

Bridging the Digital Gap: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Marketing Challenges for Rural Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000740>

Received: 25 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 28 October 2025

ABSTRACT

The rise of digital platforms has profoundly transformed global business landscapes, offering unprecedented opportunities for entrepreneurs to access wider markets and reduce operational costs. For rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia, social media and online marketing present significant avenues to expand income sources and foster community development. However, a persistent digital divide creates barriers to their full participation in the digital economy. This article adopts a qualitative, desktop-based approach to examine the online marketing challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Utilizing secondary sources from academic literature, government reports, and NGO publications between 2010 and 2025, data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring issues. Findings reveal four major challenges: limited digital literacy, inconsistent internet infrastructure, financial and technological barriers, and socio-cultural constraints affecting online engagement. While initiatives like the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (My DIGITAL) and Rural Digital Economy Strategy (REDES) have been introduced, structural gaps persist. The paper argues that bridging the digital gap requires integrated policies combining digital skills training, improved rural connectivity, gender-sensitive entrepreneurship support, and stronger social capital networks. These findings contribute to ongoing debates on rural development, gender empowerment, and inclusive digital transformation in Malaysia.

Keywords— Digital divide, rural women, online marketing, social media, Malaysia, qualitative study.

INTRODUCTION

Digitalization has fundamentally reshaped entrepreneurial ecosystems worldwide, enabling small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to access broader markets through online platforms. In Malaysia, the government has strategically prioritized the digital economy as a key driver of growth, aiming to empower micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), particularly those operated by rural women. Rural women entrepreneurs are indispensable agents of socio-economic development, making substantial contributions to household income, poverty reduction, and community resilience through their micro-enterprises in sectors such as food production, handicrafts, and services. Social media marketing (SMM) has really opened doors for rural businesses, offering them a chance to get around old-fashioned market limits and connect with more customers than ever before. That being said, research often points out that rural women entrepreneurs often have a tough time when it comes to using online tools and platforms effectively (Nor, 2021; Ismail & Hussin, 2020).

This leads to two key questions in this study:

1. What are the biggest online marketing challenges for rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia?
2. How well are current laws, policies, and institutions helping to close the digital gap for these entrepreneurs?

Exploring these questions, this article seeks to offer a full picture of the hurdles rural women entrepreneurs encounter in the digital world, plus assess how well current efforts are working. It's hoped that the insights gained here can guide more focused and effective policy changes, with the eventual goal of building a more

inclusive and fair digital economy in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, desk-based analytical approach to explore the online marketing challenges experienced by rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. As a desktop study, this method relies solely on secondary data, which, while providing a broad overview, lacks the granular insights of primary empirical research. To mitigate this limitation and broaden the study's analytical depth, a comparative perspective is integrated by drawing on relevant literature from neighboring Southeast Asian countries, particularly Indonesia and Thailand. This comparative element allows for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by Malaysian rural women entrepreneurs within a regional context, highlighting both shared and country-specific issues.

The study draws on a systematically identified and selected corpus of secondary sources, adhering to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance, credibility, and comprehensiveness. The data collection process involved three principal streams. First, Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025 were surveyed using targeted keywords such as “rural women entrepreneurs Malaysia,” “online marketing challenges,” “digital divide Malaysia,” “social media marketing,” “digital literacy,” “internet infrastructure,” “financial barriers,” and “socio-cultural constraints.” Searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and relevant Malaysian repositories. To broaden the comparative analysis, searches were extended to include literature on Indonesia and Thailand, using similar keywords to identify parallel and contrasting themes. Second, the official reports, strategy papers, and blueprints from Malaysian authorities were examined, with particular attention to the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL), the Rural Digital Economy Strategy (REDES), and publications from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). This was supplemented by a review of similar policy documents from Indonesia and Thailand to provide a comparative policy context. Third, analyses and reports from NGOs and international bodies focused on gender empowerment, rural development, and digital inclusion in Malaysia, such as UN Women and the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), were incorporated. Reports from organizations like the OECD and UNDP, which cover the broader Southeast Asian region, were also included to contextualize findings within a wider developmental landscape.

The inclusion criteria for sources were direct relevance to the challenges of rural women entrepreneurs in the digital economy, publication date between 2010 and 2025, credibility of the source such as peer-reviewed journals, government reports, reputable NGOs, and accessibility of the full text. On the other hand, exclusion criteria included sources not focused on the Southeast Asian context, purely theoretical papers with no empirical or policy-based evidence, and sources with unverifiable or outdated data. From these diverse materials, key findings, arguments, and quantitative indicators relevant to the research questions were extracted to enable triangulation across academic, governmental, and practitioner perspectives.

