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## The Emerging Digital Ecosystem of Online Marketing for Startups in the Covid-19 Era: Insights from Northern Province Sri Lanka.

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the emerging digital ecosystem of online marketing for startups in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 era. Using in-depth interviews with 18 entrepreneurs who started their businesses during the pandemic, this study uses qualitative approaches to explore the developing digital ecosystem of internet marketing for startups during the COVID-19 era. The results show important patterns and takeaways from their experiences, emphasizing how quickly marketing tactics may be modified to meet novel obstacles. Digital marketing technologies were rapidly adopted by numerous startups, enabling live-streamed meetings and interactive content to foster client interaction. One key strategy that has evolved is community involvement. According to the data, there has been a noticeable change in the way entrepreneurs engage with their target audiences. To keep up consumer connection, social media became essential. Customized outreach, including branded email marketing and regionalized search engine optimization initiatives, has demonstrated efficacy in augmenting client retention and exposure. Brand reach and engagement were further increased through partnerships with regional influencers. Startups proved to be flexible as many shifted to online models, which resulted in a steady rise in online sales. All things considered, this study highlights how the pandemic required a reassessment of marketing tactics, highlighting the significance of digital involvement and strengthening community bonds. With the world going digital, the information these firms have obtained can offer useful direction for future marketing campaigns.

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a profound impact on how businesses operate globally, quickening the transition to digitization and changing customer behaviour (Andrabi et al., 2024). The pandemic has brought with it previously unheard-of opportunities as well as obstacles for businesses, especially in the field of online marketing (Kumar and Purushotham, 2021). Digital ecosystems have emerged as essential lifelines for survival and growth when old company paradigms collapse. Online marketing, which was before an auxiliary channel, is now an essential component of business strategy, helping companies connect and interact with their target markets in new and creative ways .

Social media, search engine marketing, influencer partnerships, data analytics, and other (Denga *et al.*, 2022). platforms and technologies are all part of the growing digital ecosystem that is online marketing (van der Vlist and Helmond, 2021). These tools have given startups creative ways to increase revenue, lead generation, and brand exposure. However, new businesses face both opportunities and challenges as a result of the digital platforms' quick expansion and changing consumer demands (Veile *et al.*, 2022). The key to a startup's success is knowing how to successfully navigate this changing environment.

Furthermore, a lot of research findings quickly become outdated due to the swift speed at which technology is developing and the changing habits of consumers. Comprehensive studies that examine how entrepreneurs have responded to these developments in real time are scarce, especially when considering the backdrop of a pandemic that is still raging worldwide (Giones *et al.*, 2020). The complex tactics used by startups, their triumphs and setbacks, and the wider ramifications of these tactics for the digital marketing ecosystem are frequently overlooked in the literature.

Additionally, although a lot of study has been done on the efficacy of specific online marketing tools and tactics, more research is required to combine these aspects into a comprehensive understanding of how startups operate in the digital sphere .There is still much to learn about how different online marketing channels interact with one another and how companies may use this knowledge to their advantage.

One of the main areas of research is how startups changed their marketing approaches in reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak, both traditional marketing channels and customer behavior have been impacted by the outbreak (Sheth, 2020). It is necessary to conduct research to find out how startups have modified their digital marketing strategies to stay competitive and relevant in this quickly evolving landscape. Evaluating the efficacy of the different digital marketing platforms and techniques that entrepreneurs employed during the epidemic is another crucial problem. Due to their limited resources, startups have to give their marketing campaigns top priority. To determine which digital tools like influencer partnerships, social media, and search engine marketing have helped businesses most accomplish their marketing goals (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021)

As a result of the epidemic, there has been a notable shift in customer behavior toward online shopping and a rise in digital interaction (Gu *et al.*, 2021). It is crucial to look into the strategies used by startups to interact

with customers in this new digital environment. Understanding how consumer tastes have changed and how entrepreneurs have modified their marketing strategies to address these changing needs should be the main focus of research.

