ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VII, July 2026

Online Marketing Adoption as Uneven Practice: Evidence from Clothing Micro and Small Enterprises in Bangladesh

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150700153

Received: 09 August 2026; Accepted: 14 August 2026; Published: 25 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the adoption of online marketing by micro and small apparel businesses in Bangladesh due to their limited capabilities and resources. The study does not present digital adoption as a binary choice about using technology, but rather emphasizes the integration of diverse marketing approaches into routine business activities. The study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach, consisting of a survey of 510 digitally engaged apparel companies and 20 semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs, including four embedded business cases. The current review is limited to qualitative evidence, with survey statistics providing descriptive context alone. The online marketing strategies were analyzed across four dimensions: affiliate-oriented promotion, digital engagement, web optimization, and viral-content work. The results show considerable variation in how these practices are carried out. Digital engagement was seamlessly integrated into routine customer communication and visibility campaigns. Promotion focused on affiliates mainly through casual referrals and customer sharing, as opposed to formal affiliate frameworks. Entrepreneurs knew that web optimization was important, but still found it difficult due to technical, financial and time constraints. The creation of viral content was mostly improvised, relying on audience reactions rather than any strategic planning. The results also indicate that online marketing strategies are interrelated, and they can evolve at different levels of strategic complexity. The research provides a practice-oriented insight into digital adoption by highlighting that online presence is not a guarantee for cohesive or strategically aligned online marketing for resource-constrained small businesses.

Keywords: online marketing adoption, micro and small enterprises, digital engagement, practice-based perspective, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Online marketing can give a micro or small business a competitive advantage and access to new customers using limited resources. The benefits of online marketing are accrued through the integration of digital resources in the day to day operations of organizations (Bakashaba & Bindeeba, 2025; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). With no full-fledged e-commerce infrastructure, many small fashion firms may utilise social commerce for enhancing their market engagement and engaging with customers (Ashiq, 2025). But just being there digitally doesn't mean you're there strategically in the market. Post product pitch entrepreneurs must foster trust through regular and transparent communication. So online marketing is not just a technical issue, but also a question of small businesses' ability to stay in touch with the market in the absence of a lot of resources.

Most of the research on the digitalization of small businesses has been on variables such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, skills, enabling conditions and external support (Susanty et al., 2025; Ye et al., 2025). These concepts help in understanding the factors that facilitate and impede adoption of new technologies in small textile and fashion businesses (Fatorachian & Ramesh, 2025). However, adoption research (Sofi & Al-Fattal,

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VII, July 2026

2026) is more concerned with intentions and uptake than use and maintenance of technologies in everyday work. However, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) may not be fully exploiting the strategic potential of digital channels in the absence of organizational skills and knowledge (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). A key gap remains: what does online marketing look like in practice? Why do some activities become central, while others are marginal? How do entrepreneurs adjust when formal strategies are hard to maintain (Amos & Adea, 2025)?

This research addresses this gap by looking at the daily practices of Bangladeshi clothing micro and small enterprises within the framework of online marketing adoption. It employs a practice-led approach. Here, adoption is not conceived as a binary state, but as a situated and ongoing enactment within the framework of daily work (Orlikowski, 2000). The study uses a four-dimensional model of online marketing: affiliate-oriented promotion, digital engagement, web optimization, and viral-content work. These four areas are analyzed across three cross-cutting categories: (i) capability, (ii) resources, and (iii) socio-cultural context. This study answers three research questions: (1) How do micro and small clothing entrepreneurs put online marketing adoption into practice? (2) How are the four practice dimensions carried out differently under limited capability, resources, and socio-cultural conditions? (3) What coping strategies do entrepreneurs use when constraints make formal online marketing difficult?

The study makes three contributions. First, it advances a practice-based understanding of online marketing adoption by showing that a digital presence can coexist with uneven strategic enactment. Second, it offers contextually grounded insight from a women-dominated clothing sector in Bangladesh into how capability, resources, and situational expectations shape the feasibility and sustainability of online marketing practices, without treating the qualitative sample as statistically representative of women entrepreneurs more broadly. Third, it provides context-sensitive implications for support mechanisms and training interventions that build on the practices micro and small enterprises already use. Overall, the study connects research on adoption to entrepreneurs' everyday practices and treats uneven enactment, rather than mere uptake, as the core analytical issue.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The theoretical background develops the practice-based conceptual framing and explains the four-dimensional analytical model inherited from the parent study. The methodology clarifies the explanatory sequential parent design, the 510-person survey, and the subsequent qualitative phase of 20 interviews, including four embedded cases, while explaining the qualitative-dominant analytical focus of the present article. The results present the qualitative findings, using selected survey statistics only as contextual descriptive evidence. The discussion interprets the findings and refines the analytical model. The conclusion states the study’s boundary conditions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical Background And Conceptual Framing

Traditional adoption models and their limitations

Existing adoption frameworks are good at explaining the first-time use of technology, but they are not good at explaining how digital devices are integrated into the daily operations of a business (Susanty et al., 2025; Ye et al., 2025). Models tend to emphasize perceived utility, ease of use, readiness, and enabling conditions. However, the application of technology is now passing through the early stage of acceptance. As Orlikowski (2000) points out, a practice perspective deals with the way technology is used by users in repeated contextual activities. Recent studies (Sofi & Al-Fattal, 2026) have demonstrated that a positive attitude toward a technology does not necessarily indicate that it will be used significantly. A key limitation of traditional adoption models is that they explain the shift to digital use more effectively than the continuous implementation, sustainability, and uneven strategic depth of digital practices.

