

Digital Marketing Strategies for Agribusiness SMEs in Enhancing Competitiveness and Consumer Purchase Decisions: A Phenomenological Study in Nganjuk Regency

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how digital marketing helps agricultural MSMEs in Nganjuk Regency become more competitive and influence consumer purchasing decisions. Interviews, observations, and documentation were used in a qualitative method with a phenomenological design. The results show that digital marketing may boost consumer trust, broaden market reach, improve product visibility, and boost company competitiveness. However, there are still issues with its implementation, including a lack of human resources and insufficient computer literacy. As a result, digital marketing transformation—achieved through ongoing processes of adaptation, learning, and the development of digital competencies—emerges as a critical approach for the sustainability of agribusiness MSMEs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing operations in a number of industries, including agribusiness, have changed as a result of the digital economic revolution. Promotional, communicative, and transactional procedures may now be carried out more quickly and effectively across geographical borders because to developments in information technology, the internet, and social media. Consumer behavior has changed in tandem with these developments, with customers depending more and more on digital platforms to research products, compare costs, read reviews, and make purchases. As a result, companies are shifting away from traditional marketing and toward using a variety of digital platforms as their main tactic to increase their competitiveness.

An essential component of Indonesia's economy is the Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprise (MSME) sector. The Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs reports that MSMEs employ more than 97% of the workforce and contribute about 61% of the country's GDP. However, there are still a number of obstacles in the way of MSMEs' digital transformation. Although around 27 million MSMEs have joined the digital ecosystem, according to the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2024), this number is less than half of all MSMEs in the country. This suggests that there are still barriers to digital technology adoption, especially with relation to digital competency, marketing tactics, and the best use of digital platforms.

East Java Province's Nganjuk Regency has a lot of potential for agribusiness. Along with a variety of processed agricultural goods, key commodities like shallots, chili peppers, rice, and corn support the local economy and provide a means of subsistence for the people. The expansion of the horticulture, agricultural product, and food processing industries presents significant chances to increase value through digital marketing. Preliminary findings, however, show that the majority of business owners still only use digital media sparingly, mostly for simple marketing. Products cannot reach their full competitive potential due to the lack of integration across activities including content management, marketplace utilization, social media optimization, consumer behavior analysis, and customer relationship building.

The expansion of small enterprises is positively impacted by digital marketing, according to several earlier research. According to Fakhriyyah et al., (2022) digital media can help increase product visibility and market reach. Additionally, (Mofokeng, 2023) clarify that the success of marketing strategies is determined by the quality of digital communication since customer trust in digital information is a critical component influencing purchasing decisions. According to research by Wartiningsih et al., (2024) digital transformation is a change in corporate strategy that includes customer management, business model innovation, and value generation using digital platforms. It goes beyond simply adopting new technologies. However, Setiadi & Sulandjari, (2026) an organization's capacity to create interesting content, improve consumer interaction, and use social media analytics as a foundation for better marketing decision-making determines the effectiveness of a digital marketing plan. These results show that the capacity of business owners to combine technology with customer-focused marketing techniques determines the success of a digital strategy rather than just the existence of digital media.

However, there are still certain restrictions on earlier research. First, the majority of research has used a quantitative methodology that focuses on examining correlations between variables, which has prevented it from offering a thorough explanation of how business owners develop, implement, and understand digital marketing strategies within their everyday operational contexts. Second, prior studies have typically concentrated on a single factor—such as higher sales, customer loyalty, or purchase decisions—without taking into account how these tactics also boost company competitiveness. Thirdly, the majority of research has been on the MSME sector as a whole; as a result, less attention has been paid to the particular traits of agribusiness, such as the perishable nature of goods, seasonality, price swings, and distinctive supply chains. Additionally, there is still a dearth of study specifically looking at how agribusiness MSMEs in Nganjuk Regency use digital marketing tactics.

In light of these circumstances, our work provides uniqueness in three important areas. First, it provides a more thorough insight than earlier studies that looked at these areas separately by combining the research of digital marketing tactics, corporate competitiveness enhancement, and consumer purchase decisions into a single analytical framework. Second, the study provides a more focused contextual knowledge by concentrating on the agricultural sector in Nganjuk Regency, which has features that set it apart from other MSME sectors. Third, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the digital transformation process inside agribusinesses, it uses a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences, meanings, and tactics produced by business owners in embracing digital marketing.

