailed description of the research setting and participant characteristics may help readers assess their potential transferability to similar contexts. In addition, the data obtained through interviews is based on the responses to the questions provided by the business owners or an employee representing the participating enterprise. It has not been possible to verify the data using other sources. This situation limits internal triangulation. Another limitation of the study is the sample size. Whilst a sample size of 12 businesses may be sufficient for a qualitative study with an exploratory aim, it is not possible to generalise the findings.

Conclusion

This research offers an in-depth account of the digital marketing experiences of micro-enterprises, spanning their current practices, operational dynamics, and lived experiences. The findings reveal that all 12 micro-enterprise participants actively engage with digital marketing. But this adoption is predominantly confined to social media platforms (especially Instagram). The vast majority of participants exhibit a strong preference for visually oriented channels, particularly Instagram, appearing to associate digital marketing predominantly with social media advertising. Although this shift indicates that digital avenues are supplementing traditional marketing methods, it simultaneously underscores an important limitation: micro-enterprises operate without strategic depth or long-term planning. This pattern is shaped by well-defined internal barriers: insufficient time, notable gaps in specialized knowledge in specialized knowledge, and inadequate budget allocation. Excessive daily workloads prevent micro-enterprises from sustaining consistent efforts, resulting in irregular content deployment and tactical improvisation, while half of the participants lack a dedicated budget and the rest operate under tight financial constraints. These findings are consistent with the existing literature on the resource constraints faced by micro-enterprises. This narrow perception also impedes the development of robust omni-channel strategies, despite recent emphasis by Febriani et al. (2025), who demonstrated that even when MSMEs recognize the strategic value of integrating online and offline channels, limited resources and managerial capacity constrain their ability to progress beyond fragmented, early-stage omnichannel adoption.

Perhaps the most striking finding concerns what micro-enterprises do not use. Low-cost, high-return channels remain almost entirely absent from their repertoire: eleven of the twelve participants had made no attempt at local SEO (Search Engine Optimization), and not a single participant had ever run an email marketing campaign. This limited engagement indicates that micro-enterprises equate popular, consumer-facing platforms with the digital marketing ecosystem as a whole, leaving instruments that are decisive for competitiveness in localized markets largely unused. The pattern points less to deliberate strategic choice than to restricted technical know-how and digital literacy—an interpretation reinforced by the dual bottlenecks of limited time and limited expertise, which closely mirror the internal organizational barriers reported by Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015).

When contextualized within the specific socio-economic landscape of the Bozüyük district in Bilecik, these empirical insights underscore a broader phenomenon documented across the SME literature: a relatively limited and necessity-driven form of digital engagement rather than a knowledge-based strategic posture. This is reflected in a discernible hesitancy among SMEs to adopt social media marketing strategies, driven primarily by technological apprehensions concerning perceived advantage, complexity, and cost (Fu et al., 2024). This pattern reinforces international evidence concerning small-scale structures in peripheral or non-metropolitan settings, where perceived cost remains a significant negative predictor of the

intention to adopt social media marketing (Abbasi et al., 2022). In these rural or semi-urban environments, smaller firms overwhelmingly rely on scarce, internal human resources to manage digital activities. Structurally, organizational performance in SMEs has been shown to depend heavily on knowledge management capability, financial literacy, and problem-solving skills that are typically in short supply among small, resource-constrained firms. These dynamics align with broader findings that digital marketing capabilities carry significant value relevance for firm performance (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022), underscoring why superficial, low-capability digital engagement prevents firms from converting visual traffic into premium sales conversion rates or sustainable brand awareness.

Moving micro-enterprises from a passive digital presence to genuine digital performance may require a gradual shift from individual improvisation to structural support. Regional policymakers, chambers of commerce, and development agencies should therefore carefully develop low-cost digital literacy training and technical advisory services tailored to the constraints of rural enterprises. Future research could extend these findings through longitudinal, cross-sectoral studies that quantify the returns of local SEO and comparable low-cost tools, and could examine how—or whether—micro-enterprises measure and evaluate their digital marketing investments over time.

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T.C.
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Belge Takip Adresi : <https://www.turkiye.gov.tr/bilecik-seyh-edebali-universitesi-ebys>

Adres:Bilecik Şeyh Edebali Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü 11030 Bilecik

Telefon:0228 214 10 22 Faks:0228 214 10 17

e-Posta:ozelkalem@bilecik.edu.tr Web:bilecik.edu.tr

Keş Adresi:bsen@b01.kep.tr

Bilgi için: Sevgi İSAOĞLU
Unvanı: Büro Personeli



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