Most traditional adoption models treat adoption as a binary state, not a continuum (Sofi & Al-Fattal, 2026). And an entrepreneur may think that a website, a WhatsApp account, and a Facebook page are enough. However, this does not guarantee the availability of time, knowledge or environment to take full advantage of these platforms. Hence, a digital presence could be associated with poor strategic implementation (Valente et al., 2025). The challenge is not the use of a tool but how it is embedded into normal business processes to increase client engagement, trust and revenue.

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Practice-based perspectives on adoption

The concern over this disparity is resolved when access and execution are integrated (Orlikowski, 2000). An investigation of how technology affects the day-to-day lives, jobs, and careers of people. The first thing you need to do is log in to the platform. It is vital to understand how the stakeholders integrate it into their daily routines. Creating a Facebook page for your business is a one-time effort. However, generating content, addressing customer enquiries, managing anticipations and facilitating sales are continuous activities that differ from each other. This risk is particularly pertinent for small and medium enterprises that are using online platforms, albeit not to their full capacity (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

This mindset is found to be very useful in resource-limited regions as it classifies practices between conventional and less focused ones (Ashiq, 2025). The lack of time, expertise, or financial resources forces entrepreneurs to engage in simple or mainstream digital activities rather than more complex, risky, or expensive ones (Bindeeba et al., 2026). Under resource constraints, entrepreneurs may rely more heavily on accessible and routine digital practices, while technically demanding or less predictable activities remain limited, informal, or episodic. The practice turn therefore provides a framework for understanding why some practices proliferate while others remain limited, informal, or not fully enacted (Shatila et al., 2025).

Socio-cultural context in Bangladesh

Online marketing also impacts the social and cultural life of Bangladesh. Digital engagement may provide female entrepreneurs with an opportunity to access support networks and new markets (James et al., 2026), but it may also amplify gendered pressures and introduce new risks. The success or failure of women micro-entrepreneurs in rural Bangladesh depends on the availability of market services, family support, training and money (Begum et al., 2026). Here we have ideas that help us understand what is happening, not facts that we know for sure. These ideas provide contextual possibilities drawn from prior literature, but the participant accounts do not establish gender or household restrictions as consistent empirical patterns in this study.

When in public with people, entrepreneurs need to think about how visible they want to be and how they want to present themselves (Xiang, 2025). The study recognizes that the social and cultural environment can influence perceptions of the acceptability of behavior. It does not assume that all respondents have the same ideas about modesty, privacy, acceptability to family or cleanliness. These things are treated with care. They are not the object of the empirical research topics.

A four-dimensional model of online marketing practice

The four-dimensional framework is followed by the qualitative assessment. The original research, based on the existing literature, grouped nine online marketing instruments into four empirically and theoretically interpretable factors using principal component analysis: Affiliate Campaign (affiliate marketing and content marketing), Digital Engagement (social media, email and mobile commerce), Web Optimization (website and SEO) and Viral Content (viral marketing and blogs). This article redefines the previously proposed factors as affiliate-oriented promotion, digital engagement, website optimization and viral content work, making analytical dimensions sensitive rather than themes derived from interviews. Thus, the model is informed by the literature and quantitatively reinforced in the primary study, and the empirical qualitative patterns are inductively derived from the participants' narratives.

Affiliate-oriented promotion captures attempts to extend market reach through third parties, ranging from formal tracked affiliate systems to informal customer referrals and social-network sharing (Lacitignola & Martiradonna, 2025; Rihidima et al., 2025). Digital engagement captures recurring customer-facing work such as posting products, answering messages, responding to inquiries, and maintaining visibility and trust through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Umam et al., 2025). These two dimensions differ in where promotional labor is located: affiliate-oriented promotion depends on third-party circulation, whereas digital engagement is performed more directly by the entrepreneur or business.

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Web optimization is the improvement of websites, catalogues, search engines and related visibility efforts which are highly dependent on technical skills, maintenance and sometimes financial support (Lalitha & Sundari, 2025). The creation of viral content is the deliberate or spontaneous activity that aims to achieve wide dissemination through posts that are highly shareable, short videos, content related to events, trends, or customer promotion (Dang et al., 2025). It is an analytically useful distinction because web optimization is largely dependent on the mechanisms and infrastructure of search, while viral content generation is more dependent on creative production and audience distribution.

Together, the four dimensions provide a comparative scaffold for examining uneven enactment. They are not assumed to be equally accessible or mutually independent. Their feasibility and intensity may vary with capability, resources, and contextual expectations, and one practice may enable or crowd out another. This framework therefore guides the second-stage interpretation of the qualitative material; the empirical themes themselves are developed inductively from participants' accounts before being compared with the four literature-informed dimensions. Figure 1 summarizes this initial analytical framework.