Because this study aims to understand how business owners interpret digital transformation, navigate various challenges, formulate strategies, and adapt to changing consumer behaviors in addition to determining whether digital marketing influences competitiveness or purchasing decisions, a phenomenological approach was chosen. By using this strategy, the researcher can obtain a more

thorough knowledge of the subjective experiences of the business owners—insights that are challenging to obtain through quantitative methods. This justification leads to the following study questions: (1) how Nganjuk Regency agribusinesses use digital marketing tactics; (2) how these methods improve business competitiveness; and (3) how their implementation affects customer purchasing decisions. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how digital marketing tactics are implemented, comprehend how they increase corporate competitiveness, and investigate how they affect customer purchasing decisions in the agriculture sector in the era of the digital economy. Theoretically, by using a phenomenological lens, this research should enhance the study of digital marketing change in the agriculture sector. In practical terms, the results are meant to provide a basis for stakeholders, local government, and business owners to create more efficient, flexible, and long-lasting digital marketing development strategies.

2. METHODS

In order to improve business competitiveness and impact customer purchasing decisions in the digital economy era, agribusiness MSMEs have used digital marketing tactics. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. Because the study aims to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and tactics of MSME operators, a qualitative approach was used. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research seeks to investigate and comprehend the interpretations that people or groups make of a social occurrence. The core of the business owners' actual experiences incorporating digital marketing methods into their operations is revealed through the application of the phenomenological approach.

The agribusiness MSMEs in Nganjuk Regency, East Java Province, were specifically chosen for the study because of the area's standing as a hotspot for agribusiness with quick adoption of digital platforms. Purposive sampling, which involves choosing informants based on particular standards in line with the study's goals, was used to choose the informants (Sugiyono, 2023). The requirements were as follows: (1) MSMEs in the agriculture sector that have been in business for at least two years; (2) active use of digital media for marketing, such as social media, marketplaces, or instant messaging apps; and (3) direct participation in marketing decision-making. In accordance with the data saturation principle, which states that data gathering ends when information becomes repetitive and produces no new topics, the number of informants was chosen at 8–12 MSME operators (Moleong, 2021).

2.1. Data Gathering Methods

Three main methods were used to gather data in order to guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the information (Yin, 2018) :

- a. In-depth Interviews: These are semi-structured interviews that provide informants freedom to tell their stories. In order to capture the real-world environment, each interview lasted 45 to 90 minutes and was done in person (or online, if needed) at the informant's place of business. With the informant's permission, audio recordings of the interviews were made, and they were then verbatim transcribed.
- b. Observation: Using a non-participant observation approach, the study examined the informants' digital marketing initiatives and the interactions between MSMEs and customers in both digital and physical venues (outlets/business locations).
- c. Documentation: Gathering supporting information, such as images of marketing campaigns, digital sales reports (if accessible), social media posts, and business profile documents.

2.2. Thematic Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted inductively using a thematic analysis technique that follows these systematic steps (Miles & Saldana, 2014) :

- a. Data Reduction: All interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were collected, then selected, focused, and simplified by discarding irrelevant data.

- b. Data Display: The reduced data were organized into narrative or matrix formats to facilitate understanding of the relationships between data points.
- c. Coding: The process of assigning labels to data segments to identify key concepts emerging from the informants' experiences.
- d. Theme Identification: Sorting codes into main themes that capture the essence or patterns of the digital marketing tactics being used.
- e. Drawing Conclusions: To solve the research challenge, a final synthesis of the topics found.

2.3. Validation and Validity of Data

The following stringent validation techniques are used in this work to guarantee credibility, reliability, and confirmability:

- a. Source triangulation: contrasting observational and documentary data with interview findings from several sources.
- b. Methodological Triangulation: Data from observations, interviews, and documents are compared to confirm information. The researcher confirms the information with the informants if there are any differences.
- c. Member checking: To make sure the researcher's interpretations match the informants' objectives and experiences, the researcher gives the informants transcripts or summaries of the analysis results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- d. Audit Trail: In order to trace and scientifically validate the complete analytical path, the researcher records every step of the research process, from field notes and interview question drafts to the coding procedure.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Using Digital Marketing Transformation as an Agribusiness MSMEs Adaptation Strategy

According to the research findings, digital marketing is seen by agricultural MSME operators as an essential adaptation strategy for maintaining business continuity in the era of the digital economy. They see the move to digital marketing as a strategy to adjust to changing customer behavior and escalating company competition rather than just a change in promotional media. Prior to using digital media, almost all of the informants said that their marketing relied on local networks, word-of-mouth, and regular clients, which led to comparatively slow business growth.