In the digital marketing environment, startups encounter particular difficulties due to their tight budgets, inexperience, and fierce rivalry (Chowdhury, 2022). It's critical to pinpoint the precise obstacles companies face while putting internet marketing plans into action during the pandemic (Klein and Todesco, 2021). The goal of the business startups during this outbreak is to determine how these obstacles impact startups' capacity to use digital marketing efficiently what kind of support systems might be implemented to deal with these problems, and figure out how the epidemic will affect startup sustainability and growth over the long run through internet marketing (Silva *et al.*, 2023a). Even though a lot of businesses have rapidly adjusted, it's crucial to assess whether these changes have resulted in long-term growth and how they might affect marketing plans going forward in a post-pandemic environment (Chakraborti *et al.*, 2022)

To reach their audience, a lot of startups employ a variety of digital marketing channels. To develop unified and successful marketing strategies, they must investigate how to integrate several channels, including social media, email marketing, content marketing, and paid advertising for understanding how entrepreneurs prioritize and balance various channels to optimize their impact is part of this (Skala, 2019)

For companies, calculating the return on investment (ROI) and other performance indicators for their digital marketing initiatives can be difficult. Research ought to concentrate on the metrics used by startups to gauge their success as well as how they assess the value of their online marketing initiatives (Nikhil, 2021). Examining the most effective methods for monitoring and evaluating marketing success inside the digital environment is part of this. The pandemic has increased the demand for these two qualities in the marketing industry. One is examining how entrepreneurs have used unique and inventive strategies to stand out in a crowded digital environment. The second one is case studies of effective campaigns and tactics that have arisen throughout the pandemic is one way to do this.

Though research on digital marketing and its effects on established organizations is expanding, there is a noticeable lack of studies that particularly address startups during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of previous research focuses on big businesses or general digital marketing tactics, avoiding the special difficulties and chances that startups encounter during a crisis.

Therefore This study attempts to give a thorough grasp of how entrepreneurs traverse the developing online marketing ecosystem in the COVID-19 age by tackling these research concerns. Startups looking to optimize their digital marketing strategy and adjust to the changing business environment will find great value in the findings. The goal of the research is to investigate the dynamics of online marketing for startups in the COVID-19 age, with a particular emphasis on the tactics, resources, and products that make up this online ecosystem.

This study looks at how startups changed their marketing strategies in reaction to the pandemic in an attempt to offer guidance for future marketing campaigns by identifying emerging patterns and best practices.

### **Research Objectives**

To assess how new startups have modified their internet marketing plans to address particular difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To determine and evaluate which digital marketing techniques and channels, in the COVID-19 period, have helped them most successfully achieve their objectives.

To investigate how pandemic-related adjustments made to their digital marketing strategies have affected their long-term viability and expansion.

## **2. Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the use of digital marketing tactics in several sectors, culminating in the amplified expansion of e-commerce and a necessity for enterprises to augment their online visibility (Aleksandra *et al.*, 2021). Social media usage skyrocketed during the pandemic, allowing marketers to engage with customers and modify content to convey empathy. Budgets for digital advertising were redirected into campaigns that prioritized results (Patma *et al.*, 2021). The epidemic brought to light the importance of agile tactics and data-driven marketing, requiring firms to adjust to real-time data and changing consumer behaviour (Dash and Chakraborty, 2021)

Startups frequently encounter major difficulties, particularly when trying to establish brand awareness on a tight budget (Silva *et al.*, 2021). It will take effective digital marketing to get beyond these obstacles. Blogs and videos are examples of content marketing that improves SEO and draws viewers in. Social media marketing facilitates community building and direct communication with potential clients (Olorunyomi Stephen Joel *et al.*, 2024). Personalized campaigns in email marketing help to strengthen ties with customers. Pay-per-click (PPC) advertising can provide rapid exposure, but to be profitable, it needs to be managed carefully. Using performance measurements to refine marketing tactics requires data analytics. Startups may effectively drive development and increase their visibility by utilizing these strategies (Lizarelli *et al.*, 2021). Significant turning points and the creation of new channels have characterized the growth of digital marketing, radically changing how companies interact with their customers. Originally, email marketing and the first websites were made possible by the internet's surge in the late 1990s, allowing firms to communicate with consumers directly (Dsouza and Panakaje, 2023). With the introduction of social media platforms in the 2000s, consumer

involvement and connection were transformed, and as a result, social media marketing became an essential part of digital strategies (Mujahid and Mubarak, 2021).