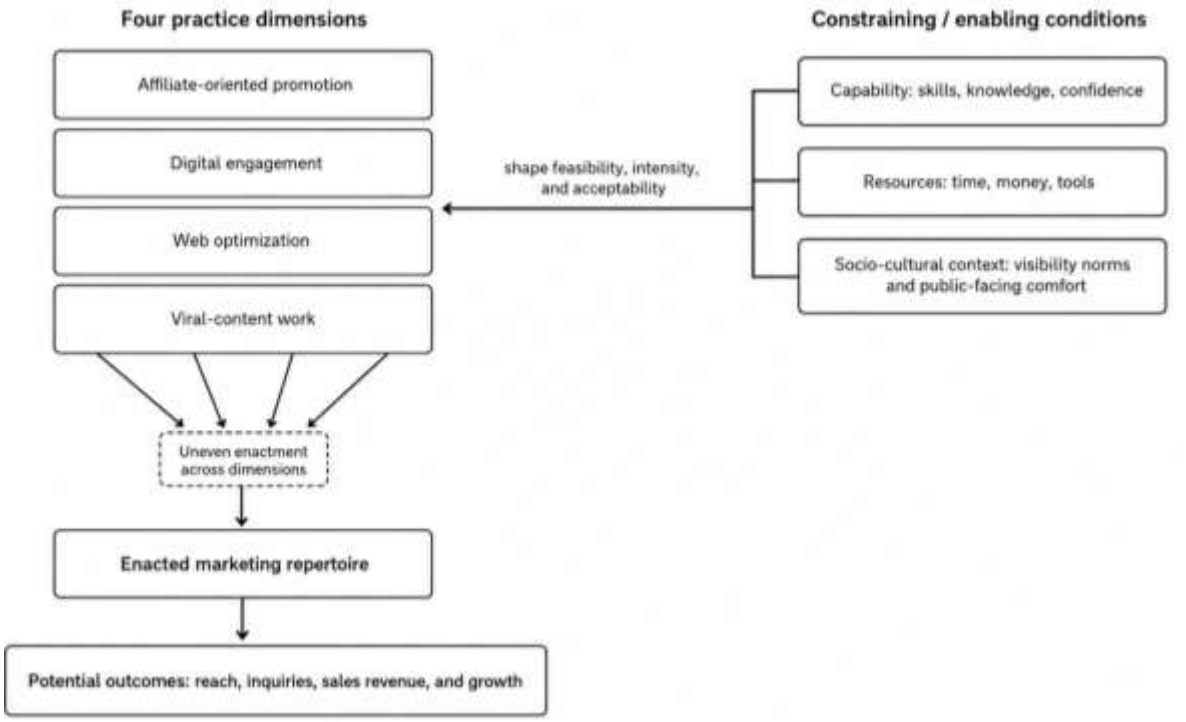


Figure 1: Conceptual model of online marketing adoption as enacted practice

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The data were generated within an explanatory sequential mixed-methods PhD study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In the parent study, the quantitative phase first surveyed 510 digitally active small clothing firms; this was followed by a qualitative phase comprising 20 semi-structured entrepreneur interviews, with four of those 20 participating organizations selected as embedded cases. The present article gives analytic priority to the qualitative phase because its research questions concern how online-marketing practices are enacted, constrained, and adapted in everyday business. Selected survey means and standard deviations are retained only as descriptive context; the article does not re-test the parent study's regression hypotheses or use the qualitative sample for statistical generalization. This distinction between the parent mixed-methods design and the present article's qualitative-dominant analysis is maintained throughout the findings and discussion.

A multiple-case structure is appropriate because the research questions concern how entrepreneurs use digital tools in everyday practice, why some practices are sustained while others remain partial, and how entrepreneurs

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adapt under constrained capability and resources. Cross-case comparison also allows patterns to be examined across businesses differing in product type, audience reach, and platform participation. The aim is analytic and contextual explanation rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018).

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted in Bangladesh's clothing micro and small enterprise sector. Participants in the qualitative phase were purposively selected to capture variation in location, business scale, and digital involvement, drawing on local entrepreneur groups, women-in-business networks, and word-of-mouth referrals. The qualitative sample comprised 20 entrepreneurs (18 women and 2 men), most of whom operated home-based or small informal businesses and used Facebook, WhatsApp, or similar platforms. Four of these 20 participating organizations—Zain's Collection, Uthan Boutique, LongSpring, and Twinkle Crafts—were selected as embedded cases for more intensive within-case and cross-case analysis because they represented differing online strategies, profiles, and operating contexts. Interview participants were anonymized as P01–P20. All business names used in this manuscript, including the four embedded cases, are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality. Appendix A summarizes the interview participants, and Appendix B summarizes the four embedded cases.

Data collection

Data collection followed the explanatory sequential order of the parent study. The quantitative phase used a structured questionnaire administered to 510 small clothing businesses drawn by systematic random sampling from a purposively constructed frame of 1,264 digitally active firms identified through BSCIC databases and industry networks. Eligibility required evidence of an active digital presence, such as a Facebook page, Google Business profile, or mobile-commerce use. The questionnaire recorded respondent profile, use of nine online-marketing tools, 7-point agreement ratings of their perceived effects, a four-statement factor-level validation section, and open-ended comments. The four factor-level statements correspond to the practice labels used in this article, and their exact wording is reproduced in Appendix C.

The qualitative phase followed the survey and comprised 20 semi-structured interviews designed to explain and contextualize the broader quantitative patterns. Interviews elicited detailed accounts of business background, online-marketing practices, customer interaction, constraints, adaptation, and future plans. They were conducted in Bangla, face-to-face or by telephone depending on location and availability, and lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Four of the 20 participating organizations were additionally examined as embedded cases. Appendix D presents the interview domains and illustrative prompts. For the present article, survey results are used only as descriptive context and no inferential comparison is made among the four practice means shown in Table 2.