According to one informant:

"In the past, the majority of buyers were either personal acquaintances or from the local market. Orders from beyond the district and even from outside Nganjuk Regency began to arrive when they became active on Facebook and WhatsApp Business. "Nowadays, people are more likely to make inquiries via social media than to visit in person."

Observations demonstrating that most business owners have used social media as a digital showroom support this claim. Photos, brief movies, and digital catalogs are used to highlight products, giving prospective buyers access to information without physically visiting the company's location. This change shows how one-way communication has given way to more interactive engagement between producers and consumers as a result of digital media.

This experience indicates a change in the way business owners view marketing initiatives from a phenomenological standpoint. At first, digital media was only thought of as an additional marketing tool. But as they gained experience interacting with consumers online, business owners realized that building long-term relationships, communication, and trust are more important for marketing success than just selling things. In other words, there is a mental shift occurring in addition to a technological one.

The informants view the evolution of digital marketing as a process of adjusting to evolving consumer behaviors, particularly the growing dependence on digital technology for information

seeking, product comparison, and purchase, as well as a change in promotional media from traditional to digital channels. This experience shows that as agribusiness MSMEs navigate an increasingly competitive economic climate, digital marketing has become an essential part of their business plans. These results are consistent with study by Verhoef et al., (2019) which defines digital transformation as an organizational adaption process that uses digital technology to preserve competitiveness, increase efficiency, and create value. As a result, marketing efforts are now aimed at providing customer experiences rather than just product sales. This change in focus suggests that the marketing paradigm has shifted from product-oriented to customer-oriented due to digital revolution.

These results suggest that the capacity of business owners to use digital marketing platforms to cultivate client relationships is more important for success than the quantity of platforms utilized. As a result, digital transformation in agriculture MSMEs is an adaptation process that incorporates organizational learning, changes in marketing behavior, and technology advancements all at once. Research from Saputra et al., (2023), which also shows that the use of digital marketing improves market access and promotional efficacy, supports these conclusions.

3.2. How Digital Marketing Helps Agribusiness MSMEs Become More Competitive

According to this report, agricultural MSMEs' competitiveness is greatly increased by digital marketing. This development is demonstrated not just by an expanding client base or market reach, but also by business owners' enhanced capacity to react quickly to changes in the market. Additionally, by using digital marketing instead of expensive traditional marketing channels, agro MSMEs can more rapidly and successfully launch products to consumers.

According to one informant:

"We used to need to attend trade exhibitions to promote our products, but these days it's sufficient to only upload information on a regular basis and reply to remarks from customers. It produces greater results at a lower cost."

According to field observations, almost all informants use social media as their main channel for communicating with clients, introducing new products, and providing pricing information. Compared to the time before they started using digital media, these initiatives have raised the companies' visibility. This result is consistent with study by Rompis et al., (2024), which shows that digital marketing improves product exposure, marketing communication efficacy, and promotional cost efficiency, all of which have a beneficial impact on MSMEs' competitive advantage. Additionally, the ability of business owners to provide pertinent and interesting content for customers has a significant impact on the effectiveness of digital marketing in increasing competitiveness.

Expanded market reach, a larger client base, and increased product exposure are all signs of increased competitiveness. Digital customers are more drawn to information that is genuine, educational, and able to provide a worthwhile experience, claims Kotler (2021). A successful digital marketing approach emphasizes building emotional bonds with customers through regular, customer-focused contact in addition to promoting products.

The most important lesson to be learned from these results is that agriculture MSMEs become more competitive through an ongoing digital learning process. The ability of business owners to acquire digital competencies, comprehend consumer behavior, and convert data into effective marketing plans is what ultimately determines success, even while technology serves as a facilitator. In order to assist the effective transformation of marketing within the agriculture industry, it is therefore equally important to enhance human resource capacity as it is to provide digital infrastructure.