Additionally, as companies work to improve exposure and offer helpful material to draw in and keep customers, the convergence of search engine marketing (SEM) and content marketing has become crucial (Marina Basimakopoulou *et al.*, 2022). Digital marketing technology was adopted at a faster pace due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of adapting quickly to changing consumer habits (Seshadri *et al.*, 2023)

Traditional marketing strategies were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 epidemic, which forced companies to hasten their digital transition. Due to health concerns, organizations had to rely more and more on digital marketing techniques to sustain client engagement and sales as in-person encounters decreased (Mishrif and Khan, 2023) With many firms implementing social media and e-commerce to efficiently reach consumers, the shift to online platforms became imperative (Gede Sri Darma and Putu Teddy Noviana, 2020). This shift not only lessened the pandemic's immediate effects but also made it clear that marketing techniques must continuously adapt to the digital age (Fischer *et al.*, 2020) As a result, during this crisis, companies that adopted digital tools showed increased resilience and adaptation (Ang *et al.*, 2022).

Traditional marketing strategies were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 epidemic, which forced companies to hasten their digital transition. Businesses depended more and more on digital marketing techniques to sustain consumer engagement and sales when in-person interactions decreased as a result of health concerns (Good *et al.*, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed how people spend and consume media, especially when it comes to internet commerce. As social distancing measures were implemented, a significant number of consumers began to shop for groceries online (Baarsma and Groenewegen, 2021). Globally, people followed suit as they looked for safer ways to shop, which resulted in a sharp increase in e-commerce activity (Cavallo *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, as a result of people searching for information and amusement while confined to their homes, media consumption patterns saw a significant shift, with a rise in the consumption of digital content (Toubes *et al.*, 2021). These modifications underscore the significance of digital platforms in the new normal and are indicative of a larger shift in consumer behaviour.

Digital marketing presents startups with several challenges, including limited resources, a lack of experience, and fierce competition. Budgetary constraints prevent startups from investing in all-encompassing marketing plans, which may hinder their ability to successfully use cutting-edge digital tools and platforms (Wiesenberg *et al.*, 2020). Smaller firms find it difficult to handle the complexities of digital marketing, from social media management to SEO, which is made worse by the absence of internal experience (Mukul *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, well-resourced established businesses compete fiercely with startups, making it difficult for them to become visible and achieve traction in crowded industries

The COVID-19 pandemic increased these issues, disrupting typical corporate processes and affecting customer behaviour. As more companies shifted to digital platforms, the competition grew as the cost of online advertising increased and the digital area filled up more (Levine and MacBride, 2021). Due to their limited resources, entrepreneurs found it more and more difficult to compete, and the quick transition to digital platforms required new skills that many of them lacked (Agrawal *et al.*, 2020). This circumstance brought to light the necessity of flexible and affordable digital marketing tactics, highlighting the vital role that creativity and adaptation play in managing crises.

Several important conclusions are drawn from studies on the long-term effects of digital marketing adjustments on the viability and growth of startups. According to research by (Rizvanović *et al.*, 2023), startups see a notable increase in market reach and customer engagement when they adopt digital marketing trends, such as utilizing social media and data analytics. According to research by (Marirajan Murugan and Natarajan, 2022). firms that use agile digital strategies have stronger customer loyalty and brand resilience, which puts them in a better position for long-term survival. Furthermore, a study by (Das *et al.*, 2020). shows that over time, greater survival rates and competitive advantage are correlated with ongoing adaptability to developments in digital marketing.