For the four practice dimensions, the questionnaire's factor-level extension contained one positively worded statement per dimension, each rated from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. Table 2 reports these direct single-item ratings; no construct score was summed or averaged and no reverse-coded item was used for the four practice entries. The dependent outcome in the thesis is Sales Revenue, also assessed perceptually on a 7-point agreement scale; accordingly, M = 1.19 (SD = 0.459) is reported here as Perceived Sales Revenue rather than as a broad 'Perceived Business Outcomes' composite. The archived SPSS output reports N = 510 for each observed marketing variable and no imputation procedure, so the descriptive summaries use the complete 510 cases. In the parent study's broader quantitative validation, Cronbach's alpha was reported as above .70 for all composite scales, although separate construct-specific coefficients were not tabulated; alpha is not applicable to the single-item factor ratings shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Generational distribution of survey respondents for descriptive profile (Author's own)

Generation	Birth years	Age range in 2024	n (%)
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	60–78	13 (2.5)

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Generation X	1965–1980	44–59	135 (26.5)
Millennials	1981–1996	28–43	248 (48.6)
Generation Z	1997–2012	12–27	114 (22.4)
Total			510 (100.0)

Data analysis

Qualitative analysis followed a two-stage hybrid procedure that deliberately separates inductive themes from the pre-existing dimensions inherited from the parent study. In the first stage, the translated transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring practices, constraints, adaptations, and meanings without forcing the material into the four-dimensional framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were compared and grouped into higher-order empirical themes. In the second stage, these inductively developed themes were compared with the four literature-informed, PCA-consolidated dimensions—affiliate-oriented promotion, digital engagement, web optimization, and viral-content work—to examine convergence, divergence, and differences in enactment across interviews and embedded cases. Thus, the four dimensions were not treated as findings generated by the thematic analysis; rather, they provided a pre-existing conceptual structure for interpreting themes that emerged from participants' accounts.

Two researchers coded the qualitative material independently and resolved differences through discussion. Cross-case comparison was then used to examine whether patterns were reproduced, contradicted, or qualified across the four focal businesses. Peer debriefing, reflexive memoing, and an audit trail were used to strengthen transparency and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The survey summaries were consulted only after the qualitative themes had been developed and were used for contextual comparison, not as a statistical test or validation of the qualitative results.

Ethics and confidentiality

Ethical approval for the research involving human participants was obtained from the university ethics review board before fieldwork. Interview participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was protected through anonymized participant codes, pseudonyms for participating businesses, and removal of other identifying information from transcripts and analytic files. Audio recordings, transcripts, and translated materials were securely stored in accordance with institutional data-management procedures.

RESULTS

The qualitative findings are organized under the four literature-informed practice dimensions, but the subsection labels describe empirical patterns developed from the interview data: informal referral work, everyday visibility work, awareness without accessibility, and customer-driven viral content. Across the interviews and focal cases, these patterns were enacted unevenly. The analysis below relies primarily on participant accounts and cross-case comparison. Table 2 is included only to show descriptive survey patterns; its means and standard deviations are not treated as statistical tests, and numerical differences between dimensions are not interpreted as statistically significant.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for factor-level survey ratings and perceived sales revenue (N = 510; contextual use only)

Construct	Mean	SD
Affiliate-Oriented Promotion	5.04	1.15
Digital Engagement	5.42	1.03

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Web Optimization	3.40	1.67
Viral-Content Work	3.97	1.17
Perceived Sales Revenue	1.19	0.459

Note. The four practice entries are direct single-item ratings from the questionnaire's factor-level extension; all used a 7-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Perceived Sales Revenue was also assessed on a 7-point agreement scale. Values are descriptive only. No inferential comparison among the means is made in this article, and numerical differences should not be interpreted as statistically significant. The qualitative interview and embedded-case evidence remains the primary basis for the article's practice-based interpretations. See Appendix C for item wording and scoring details.

Affiliate-oriented promotion as informal referral work

Most participants appreciated third-party endorsement, but this was rarely formalized as an affiliate program. More endorsements from clients, verbal recommendations and casual social interactions were required. For example, P01 said they rely on verbal referrals rather than formal partnerships. Also, P03 described how customer referrals were like affiliate activities, but there is no formal system to track or reward. These sources suggest that third-party circulation was promotional in nature but rooted in social contexts rather than being formally established.

The activity was informal, due to the limitations in both capacity and money. P02 had little knowledge of affiliate marketing, whereas P05 and P20 pointed out the need for professional help. Therefore, participants relied on traditional referral channels such as repeat customers, relatives and community connections rather than supervised or commission-based structures.

The same qualitative pattern was found to be true for the central ones. Zain's Collection relied on repeat customers who shared Facebook posts and acted as unofficial brand promoters while Twinkle Crafts experienced intermittent spikes in customer sharing associated with trendy designs. These initiatives were largely ad hoc and non-quantitative. The mean score for affiliate-focused promotion (M = 5.04) is provided for reference only and is not presented as evidence of a statistically significant difference from the other aspects.