3.3 Purchase Decisions Made by Customers

According to research findings, consumers' purchasing decisions in agro MSMEs are significantly influenced by digital marketing. According to informant interviews, customers are more likely to buy agriculture items with thorough product details, eye-catching images and videos, favorable customer feedback, and prompt service via a variety of digital channels. The availability of

digital media reduces uncertainty before making a purchase by enabling consumers to rapidly and readily get information.

According to research findings, the quality of digital communication established by agricultural MSMEs has an impact on consumer purchase decisions in addition to the quality of the items offered. Important elements that can boost customer trust include promptness in answering questions from customers, transparency in pricing and product information, convenience of transaction processing, and consistency in service delivery. These findings are consistent with study by Andora & Yusuf, (2021), which demonstrates that by boosting consumer trust, digital marketing has a major impact on purchase decisions. The degree of consumer trust in the product and seller increases with the effectiveness of the digital marketing approach used, which promotes purchasing decisions. Research by Nurmallasari & Latifah (2024), who discovered that social media marketing improves MSME consumer purchase decisions by boosting customer engagement and trust, corroborates these findings.

From the standpoint of digital marketing, contemporary consumers typically conduct online research and product evaluations prior to making purchases. Kotler (2021) claim that digital customers now take into account user reviews, community recommendations, and other customer experiences found on digital platforms in addition to commercial advertisements. Consequently, good opinions of the agribusiness products offered are greatly influenced by the availability of authentic, educational, and easily available content.

Customer testimonials are one of the best types of social evidence for boosting consumer confidence in product quality, according to informants' experiences. Positive social media and marketplace reviews can increase a company's trustworthiness and lessen customers' reluctance to make purchases. This result is consistent with study by Erkan & Evans (2016), which claims that recommendations and information gleaned from digital media have a significant impact on consumers' intents and choices to make purchases. The study's findings thus validate that digital marketing transformation in agriculture MSMEs functions not only as a way to promote products but also as a strategic tool for enhancing customer experience, fostering trust, and sustainably influencing consumer purchasing decisions.

3.4 Implementing Digital Marketing in Agribusiness MSMEs: Difficulties

This study found a number of barriers to digital marketing implementation in agribusiness MSMEs, despite the fact that it offers numerous advantages for business development. Low digital literacy, a lack of human resources, an inability to produce compelling marketing material, and a lack of comprehension of digital marketing performance analysis are the primary challenges encountered by informants. Due to these circumstances, digital technology is not being used to its full potential to boost company competitiveness.

The majority of informants acknowledged that they continued to use digital marketing at a rudimentary level, such as posting product images and interacting with customers on social media. They haven't, however, yet made use of the analytical tools on digital platforms to assess the success of their marketing campaigns. Poor technology management abilities are another barrier impeding MSME competitiveness through digital marketing, according to research by Jiyoto, (2023). Apart from internal considerations, agriculture MSMEs also face problems such as limited promotional resources, fierce digital competition, and changes in social media algorithms. According to informants, as more companies use digital media, the battle for content has grown more intense, requiring constant innovation and inventiveness to draw in customers. This position is consistent with research from the OECD (2021), which said that the digital capability gap and restricted access to resources that enable marketing innovation are two of the biggest obstacles to MSMEs' digital transformation.

The study also demonstrates that the availability of technology is not the only factor that determines the success of digital marketing transformation; human resources' ability to use that technology successfully also plays a significant role. Verhoef et al., (2019) defines digital transformation as a process that entails adjustments to organizational culture, business actors' mindsets, and

capabilities in order to deal with an increasingly digitalized business environment. Therefore, enhancing human resource capacity is essential to helping agro MSMEs successfully utilize digital marketing.

The significance of continuous training programs, mentorship, and enhancing digital literacy for MSMEs was underscored by informants. To help agribusiness MSMEs comprehend more successful digital marketing methods, make use of analytical features, and create content that is suited to consumer needs, assistance from the government, academic institutions, and business support organizations is considered crucial. Therefore, enhancing digital competency might be a tactical way to go around a number of challenges and boost agro MSMEs' competitiveness in the age of the digital economy.