Startups that quickly adjusted to changes in digital marketing during the COVID-19 epidemic witnessed significant changes in market positioning, brand perception, and overall performance. According to research by (Silva *et al.*, 2023b). companies that used e-commerce and digital channels to reach a wider audience witnessed improvements in their market placement. According to (Modgil *et al.*, 2022), significant online engagement and trust were fostered by agile digital initiatives, which improved brand perception. Furthermore, as reported by (Stalmachova *et al.*, 2021), startups that used digital transformation demonstrated superior company performance, as evidenced by higher sales and customer retention rates, in contrast to those that employed less adaptable techniques. This emphasizes digital agility is important to long-term growth and maintaining a competitive advantage.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, many startups are sticking with and modifying their digital strategies from the pandemic (Meha Agarwal and Dr. Archana Sharma, 2024)notes that startups prioritize digital channels because they have proven effective in attracting and retaining customers. (Morrison *et al.*, 2022) point to some pandemic-related innovations, such as: While remote customer service and virtual events are being retained for their cost-effectiveness and reach, startups are also modifying their strategies to incorporate more hybrid approaches. (Griva *et al.*, 2023). emphasize that startups are refining their digital marketing strategies to blend online and offline engagement, aiming to balance efficiency and personal interaction to improve customer experience and long-term growth.

According to (Ajzen, 2020) Theory of Planned Behavior, attitudes, subjective standards, and perceived behavioural control, all have an impact on intentions, which in turn drive behaviour. TPB can clarify how shifting perceptions of control over online resources, shifting attitudes about digital marketing, and the impact

of industry standards influenced startup strategies during the epidemic (Xu *et al.*, 2023). The growing uptake of digital marketing is indicative of changing perspectives and an improved sense of control over online marketing endeavours. During the COVID-19 pandemic, startups' positive attitudes towards digital marketing tools drove their rapid adoption. The pandemic highlighted the benefits of online channels, creating subjective norms and a benchmark for industry peers. The availability of accessible digital tools enhanced their perceived behavioural control, allowing them to quickly implement online strategies (Modgil *et al.*, 2022).

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory by (Everett Rogers, 2003) describes how novel concepts and advancements in technology proliferate among people. This approach helps explain why startups during the epidemic adopted digital marketing tools so quickly ((Kuckertz *et al.*, 2020). Startups, who were frequently early adopters of digital advances, influenced more general industry norms and hastened the acceptance of new techniques and tools for digital marketing (Obor, 2023). It explains how startups quickly adopted digital marketing innovations like social media advertising and e-commerce platforms, accelerated by the pandemic. This rapid adoption influenced industry practices, demonstrating how early startups can drive widespread change and influence various sectors (Khuan *et al.*, 2023).

Theories of strategic management, like the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) and Porter's Competitive Forces Framework (Porter, 1980), shed light on how companies modify their business plans. While RBV highlights the need for distinctive digital resources and capabilities in establishing a competitive advantage (Zahra, 2021), Porter's framework aids in the analysis of competitive pressures and the necessity for differentiation through digital channels. Startups skillfully navigated the obstacles posed by the pandemic by redefining their strategic approaches through the utilization of digital tools and resource optimization (Ali, 2024) The pandemic intensified competitive pressures for startups, particularly through digital channels. Porter's Competitive Forces Framework and Resource-Based View (RBV) highlight the importance of leveraging unique resources for competitive advantage, such as social media, SEO, and online customer engagement, to sustain and grow businesses(Hammerschmidt *et al.*, 2024).

### **3. Research Methodology**

A qualitative study was conducted to understand how entrepreneurs adapted their digital marketing strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, using in-depth interviews and case studies with founders, CMOs, and digital marketing managers to evaluate their strategies. 18 startup decision-makers were selected using purposive sampling based on their experience with digital marketing tactics and their insights on pandemic adjustments. Consent was obtained for video or phone interviews, which were recorded to investigate participants' marketing tactics, difficulties, and thought processes, and the interviews were transcribed for analysis. Case studies were conducted on those 18 companies to determine the most effective digital marketing strategies and platforms during the pandemic. Case studies from companies showcasing significant digital marketing achievements were selected for analysis, spanning various industries, and interviews with key executives

were conducted to gain comprehensive insights (see Table 1, that shows the profile of the sample of the study). The study evaluated the effectiveness of various marketing tactics, including live observations and longitudinal interviews, on startups' long-term profitability and expansion amidst the pandemic. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 18 startups to evaluate the long-term effects of pandemic-related changes on company performance, market position, and brand perception, recording and examining the changes.

