

Barriers to the Adoption of Digital Marketing Tools Among Palmyrah Micro-Entrepreneurs in Rural Areas of the Jaffna Peninsula

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Digital marketing has become crucial for increasing effectiveness via better engagement and revenue generation. Palmyrah micro-entrepreneurs in the Northern part of Sri Lanka rely on traditional approaches that are restricted due to social stratification and insufficient modernization. Digital marketing competence becomes significant for micro-entrepreneurs' performance and strategic adaptability, and more digitally involved micro-entrepreneurs are more likely to experience customer retention but require resourcefulness such as finances to use digital marketing tools. In an emerging economy, barriers include technology, managerial commitment, lack of government backing and insufficient customer pressure. Though existing research has provided substantial knowledge on barriers to digital marketing tools adoption, there is little evidence on barriers faced by micro-entrepreneurs in traditional rural industries like the palmyrah industry, with little attention paid to the interplay of socio-cultural and technical barriers among this group. This research focuses on current barriers to digital marketing tools

adoption among micro-entrepreneurs in the palmyrah industry in the *Jaffna* Peninsula. The qualitative exploratory study utilized purposive sampling to select 15 palmyrah micro-entrepreneurs from *Jaffna* district, ensuring representation by gender (10 females, 5 males), age (30-55 years) and geographic location, along with 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) of 3-4 members each. Semi-structured interviews of 20-45 minutes and FGDs of 30-45 minutes covered marketing efforts undertaken, experience with digital tools (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp Business), awareness of digital marketing advantages, language issues, perceptions of online marketing, financial limitations and infrastructure-related challenges, analyzed in *Tamil* using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis approach. QDA Miner Lite software was employed solely for qualitative data management and coding. Analysis, conducted through a socio-technical approach, indicated that obstacles hindering digital marketing tools adoption were mainly structural rather than dispositional, identified in five major themes: 'limited digital marketing skills' (familiar with social media but no skills in content creation, advertisement and analytics), 'financial constraints' (unable to afford paid advertisements or technology due to daily expenditure needs), 'lack of knowledge regarding the advantages of digital marketing' (little knowledge about benefits for sales, customer reach, brand visibility and growth), 'language barriers' (platform interfaces such as Facebook Business Manager, Instagram Ads and WhatsApp Business being available only in English), and 'logistical and trust issues' (unreliable rural couriers and lack of trust in online transactions). Despite this, a consistent "positive attitude towards future adoption" emerged, as micro-entrepreneurs were willing to adopt digital marketing

tools given sufficient training, funding and awareness, disputing the idea that lack of motivation causes low adoption. Interventions should target shortcomings in digital literacy, funding and technology infrastructure rather than relying on motivational measures alone. Development programs must provide training in Facebook ads, Tamil-based learning applications, village couriers and online payment mechanisms, with future research focusing on the joint effect of digital literacy programs and *Tamil* digital platforms on tool adoption among palmyrah micro-entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Digital marketing tools, Language barriers, Palmyrah micro-entrepreneurs, Rural entrepreneurship, Sri Lanka

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