Digital engagement as everyday visibility work

Most often mentioned in the interviews and a focal case as a routine activity was digital engagement. The descriptive survey had the highest numerical mean (M = 5.42) but no inferential analysis was conducted. The participants consistently mentioned the act of sharing products, responding to customer enquiries and maintaining communication through Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. They said this was needed to be seen and to queue up customers and described the time and effort it would take.

P06 explained the anxiety of posting consistently: "If I don't post online my old clients will forget me." The same account also suggested an incomplete grasp of platform-specific features. P02 has identified social media as the main channel through which the enterprise interacts with its clients. These examples show that digital engagement is not just a promotional tool but a functional medium to showcase products, answer questions, process orders and maintain relationships with customers.

Digital engagement was sustained despite resource constraints, often through organic rather than paid activity. P07 described engaging with customer queries on Facebook without paid promotions, which shows dependence on organic engagement. Importantly, data on socio-cultural limitations were less comprehensive than data on temporal, skill-related and financial constraints. One female participant, P03, acknowledged that she felt uncomfortable about Facebook Live, but recognized its interactive potential. The research therefore reads public-facing discomfort as an observation particular to the participant rather than as evidence of a general disavowal of prominent digital formats by women entrepreneurs.

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Web optimization as awareness without accessibility

Although many participants acknowledged the importance of web optimization and structured online shop fronts, SEO and websites were not uniformly applied. Note that the survey mean (M = 3.40) is presented for descriptive purposes only. P09 talked about the need of a website but budget constraints for SEO. P10 questioned the value of a website that was not easily searchable via search engines. Qualitative accounts underscore a gap between the practical capacity to maintain web presence and the awareness of it.

The two persistent problems were the technical ability and the resources. P12 mentioned weak visibility, even with a website, and P11 explained limited SEO knowledge. P18 also spoke of the poor outcomes from non-optimized website efforts. Across these accounts, hiring developers or SEO specialists was seen as a challenge, while the daily demands of the business reduced the time available for learning or experimentation.

The pattern was further confirmed by the focal cases. Twinkle Crafts had strong organic visibility on Facebook without a developed website or SEO strategy while LongSpring had considered improving its website and applying targeted online promotion but did not maintain these efforts due to cost. Thus, the lower descriptive survey mean for web optimization is interpreted as numerically consistent but not statistically confirming the qualitative pattern.

Viral-content work as episodic and customer-driven

Work on viral content was described as episodic and difficult to manage. The survey mean (M = 3.97) is presented just as a descriptive context. Participants differentiated between content that was spread unusually widely and routine posting, but few described a deliberate or repeatable viral strategy. P14 explained the posting organically process, without being able to plan for virality, while P16 prioritized consumer input and reviews, over a planned viral campaign. Such accounts suggest that rather than as a controllable strategy, larger circulation was more often experienced as a consequence of audience reaction.

Participants also described virality as dependent on audience participation. P17 discussed the business's hopes that consumers would echo their message and P04 discussed the increase in circulation that came from customers sharing content. The revised analysis does not include modesty, family approval or household gate-keeping as established empirical themes, as the interview material provided limited evidence of wider socio-cultural restrictions in this dimension.

The focal cases further illustrate the episodic nature of viral circulation. Twinkle Crafts saw high engagement on embroidery related videos but that was not consistently replicated, while LongSpring saw one time increases in engagement around festival related posts. Therefore, the qualitative pattern is characterized by a selective and uncertain circulation, rather than a systematic strategy of viral content.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of key findings

The findings indicate that the adoption of online marketing among the examined micro and small apparel firms is better characterized as a mixed bag of practices rather than a binary online/offline distinction. The interviewees were all utilizing digital platforms, but their online marketing strategies were not cohesive and well integrated. Routine practices were more embedded in everyday work but technically complex or less predictable practices were often disjointed, informal and desired. The analysis is mostly qualitative and uses survey data only in a descriptive sense.

The second important revelation is about affiliate-focused marketing. Participants recognized the advantages of progress through others, but only a minority used formal affiliate programs. They depended on client referrals, repeat business and word of mouth. This means that the logic of affiliate marketing was there, but it was not formalized and was embedded in social environments. It was a digital version of word of mouth promotion and not a systematic commission-based agreement (Rihidima et al., 2025).

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The third discovery relates to web optimization. For companies websites and SEO are crucial instruments to build credibility and professionalism and grow their customer base. However, they were often difficult to upkeep." Website optimization was often perceived as ineffective, while optimization was linked to technical skills, external help, and financial resources (Lalitha & Sundari, 2025). This indicates a gap between digital hopes and the digital reality: much awareness about the possibilities of the Internet, but still limited access in practice.

The final and fourth finding is related to the effort of viral content. Entrepreneurs viewed viral content as an appealing means to boost visibility, but seldom as a conscious or sustainable approach. By contrast, viral reach was described as unpredictable, intermittent and consumer-oriented. Some posts did surprisingly well, especially during festivals or with visually appealing products, but overall participants felt that virality was not a phenomenon that could be generated consistently within the limits of the present context. Viral-content work was therefore opportunistic rather than systematic or strategic.

These results are consistent with a growing body of literature suggesting that low-cost, easily accessible digital solutions are more sustainable for small businesses than resource-intensive initiatives. This research contributes to an understanding of the expression of difference in the performance of routine activities, through difference in time, technical skill, financial resources and reliance on client networks. But the evidence on constraints on socio-cultural visibility was reduced. Only one participant explicitly expressed concerns regarding Facebook Live; interview findings do not support broad claims that modesty, familial responsibilities or domestic oversight inhibit female entrepreneurs. Thus, these ideas remain as contextual alternatives taken from prior literature, rather than universal conclusions from this sample.