**Table1: Profile of the sample selected**

Types of the startups	Age	sex	Target market	Location
Restaurant	35	Male	Local families	Jaffna
Beauty parlour	37	Male	Young adults 18-30	Jaffna
Care taker service	43	female	Elderly individuals and their families , busy professionals , disabilities, post surgery rehabilitatio patients	Mannar
Tailoring	44	Female	Brides and grooms , individuals seeking custom clothing	Killinochchi
Legal service	54	Male	Individuals and business	Jaffna
Tutorial class	32	Female	Children and teenagers aged 6-18	Mannar
Fresh Food producer	60	male	Health consious consumers , families	Mullaithivu
Handycraft maker	39	Female	Gift shoppers and artisans, craft enthusiasts.	Killinochchi
Palmeria based products manufactures	47	Female	Food manufactirues, restaurants, beverage companies, nd individuals	Jaffna
Tutorial and coaching centre	55	Male	Adults learners and professionals	Killinochchi
Fitness centre	57	Male	Health conscious individuals, weight loss seekers.	Mullaithivu
Retail shop	61	Male	General consumers , families	Mannar
Lunch delivery service	30	Female	Busy professionals , students, health ocnsious individuals.	Jaffna
Juice bar	28	Male	Eco-conscious consumers, Dietary Restriction groups.	Killinochchi
Retail business	26	Male	General consumers , families, gift shoppers.	Mannar
Home food delivery	34	Male	Busy professional and families	Mullaithivu
Home décor	36	Female	Home owners, renters, inetrior design enthusiasts	Jaffna
Cofee shop	64	Male	Tourists, remote workers, students, Hostellers	Killinochchi

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in qualitative case studies and interviews. Open coding was used to code data and identify new themes. The themes were categorized into overarching themes, such as adaptation strategies, marketing effectiveness, and long-term impact. To methodically examine the marketing materials and campaign data from the case studies, content analysis was used. The content was categorized according to themes including innovation, channel efficacy, and sorts of strategies.



The results were combined to offer a thorough summary of effective marketing strategies and how they affect long-term business growth. Triangulation was used to enhance the reliability of conclusions, comparing results from case studies, document analysis, and interviews. A member verification process ensured accuracy. Participants provided feedback on preliminary results, and the researcher's role was recorded in a reflective journal. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed about the study's goals and withdrawal options. Participants were pseudonymized, data was stored securely, and only the research team had access. Clear communication about study goals, procedures, and effects fostered collaboration and confidence.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

This section contains the results of qualitative data analysis and in-depth interviews with business owners who opened their doors during this turbulent time. This study hopes to shed light on important themes and lessons that came to light during their travels by looking at their experiences, tactics, and the results of their adaptations. These results shed light on the pandemic's rapid reactions and offer insightful guidance for future marketing strategies in a world going digital. A thorough description of the data analysis procedure is given in Table 2, which shows how codes were combined into subcategories and, in the end, how themes that relate to the study's goals were found.

Many startups moved faster to adopt digital marketing tools. To continue servicing customers through live-streamed sessions and recorded workouts. Startup owners stressed the importance of becoming involved in their local communities. A lunch shop launched a campaign to give away free lunch to clerical workers, caretakers, and doctors in the hospitals which had a significant positive impact on their clientele and improved relations with the local community. There was a noticeable change in the way companies interacted with their target market. One start-up changed the way it promoted its products to emphasize relaxation and self-care, positioning loungewear as the new standard. Social media has emerged as a vital instrument for preserving client involvement. One recently opened restaurant offered social media followers the opportunity to interact and engage with the business while displaying its services through virtual cookery lessons.

Tailoring business reports indicate a shift toward more regular and customized social media interaction. A weekly message with new designs, and patterns were regularly sent to the clients to keep them interactive with the business, and it greatly raised open and engagement rates. Many startups realized how crucial it was to make their web presence more localized. A bakery saw an increase in exposure and queries from nearby clients after optimizing its website for local keywords. Social media platforms have become essential avenues for promoting brands and engaging with customers. To promote new arrivals and run interactive polls, a boutique apparel business used Instagram Stories. This improved interaction and led to quick purchases.