3.5 Phenomenological Viewpoint: Digital Marketing as an Ongoing Education Process

This study's phenomenological methodology shows that agricultural MSME operators see digital marketing as an ongoing learning process rather than only using social media or online marketplaces to promote products. The experiences of the informants show that success in digital marketing requires a process of adaptation, introspection, and assessment of their interactions with customers in the digital realm.

The majority of informants admitted that there were a number of difficulties in the beginning, including figuring out what kind of content would be interesting, comprehending the unique features of various digital platforms, and developing online customer trust. Nonetheless, these encounters provided insightful learning chances that influenced their capacity to create more potent marketing plans.

According to one informant:

"When I initially saw other companies using social media, I simply hopped on the bandwagon and made profiles. After a few months, I started to see that developing customer trust and promoting repeat business are more important than merely regularly uploading things."

The passage suggests that business owners' perspectives on marketing initiatives have changed as a result of their use of digital media. Digital marketing is now seen as a process of establishing long-term client relationships through regular communication and high-quality service, rather than just a temporary promotional activity.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the experiences of the informants show that the transition of digital marketing include a process of making sense of an increasingly digital business environment in addition to the use of technology. Owners of MSMEs in the agribusiness sector progressively get the capacity to comprehend market demands, analyze customer feedback, and modify their marketing tactics in light of their acquired experience. According to Verhoef et al., (2019), digital transformation is an organizational adaption process that involves changes in mentality, learning, and capability development about the use of digital technology. These findings are consistent with their research. Additionally, Chaffey & Ellis, (2022), stress that business owners' capacity to comprehend consumer behavior and sustainably manage client connections is just as important to the success of digital marketing as the technology used.

Additionally, the study's findings show that this process of learning also helps entrepreneurs feel more confident when navigating online competition. Informants who had previously been hesitant to use digital technology started to have the guts to try out different types of material, grow their marketing networks, and make use of digital capabilities they had never used before. This illustrates how capacity building is an ongoing process in digital transformation. Agribusiness MSME operators view digital marketing as an adaptive learning process that constantly connects experience, changes in consumer behavior, and innovative marketing strategies. This is the essence of the phenomenon found in this study. By redefining digital transformation as a process of competency building and a change in the mindset of business owners, these findings expand the understanding of digital transformation, which is frequently seen simply as technology adoption.

3.6 Digital Marketing Transformation's Effects on Agribusiness MSMEs' Sustainability

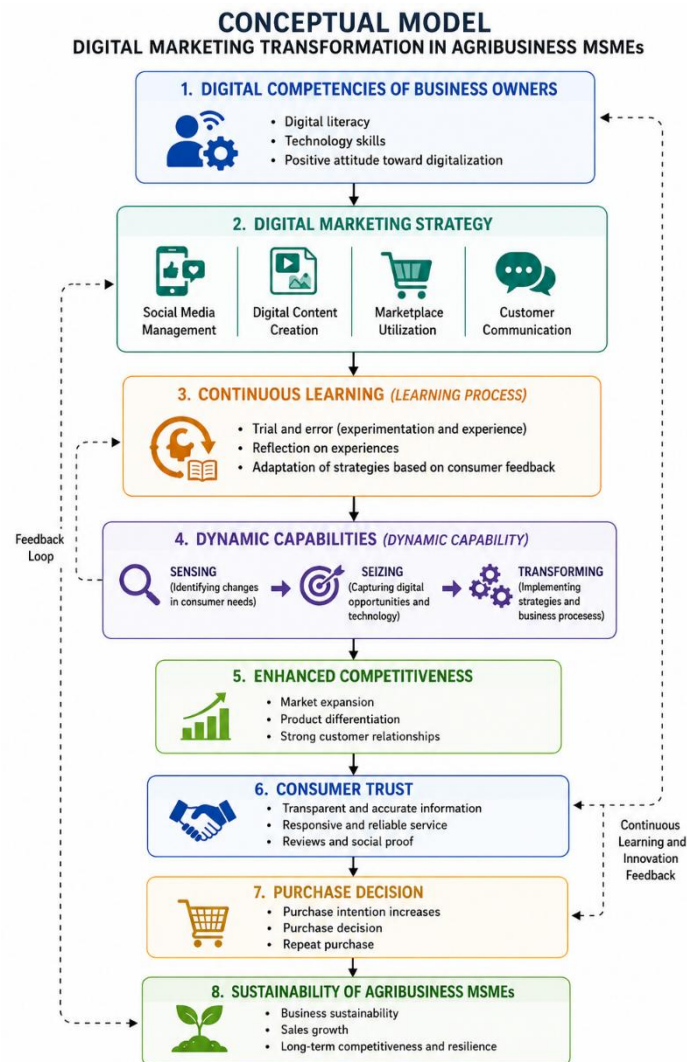
Overall, the research findings show that, in the era of the digital economy, the evolution of digital marketing plays a critical role in boosting the competitiveness of agriculture MSMEs while also influencing customer purchase decisions. Through the use of digital media, business owners may improve product awareness, broaden their market reach, cultivate stronger customer relationships, and raise consumer trust. The capacity to use digital technology is essential for agriculture in order to navigate a market that is becoming more competitive and dynamic. According to research by Jiyoto, (2023), marketing digitalization increases MSMEs' competitive edge by facilitating better information access and strengthening customer communication.