The study acknowledges the potential for bias in its source selection. The reliance on secondary data, particularly from Malaysian-focused publications, may introduce a national-level bias. To counteract this, the inclusion of comparative data from Indonesia and Thailand, as well as regional reports from international bodies, is intended to provide a more balanced perspective. Furthermore, the use of a 2025 end date for the literature search, while allowing for the inclusion of the most recent publications, may limit accessibility for some readers. This is a noted limitation of the study. The thematic analysis process, described below, also includes researcher reflexivity to minimize the impact of personal biases on the interpretation of the data.

The extracted evidence was analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic framework. The process began with repeated readings to achieve deep familiarization and to surface preliminary insights, followed by systematic generation of initial codes capturing salient features across the entire dataset. These codes were collated into candidate themes, with all pertinent extracts gathered under each thematic heading. Themes were iteratively reviewed for internal coherence and fidelity to the coded data and the dataset as a whole, then refined, defined, and aptly named to clarify the narrative each theme advances and its contribution to the overall argument. The analysis concluded by crafting an integrative narrative, embedding the thematic

findings into the established literature. This connected empirical observations with relevant conceptual discussions and policy considerations.

This thematic analysis systematically identified and categorized recurring challenges encountered by rural Malaysian women entrepreneurs in their online marketing efforts. From the data coding process, four main themes surfaced, each focusing on a crucial aspect: digital literacy, internet infrastructure, financial and technological obstacles, and socio-cultural constraints. This ensures the results are solid, grounded in supporting evidence, and aligned with the research aims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia

Studies often point out that in Malaysia, rural women entrepreneurs frequently start businesses out of necessity, mainly to add to their family's income, rather than to chase after growth opportunities. You see, these enterprises are usually quite small and don't have the same growth potential as their urban SME counterparts. These businesses tend to operate in traditional areas, with their success closely tied to what's going on in their local community and the resources they can get their hands on. Considering this unique setting, it's really important to understand the specific challenges that women in rural Malaysia face when trying to adapt to modern business practices, especially in the digital world (Nor, 2021).

Digitalisation and the Promise of Social Media Marketing

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become very cost-effective ways to promote a business. Research generally points to boosts in visibility, consumer engagement, and, ideally, sales. For rural women entrepreneurs, these platforms can be a workaround for geographical limits, opening up access to larger markets. Yet, despite these apparent benefits, actual adoption and impactful use of digital tools among Malaysian rural women entrepreneurs seems surprisingly low. This hints that the promise of social media marketing might be overshadowed by less obvious hurdles preventing full integration into business models (Ismail & Hussin, 2020).

The Digital Divide in Malaysia

The phrase "digital divide" generally describes the persistent gaps in access, skills, and effective tech usage. In Malaysia, rural-urban differences concerning internet access, affordability, and digital literacy still present considerable issues. Rural women often face disadvantages, stemming from a mix of socio-economic and gender-based inequalities. These manifest as limited reliable, affordable internet access, a deficit in essential digital skills, and less exposure to digital business methods. Bridging this divide is incredibly important for inclusive economic growth, ensuring rural women entrepreneurs can fully participate in the digital economy (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2022; Hamid & Zukarnain, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

To better comprehend how rural women engage in the online entrepreneurial space, this paper leans on two key theoretical frameworks: Human Capital Theory and Social Capital Theory.

Human Capital Theory essentially spotlights how skills, knowledge, and formal education serve as valuable investments enhancing productivity and potential earnings. In the realm of online marketing, this suggests that lacking adequate digital literacy, technical skills, and fundamental business knowledge can seriously impede a rural woman entrepreneur's ability to effectively leverage digital platforms. Consequently, investing in tailored training and relevant education becomes crucial for boosting their human capital, helping them navigate the digital landscape more successfully (Becker, 1964).

Social Capital Theory emphasizes the role of networks, relationships, and trust in facilitating collaborative action and fulfilling individual and collective objectives. For rural women entrepreneurs, robust social networks can translate into access to pertinent information, invaluable mentorship, peer-based support, and even enhanced

collective bargaining power. However, weakened or constrained social capital can foster isolation, making it comparatively harder to access critical resources and opportunities pivotal for online business success. Both frameworks are important for a holistic understanding. Challenges and opportunities faced by rural women entrepreneurs as they navigate online entrepreneurship are key considerations (Coleman, 1988).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary data's thematic analysis pinpointed four key areas presenting online marketing hurdles for rural Malaysian women entrepreneurs. Together, these issues widen the digital divide, impeding their effective involvement and success in the online marketplace. This discussion critically examines these findings, integrating a comparative perspective from neighboring countries like Indonesia and Thailand to provide a broader regional context. It also evaluates persistent policy gaps and introduces a SWOT analysis to frame strategic recommendations.