Startups that emphasized narrative in their material witnessed an increase in client retention. To build stronger relationships with customers and increase traffic to their online store, they started a blog where they shared

information about their brewing process and involvement in community initiatives. One of the owners said, Tailored email campaigns worked well for preserving client relationships. Personalized coaching regimens and inspirational messages were given by an online dancing class, which increased client retention and engagement. Organizing webinars and online gatherings has shown to be an effective approach to include clients and demonstrate proficiency. To enhance leads and brand authority, a digital marketing agency arranged a series of free webinars on managing online marketing during the pandemic.

Table 2: Codes, sub-categories and Themes of digital marketing plans, strategies, and the impacts of business startups during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Startups	Responses /codes	Sub categories	Themes (objectives of the study)
Resturant	We realized we had to go digital overnight, Our showroom is now our website."	Internet marketing as -first tactics	How the startups modifies their inernet marketing plans
Beauty parlour	"We wanted to show that we care about our community's well-being, so we shifted our messaging to highlight local support initiatives."	Consdidering community wellbeing	
Care taker service	"We used platforms like Instagram and Facebook not just to sell but to connect with our audience through stories and polls."	Connections via social media	
Tailoring	"We started sending weekly updates, not just about promotions, but also sharing tips and stories that mattered to our customers."	Updating content strtegies	
Legal service	Our open rates increased dramatically as a result of segmenting our email lists and personalizing messages according to user behavior.	email marketing	
Tutorial class	"We revamped our Google My Business listing to ensure we showed up for local searches, especially when people were looking for delivery options."	Prioritize local SEO and online listings.	
Fresh Food producer	"It evolved into a means of preserving connections. We used Instagram to connect with our audience daily," said one owner.	Social media engagement	
Handycraft maker	"We told anecdotes about our team and our experience together. Consumers felt a genuine connection with us."	Content marketing and story telling	
Palmeria based products manufactures	"We segmented our email lists and tailored messages based on customer behaviour, which significantly improved our open rates."	Email marketing and personalisation	

Tutorial and coaching centre	"We hosted free online workshops, which not only added value but also introduced potential clients to our services."	Webinars and virtual events	Impact on long-term viability and expansion
Fitness centre	"Partnering with influencers allowed us to tap into their follower base, which was crucial for building brand awareness."	Influencer collaboration	
Retail shop	A business owner said, "Optimizing our Google My Business listing was a game-changer; we saw a spike in local inquiries."	Enhanced local SEO strategies	
Lunch delivery service	"By focusing on our customers' needs and providing support, we've built relationships that will last well beyond the pandemic."	Strengthen customer relationship	
Juice bar	"We learned to be flexible and adapt our strategies on the fly," We now include this agility into our fundamental business strategy."	Adaptability and Agility	
Retail business	"Investing in our online store has paid off; it's now a significant part of our revenue,"	E-commerce growth	
Home food delivery	"Our online presence now attracts customers from different regions, which we never imagined before."	Increased market reach	
Home décor	"We took the time to evaluate our brand positioning and marketing channels, ensuring we align with our customers' evolving needs."	Longterm strategy reassessment	
Coffee shop	"Our community initiatives have become a cornerstone of our brand identity, attracting customers who value social responsibility."	Sustainability and community focus	

Businesses were able to reach a larger audience by working with local influencers. A traditional food-making start-up increased social media engagement and sales significantly by partnering with local fitness stars to promote recipes. Startups that gave local search engine optimization (SEO) a priority saw increases in community visibility and engagement. A legal service company that maximized its web presence and concentrated on local keywords saw a rise in the number of queries from clients in the area who were looking for their services. Business start-up owners stated that the pandemic-era customized communication tactics increased client loyalty. A nearby artisan store used social media and email to regularly check in with customers, which enhanced repeat business and customer retention. During the pandemic, many organizations' agility was heightened by the need to quickly change course. For instance, a fitness facility that had previously concentrated on in-person instruction moved smoothly to online sessions. Their capacity to adapt allowed them to continue operating while also creating new sources of income.