Refining the four-dimensional model

The findings refine rather than confirm the four-dimensional model. First, the dimensions differed in practical accessibility: digital engagement was routinely enacted; affiliate-oriented promotion was often informal; web optimization required greater technical and financial input; and viral-content work was episodic and uncertain. These contrasts show why the four dimensions should not be treated as equivalent levels on a single adoption ladder.

Second, the results indicate that the dimensions are interdependent. Entrepreneurs did not practice one thing separate from the others. A strong form of digital engagement might have undergirded affiliate-oriented promotion by facilitating customer sharing and repeat interaction, while also setting the conditions in which viral circulation not only became possible but even necessary. Conversely, the burdens of digital engagement could lead to decreased time and attention for website optimization or formalized affiliate systems. The pattern of uneven adoption is thus not only determined by differences across dimensions, but also by the ways in which one dominant practice allows or limits another.

Third, contextual influences should be represented cautiously. The literature suggests that public visibility and acceptable forms of self-presentation may shape digital participation, and one interview account supported this possibility in relation to Facebook Live. However, the present qualitative evidence is not sufficient to establish household gatekeeping, modesty, or family approval as cross-case themes. The refined model therefore represents socio-cultural context as a potential influence on acceptability and public-facing comfort that requires further empirical testing.

Fourth, the results show that the model explains variation not just in uptake but also in strategic depth. Entrepreneurs can be strong in one dimension but weak in others. This mismatch may persist over time. In this sense, adoption is not linear**.** A company might crank up its digital presence but never move into deeper web optimization or structured**,** formalized affiliate systems.

Taken together, these refinements move the framework beyond a simple inventory of digital tools toward an account of uneven enactment. Figure 2 represents four features supported by the analysis: unequal feasibility across dimensions, interdependence among practices, differences in strategic depth, and contextual influences

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on acceptability. The last of these is deliberately represented as a contextual influence rather than a universally established constraint.

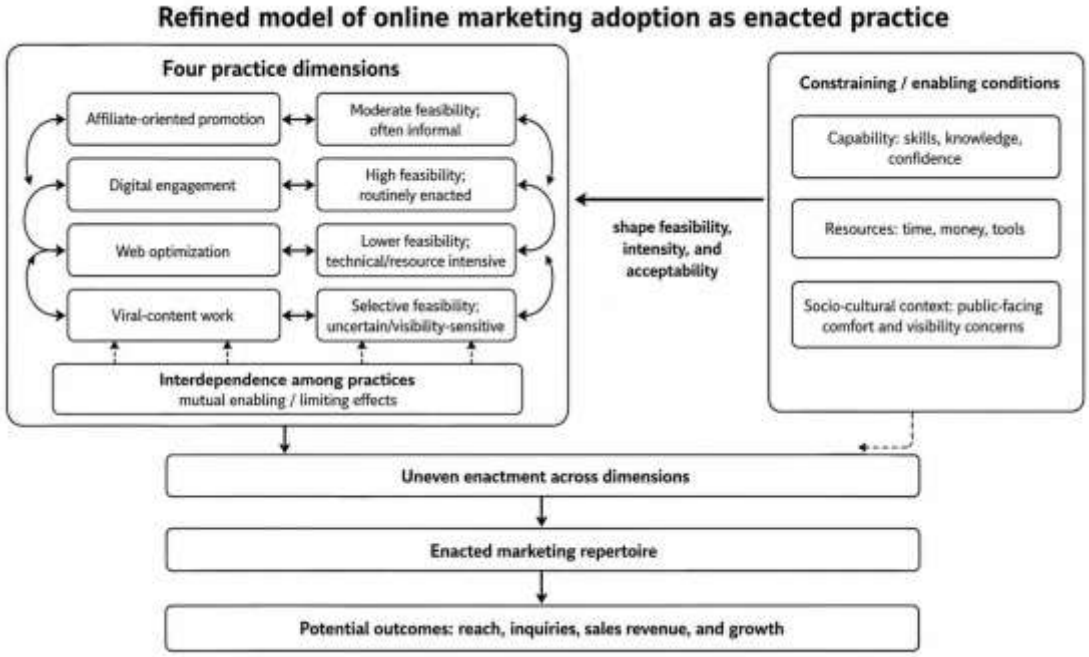


Figure 2: Refined conceptual model of online marketing adoption as enacted practice

Managerial and policy implications

The results suggest that similar businesses to those in this study need to be encouraged in a pragmatic and progressive manner that is consistent with the present behaviors of their owners. Instead of assuming readiness for sophisticated digital approaches, support could start with content scheduling, customer responses, basic analytics and platform-specific communication. Digital engagement was already embedded into daily work.

Affiliate-oriented support should also follow the current practice. Formal affiliate systems may be cumbersome for some microenterprises, but informal, referral-based marketing can be improved through customer-sharing routines, simple referral incentives, or partnerships with complementary businesses. Business support organizations and training providers could help entrepreneurs to formalize these existing practices without the imposition of prohibitively expensive or difficult to maintain systems.