Limited Digital Literacy in a Regional Context

Digital literacy presents a considerable hurdle, as studies by Hamid & Zukarnain (2020) and Hazudin et al. (2025) point out. The issue is not merely a matter of owning technology but a more profound deficit in the strategic application of digital tools for business. This challenge is not unique to Malaysia. Research in Thailand shows that while women are active in online shopping, higher education is a significant determinant of participation in online business, suggesting a gap between basic use and entrepreneurial application (Liao & Pownawat, 2025). Similarly, a UN Women report on Asia highlights that even after gaining access, women face significant knowledge/awareness and digital skills barriers that prevent meaningful participation in digital opportunities like e-commerce (Galpaya & Zainudeen, 2022).

For many rural women in Malaysia, core competencies in SEO, content creation, e-commerce navigation, and digital financial management remain elusive. This reliance on intermediaries or traditional methods limits their autonomy and growth potential. The rapid evolution of digital technologies means skills quickly become outdated, yet access to relevant, affordable, and culturally appropriate training in rural areas is scarce. Existing programs are often criticized for being too generic or impractical, perpetuating a cycle where limited digital literacy restricts access to digital opportunities, thus widening the digital gap.

The Persistent Infrastructure Divide

The physical infrastructure supporting internet connectivity in rural Malaysia remains a substantial barrier (Nohuddin et al., 2025; Gong, 2020). Despite government efforts, many rural areas still suffer from inconsistent access, slow speeds, and frequent disconnections. This infrastructure deficit is a recurring theme across Southeast Asia. For instance, a study covering Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam noted significant disparities in the digital divide among MSMEs (Oikawa, 2024). In Indonesia, the rural-urban digital divide, though slightly narrowing, remains a major obstacle (CNBC, 2023). The reliance on expensive and often unstable mobile data, a common issue in rural Malaysia (Chong et al., 2025), further discourages the continuous online presence necessary for business. Without reliable and affordable internet, even digitally literate entrepreneurs cannot maintain effective online operations, leading to lost sales, diminished customer trust, and continued economic exclusion.

Financial and Technological Barriers

Rural women entrepreneurs frequently encounter financial and technical obstacles that hinder their digital adoption (Azis et al., 2023; Musa et al., 2016). The upfront cost for necessary hardware such as smartphones, laptops and the ongoing expenses for software, e-commerce platforms, and digital advertising are often prohibitive. Access to microcredit or financial assistance specifically for digital investments is limited (Mohamad & Bakar, 2017). This is compounded by a scarcity of technical support in rural areas, leading to business disruptions. This challenge is echoed in reports on Indonesia, where access to finance is a systemic barrier for women entrepreneurs (UN Women, 2023).

Socio-Cultural Constraints Across Borders

Socio-cultural factors significantly affect a woman's capacity to engage in online marketing (Azis et al., 2023; Adnan et al., 2016). Traditional gender roles often assign women extensive household and caregiving duties, leaving limited time and energy for entrepreneurial pursuits. This is not a uniquely Malaysian issue; a report by the ASEAN Magazine (2024) notes that the burden of domestic responsibilities is a key barrier for rural women across the region. Furthermore, cultural resistance to women having a prominent online presence, coupled with anxieties about privacy and safety, can reduce participation (Selamat & Endut, 2020). Overcoming these deeply rooted issues requires culturally sensitive strategies that involve community leaders and educational programs to foster a more supportive ecosystem.

Critical Evaluation of Policy and Implementation Gaps

While Malaysia has launched ambitious initiatives like the MyDIGITAL Blueprint and REDES to foster a digital economy, a critical evaluation reveals significant gaps between policy intent and on-the-ground reality. The primary critique is the persistent disconnect in implementation, particularly in rural areas (Tokiran et al., 2021). For example, national broadband targets may be met on paper, but the quality, affordability, and reliability of connections in remote villages often remain insufficient for business use. This top-down approach often fails to address the diverse, localized needs of rural communities.

Training programs, while well-intentioned, frequently lack contextual relevance and practical, hands-on learning. A one-size-fits-all curriculum overlooks the specific challenges and learning preferences of rural women, leading to low participation and impact. In contrast to more localized or needs-assessed approaches, this results in a squandering of resources and perpetuates the skills gap. There is a clear need for greater policy localization, flexibility, and collaboration with local NGOs and community leaders who possess a deeper understanding of the everyday lives and constraints of these entrepreneurs. The lack of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the real-world impact of these policies on rural women entrepreneurs is another significant weakness.

A SWOT Analysis for Empowering Rural Women Entrepreneurs

To better structure the path forward, a SWOT analysis is useful for identifying the internal and external factors affecting rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia's digital economy.