From the standpoint of consumer behavior, it has been demonstrated that the evolution of digital marketing influences purchasing decisions by offering more thorough information, product transparency, and user testimonials, in addition to making interactions and transactions easier. These results corroborate the idea put forth by Kotler (2021), that before making a purchase, digital shoppers typically rely on online information, customer evaluations, and other users' experiences. Therefore, the ability of business owners to establish trust, uphold the caliber of digital communication, and provide a satisfying customer experience is crucial to the success of digital marketing strategies for agriculture MSMEs. According to research, the effects of digital marketing go well beyond just boosting promotional activity. Digital transformation supports company sustainability in the context of MSMEs in the agribusiness sector in three important ways:

- a. By allowing business owners to reach larger audiences at comparatively low marketing expenses, digital transformation boosts competitiveness. Small firms have an equal chance to compete with players with more resources thanks to digital media. However, according to this survey, business owners must be able to consistently improve their digital competencies in order to reap this benefit.
- b. Customer interactions are a strategic advantage in promoting corporate sustainability, according to this study. Business owners can get direct input on product quality, customer wants, and changing market trends through intensive involvement through digital media. Business owners use this knowledge as a foundation to develop new goods and improve the quality of their services.
- c. A key differentiator between business owners who successfully use digital marketing and those who still struggle is adaptability. Compared to business owners that only utilize digital media as a passive promotional tool, those who actively assess marketing techniques, use experience as a learning resource, and customize material to market needs show superior business success.

Based on these three conclusions, the study suggests that digital transformation in agribusiness MSMEs is a dynamic capability process that uses a system of continuous learning to connect digital competence with competitive advantage. To put it another way, technology is a tool that helps business owners create value for customers rather than an end in and of itself.

This study offers the following conceptual model of digital marketing transformation for agribusiness MSMEs based on a synthesis of all findings:



4. CONCLUSION

According to research findings, the development and sustainability of agribusiness MSMEs in Nganjuk Regency are greatly aided by the digital marketing revolution. In addition to being a promotional tool, social media, online marketplaces, and other digital platforms are used as a way to adjust to changing consumer trends and more competitive business environments. Businesses may increase market reach, improve product awareness, lower promotional expenses, and improve customer-business owner interactions via digital marketing.

Furthermore, by offering thorough information, prompt communication, client testimonials, and easy transaction processes, digital marketing methods have been demonstrated to increase firm competitiveness and impact consumer purchase decisions. A key component of digital marketing success is consumer trust. Nonetheless, there are still a number of obstacles to overcome in the adoption of digital marketing, including inadequate digital literacy, a shortage of human resources, a lack of expertise in producing interesting content, and inefficient use of data analytics. Therefore, the ability of MSME actors to continuously learn, adapt, innovate, and improve their digital capabilities is just as important to the success of digital transformation as the use of technology.

Therefore, digital marketing transformation may be viewed as a process of ongoing learning and adjustment that promotes the sustainability of agribusiness MSMEs in the digital economy era, increases consumer trust, boosts competitiveness, and impacts purchase decisions.

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