The nature of the knowledge and cost barriers described by participants suggests that web optimization may need to be supplemented by more targeted technical assistance. Other practical options include subsidized advisory services, student-led technical clinics, simple local SEO training or shared website help. These implications are aimed at businesses with similar resource constraints and should not be taken as population-wide prescriptions.

Since the qualitative sample was predominantly female, it is important for support programs to be mindful of heterogeneity in entrepreneurs' preferences for public-facing participation. The policy implications of this study should be modest since the evidence is limited to particular accounts, not a general pattern. Training providers can offer a variety of participation options, e.g., non-live and lower-visibility formats, rather than assuming that content with high visibility is equally desirable for all entrepreneurs. More general statements about privacy, domestic roles or household constraints need to be more explicitly supported by further research.

Practical implications

The findings suggest that entrepreneurs are more likely to get immediate value from improving their existing engagement practices rather than leveraging every digital tool at their disposal. Relatively low investment could

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be enough to retain and develop customers with more frequent postings, better message management, simpler follow-up procedures and a better product presentation. Likewise, entrepreneurs can craft an intentional customer sharing strategy using informal referral nudges, community-based promotional exchanges, or repeat customer appreciation.

The research suggests that small business support providers and development agencies should be provided with practical and modular assistance. Talking about online marketing in the abstract won't help entrepreneurs who need help with the basics like posting, cataloguing, responding to customers and updating product information. Short training modules, low cost advisory services and local support are probably more effective than one-off awareness campaigns.

Results suggest practice-based tools are helpful for digital service providers and local technology companies. These tools comprise simpler catalogue features, easier message organization, customer-sharing functionalities, and low-effort options for creation and management of public-facing content. Firms like these can benefit from service design that encourages customer involvement and minimizes complexity (Siau et al., 2026). Entrepreneurs in general, in terms of their activities at the moment, of the constraints they suffer and of the practices that can be kept as a routine, should be supported.

CONCLUSION

This study applied four dimensional analytical frameworks to analyze the implementation of online marketing by micro and small clothing entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. The affiliate-oriented promotion was largely informal, and web optimization and viral content efforts were more discerning, with digital engagement being the dominant practice in the qualitative sample. These patterns are considered qualitative insights and are context specific and not prevalence estimates in the general population.

There are many important boundary conditions. The research is confined to micro and small apparel enterprises in Bangladesh. Therefore, the patterns identified may not be transferable to other industries, larger companies or other contexts with different infrastructure and market institutions. Eighteen of the twenty participants interviewed were female. This provides a fascinating insight into a predominantly female qualitative sample but does not support generalizations of women entrepreneurs as a whole. Thirdly, the number of direct participant accounts supporting socio-cultural rationales was lower than for capability and resource constraints and it would be unwise to generalize from this dataset to claims of modesty, privacy, family expectations or household gate-keeping.

From a methodological perspective, the 20 interviews and four focal cases provide richness of context but do not generalize to the full spectrum of Bangladeshi clothing microenterprises. A detailed supplementary survey was carried out among 510 persons. The frequencies, means and standard deviations in this dataset are not used for statistical generalization, population estimation, causal inference or significance testing. Further, quantitative distinctions between practice dimensions should not be conflated with statistically validated distinctions. This research should be viewed as a qualitative analysis and explanation of the practice pattern based on the descriptive survey framework, not demographic extrapolation.

These constraints open a number of avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies enable the observation of the evolution of online marketing as entrepreneurs learn, get support or adapt to the changing conditions of the platform. Cross-sectional and cross-regional comparisons can be used to test the scope of the four-dimensional model. Further studies may also explore offering tailored assistance via online platforms, digital analytics or referral education. It will show if entrepreneurs can progress beyond conventional involvement and adopt innovative online marketing strategies with support.

The research suggests that the adoption of online marketing is not a simple binary case of acceptance but is marked by inconsistent implementation and context-dependent interpretation. This discovery is significant because it shows how different marketing strategies can exist together on different strategic levels, even with limited resources. Future studies need to rigorously test the four-dimensional framework with large scale probability based surveys, thorough psychometric validation of the instruments, and comparative qualitative

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studies that could assess the transferability of the contextual patterns that have been found across different sectors, regions and gendered entrepreneurial contexts.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Interview transcripts and participant-level survey data are not publicly available because they contain confidential business and participant information and are subject to the study's ethical and data-management protections.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Anonymized profile of interview participants referenced in the qualitative analysis

(Author's own translation)

Code	Business	Location	Main issue highlighted
P01	Ritu Bibi	Khulna	Informal word-of-mouth and no formal affiliate marketing
P02	Jeans Boutique	Jessore	Limited affiliate knowledge and strong reliance on social media
P03	SS Handicraft and Fashion	Barishal	Customer sharing as quasi-affiliate promotion and discomfort with Facebook Live
P04	Girly Boutique	Bogura	Reliance on word-of-mouth and organic engagement rather than formal affiliate promotion
P05	Ina Fashion	Rajshahi	Positive view of affiliate marketing but lack of professional support
P06	Home-based business	Narayanganj	Burden of daily posting and limited platform literacy
P07	Smriti Boutique	Rangpur	Facebook-based customer response and no paid advertising
P08	Ina Boutique	Mymensingh	Preference for more personal forms of online communication
P09	Rajshahi Nakshi Ghar	Rajshahi	Need for a website but lack of budget for SEO
P10	RS Enterprise	Dhaka	Website use without SEO implementation
P11	Castle	Sylhet	Recognition of website value but limited SEO expertise
P12	Nab Shikha	Dinajpur	Existing website with low visibility due to weak SEO
P13	Kudrot House	Faridpur	Awareness of SEO value under financial constraint
P14	Aranya Boutique	Chittagong	No deliberate viral-content strategy and reliance on customer posting
P15	Setu	Jessore	Product videos generate engagement, but no systematic viral strategy
P16	Remas Boutique	Gaibandha	Use of customer feedback rather than planned viral-content work