Table 1: SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
- High-quality, unique products (handicrafts, food).	- Limited digital literacy and business skills.	- Government policies promoting digitalization (MyDIGITAL).	- Rapidly changing digital technologies.
- Strong community ties and social networks.	- Inconsistent and expensive internet access.	- Growing e-commerce platforms (Shopee, Lazada).	- Increased competition from urban businesses.
- Resilience and adaptability of entrepreneurs.	- Lack of access to finance for digital tools.	- Increased consumer interest in authentic, local goods.	- Cybersecurity risks and online scams.
- Growing domestic demand for local products.	- Time constraints due to household duties.	- Potential for regional export via digital platforms.	- Negative social perceptions or lack of family support.

This analysis reveals that while foundational strengths and significant opportunities exist, they are undermined by critical internal weaknesses and external threats. Policy interventions must be designed to mitigate these weaknesses and threats while leveraging the strengths and opportunities.

Re-evaluating Human and Social Capital

The findings underscore the vital contributions of both human and social capital, as framed by the theoretical perspectives of Becker (1964) and Coleman (1988). Human capital, in the form of digital skills and business acumen, is a major impediment. The comparative data suggests that interventions must go beyond basic digital literacy to foster a deeper, strategic understanding of e-commerce. The low awareness of digital opportunities, as noted in the UN Women report, indicates that building human capital must also involve inspiring and educating potential entrepreneurs about what is possible (Galpaya & Zainudeen, 2022).

Social capital limitations are equally critical. Isolation deprives entrepreneurs of vital knowledge, mentorship, and support. However, social capital can be fostered through cooperatives, collaborative learning, and mentorship programs. These networks can provide essential support, promote a shared market presence, and strengthen negotiating power, creating a more holistic strategy that addresses both human and social capital deficits.

Towards an Integrated and Inclusive Digital Transformation

Closing the digital divide for rural Malaysian women entrepreneurs requires a multi-faceted, integrated strategy. It must simultaneously address infrastructure, digital literacy, financial access, and socio-cultural norms. A central component is ensuring affordable and reliable rural internet access, which can be achieved by strengthening public-private partnerships. Gender-sensitive digital literacy programs, designed with the flexibility and practical focus that rural women need, are crucial. These should be co-designed with local communities to ensure relevance and adoption.

Equally vital is fostering strong partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and private platforms to provide rural women with direct access to e-commerce marketplaces. These collaborations can deliver specialized training, promotional opportunities, and user-friendly support systems. Strengthening rural women's cooperatives can further enhance this transformation by building social capital and providing a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship. Ultimately, technology's impact is limited if it is not integrated with initiatives that address the unique, lived realities of these women. An integrated approach will not only empower entrepreneurs but also contribute to more resilient communities, a reduction in rural-urban disparities, and a more equitable digital future for Malaysia.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media marketing and digital platforms offer rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia a great deal of untapped potential, so it seems. Still, some fairly stubborn barriers complicate their full involvement in the digital economy. A qualitative desktop analysis of various sources reveals some critical challenges. These include, for instance, limitations in digital literacy, unreliable internet, significant financial constraints, and deeply ingrained socio-cultural considerations. It's not just about access; this digital divide seems rooted in a blend of economic, social, and cultural factors that disproportionately affect rural women.

To actually bridge this gap and unlock the entrepreneurial capabilities of rural women, a comprehensive plan is required. A key priority is expanding rural internet infrastructure through public-private partnerships. This often requires accelerating the deployment of affordable broadband and fostering genuine collaboration between government, providers, and communities. We should be exploring both innovative technologies and funding models to guarantee sustainable internet access, thus enabling sustained engagement for rural entrepreneurs.

Secondly, digital literacy programmes must be relevant to the particular context and sensitive to gender considerations. Training needs to go beyond generic, one-size-fits-all approaches, offering practical content tailored to the needs of rural women. This training, perhaps delivered in local languages at accessible locations and with flexible scheduling, should cover essential skills such as online marketing, e-commerce, digital payments, and of course cybersecurity. Mentorship and peer support are also pretty vital for building confidence and encouraging long-term engagement.

Thirdly, targeted financial incentives and accessible grants are a must for the adoption of digital tools. Specifically, schemes like grants or low-interest microcredit should be set up for digital investments, things like devices, internet, and e-commerce tools. It is important to simplify the application process and spread awareness of opportunities via community networks to ensure maximum effectiveness.

Finally, strengthening rural women's cooperatives and collective enterprises may well build social capital and provide a genuinely supportive environment for entrepreneurship. By pooling resources, improving bargaining power, and promoting shared learning, cooperatives can help reduce socio-cultural barriers and connect entrepreneurs to larger markets. Such an approach tends to amplify the impact of rural women's participation in the digital economy. Digital inclusion carries significant weight, even beyond pure economics, it seems. By tackling this complex web of issues, Malaysia can truly unleash its entrepreneurial spirit and foster inclusive growth, supporting Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5, 8, 9, and, of course, 10). This understanding offers both policymakers and other parties involved a potential way to craft better support mechanisms, making sure every entrepreneur gets a fair shot in today's digital world.

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