Companies that improved their online sales during the epidemic reported steady growth in their online sales. A shop of home décor increased the variety of products it offered online, which led to a 50% rise in online sales over pre-pandemic levels. By converting to digital marketing, companies were able to expand their customer base beyond their local marketplaces. Some startups said that they had to review and improve their long-term marketing plans as a result of the pandemic. To improve customer acquisition, a tech business switched from general marketing to focused efforts. The pandemic's dedication to community assistance has had a long-lasting impact on how people view a business.

This study examines how digital marketing tactics helped companies respond to pandemic issues, with a strong emphasis on community involvement, agility, and tailored communication to build resilience and retain customers. One of the key elements of a business's survival and expansion was its capacity to change course swiftly in response to shifting conditions. Numerous firms made the shift from conventional models to digital platforms, demonstrating the need for flexibility during difficult times (Fletcher and Griffiths, 2020)

Startups that engaged in community service, such as a lunch store providing complimentary lunches to critical employees, experienced an improvement in customer relations and heightened loyalty. These initiatives not only increased brand awareness but also created a feeling of goodwill that was well-received by consumers. Other organizations should take a cue from this community-centric strategy, which emphasizes that real interaction can result in ongoing consumer support and loyalty (Pilz Sonnby and Knutsson, 2022)

According to the research of (Wibowo *et al.*, 2020), there has been a noticeable movement in marketing strategies towards digital marketing, with social media playing a crucial role in sustaining client involvement. Companies that used interactive content on platforms like Instagram, including online cooking lessons or surveys, experienced an increase in sales and engagement. Personalized email marketing that was tailored to the recipient's needs also worked well for client retention. This reflects a wider trend that says companies should use digital tools to connect with their audience on a deeper level than only for marketing purposes (Lim and Rasul, 2022)

To increase their exposure in their communities, many businesses made a strategy pivot that is shown in the emphasis on local search engine optimization (SEO) (Kundu *et al.*, 2023). Businesses that optimized their web presence for local searches saw a rise in inquiries and engagement from local customers. This deliberate emphasis on localized marketing highlights the significance of comprehending the target market and modifying online tactics to satisfy regional demands, particularly in an increasingly dominated environment by digital technology (Bai *et al.*, 2022) By using blogs and social media to discuss their experiences, beliefs, and community involvement, startups could develop stronger customer relationships and increase brand loyalty (Troise *et al.*, 2022). This argument matches with similar findings derived by (Fischer-Appelt and Dernbach, 2023) which says For companies trying to stand out in a competitive market, this narrative-driven approach can be an essential tactic.

The epidemic has permanently changed the expectations and behaviour of consumers. The emphasis on community engagement and tailored communication is probably going to stick around as businesses review their long-term marketing strategy (Thompson & Roberts, 2021). Companies that have incorporated these components into their operational philosophy may find that they are better equipped to handle difficulties along their path to reach the goal (Ngai, & Singh, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

The study highlights the resilience of startups during the pandemic, highlighting their success largely due to agility, community involvement, and tailored communication, resulting in strong client retention and lasting relationships. The study underscores the importance of adaptability and sensitivity in business owners, emphasizing storytelling and community involvement for brand identity creation and strong online presence, particularly through social media and local SEO tactics. Entrepreneurs' experiences during the pandemic offer valuable lessons on resilience and creativity. Emphasizing community engagement, modern technologies, and genuine dialogue can enhance companies' readiness for future challenges.

The study's qualitative approach has limitations, including limited applicability to other businesses and geographical areas, a sample size that may not accurately reflect experiences, and the need for continued research to account for changing SEO tactics and environmental changes.

Future research should explore quantitative studies, long-term pandemic-driven strategies, and digital marketing tools' effectiveness across industries and regions for practical business guidance. Studying emerging technologies like AI and data analytics in post-pandemic marketing strategies and tracking consumer behaviour and business practices over time could enhance understanding.

### Competing internet

The authors declare that there are no competing interests related to this study

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