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P17	Iqbal Boutique	Jessore	Short-term sales increase following a viral video
P18	Swarnali	Rajshahi	Website effort without optimization produced limited results
P19	Mahiya Fashion	Chittagong	Recognition of website value but lack of SEO expertise
P20	Bornil	Dhaka	Positive view of affiliate marketing but lack of professional support

Appendix B. Summary of embedded case businesses

(Author's own translation)

Case	Location	Online following	Main platforms	Most visible practice	Main constraint
Zain's Collection	Narayanganj	2.7K followers	Facebook	Customer sharing and organic engagement	Absence of a formal affiliate system
Uthan Boutique	Dhaka	1.5K followers	Facebook, Instagram	Feedback-led digital engagement	Limited scale and resources
LongSpring	Dhaka	2.9K likes / 3K followers	Facebook, Instagram	Consistent organic interaction	Limited paid promotion and SEO
Twinkle Crafts	Jessore	7.3K followers	Facebook	Craft-based visibility	Limited web and SEO knowledge

Note: The four embedded cases are drawn from the 20 participating interview organizations. Interview participants are identified through anonymized codes (P01–P20) to preserve confidentiality. Selected survey data are used in this article for descriptive contextualization only.

Appendix C. Survey measurement details used in this article (N = 510)

The parent questionnaire contained demographic questions, nine tool-level online-marketing items, a four-statement factor-level extension, and open-ended questions. The parent PCA grouped the nine tool-level indicators as follows: Affiliate Campaign (affiliate marketing + content marketing), Digital Engagement (social media + email + mobile commerce), Web Optimization (website + SEO), and Viral Content (viral marketing + blogs). For the present article, the four practice entries in Table 2 correspond to the factor-level extension reproduced below. Each was rated directly from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

(Author's own translation)

Article measure	Original questionnaire wording / content	Response and scoring	Use in this article
Affiliate-Oriented Promotion (original label: Affiliate Campaign)	"Content marketing and affiliate marketing form a cohesive 'affiliate campaign' to strengthen affiliate partnerships."	1–7 agreement; direct single item; no reverse coding	Descriptive context; M = 5.04, SD = 1.15

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Digital Engagement	"Social media, email, and mobile commerce marketing can be categorized as 'digital engagement' to enhance personalized interactions."	1–7 agreement; direct single item; no reverse coding	Descriptive context; M = 5.42, SD = 1.03
Web Optimization	"Website and SEO efforts represent 'web optimization,' working together to optimize online performance."	1–7 agreement; direct single item; no reverse coding	Descriptive context; M = 3.40, SD = 1.67
Viral-Content Work (original label: Viral Content)	"Viral marketing and blogs can collectively serve as 'viral content' to drive massive visibility."	1–7 agreement; direct single item; no reverse coding	Descriptive context; M = 3.97, SD = 1.17
Perceived Sales Revenue	The thesis methodology records the representative outcome statement: "Our organization's sales revenue has increased due to our online marketing activity."	1–7 agreement; perceptual outcome	Descriptive context; M = 1.19, SD = 0.459
Parent tool-level indicators	Website; SEO; Content Marketing; Affiliate Marketing; Viral Marketing; Email; Social Media; Blogs; Mobile Commerce.	1–7 agreement items in parent quantitative phase	Used to establish the four-factor structure in the parent study
Profile and open-ended context	Gender, age, education, years in industry; challenges; most effective tool; additional comments.	Categorical and short-text responses	Descriptive/supporting context only

Note: The survey used systematic random sampling from a purposively constructed frame of 1,264 digitally active micro and small clothing businesses identified through BSCIC databases and industry networks; 510 completed questionnaires were analyzed. The SPSS appendix reports N = 510 for each observed online-marketing variable and does not report an imputation procedure. The four factor-level statements shown above are positively keyed single items, so no summing/averaging, reverse coding, or Cronbach's alpha is required for the four Table 2 practice means. In the broader parent-study validation, Cronbach's alpha was reported to exceed .70 for all composite scales, although individual coefficients were not tabulated.

Appendix D. Domains of the semi-structured interview guide

(Author's own translation)

Domain	Main focus	Illustrative prompt
Business background	Entrepreneurial role and business history	"Please tell me about your business and how it started."
Online marketing adoption	Initial uptake and current use of online marketing	"When did you begin using online marketing?"
Affiliate-oriented promotion	Word-of-mouth, customer sharing, and affiliate-like practices	"How do customers usually hear about your products?"
Digital engagement	Posting, messaging, and customer interaction	"How do you communicate with customers online?"

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Web optimization	Website use, SEO, and online visibility	"Do you have a website or try to improve online visibility?"
Viral-content work	Widely shared posts, trend-based content, and festival content	"Have you tried to create content that could spread widely?"
Constraints and future plans	Time, money, skills, socio-cultural limits, and support needs	"What support would strengthen your online marketing?"

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