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Social media marketing adoption: Is it important for homestay operators in Malaysia?

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ABSTRACT

Social media marketing has become a vital tool for businesses to promote their products and services, yet its adoption among SMEs in Malaysia, particularly homestay operators, remains limited. This study examines the factors affecting the adoption of social media marketing by homestay operators in Malaysia. Based on a cross-sectional research design, data were collected from 208 operators in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, and Johor via a self-administered questionnaire. Structural Equation Modelling identified that customer pressure and preference, as well as competitive pressure, significantly influence the adoption of social media marketing. In contrast, perceived cost and digital skills were found to have a lesser impact. These results offer valuable insights for policymakers to understand adoption trends among Malaysian SMEs. Social media marketing presents a cost-effective strategy for SMEs, providing extensive connectivity and interaction capabilities. The study underscores SMEs' need to embrace new technologies to enhance their marketing strategies and improve business outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) today has shown the transformation of the Internet entering a new phase (Asamoah et al., 2024; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021). The use of the Internet changed when the transformation process it underwent shifted from a browsing medium to a transaction medium that enables users to engage in various online activities. Today, the Internet is used for personal purposes and business sustainability. There are five roles of the Internet in business: communication, promotion, product distribution, management, and research (Carson, 2005). The transformation process of the Internet continues to occur over time, moving from a transaction medium to a social medium that offers two-way communication. This new generation of the Internet is known as social media, and it has changed users' knowledge, needs, and expectations in search, information sharing, and

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decision-making processes (Rejeb et al., 2022; Vila-Boix et al., 2023). Nowadays, the public has started using social media as a business platform for buying and selling, making inquiries, and obtaining feedback (Gunelius, 2011). The characteristics of social media like being easily accessible, affordable, and fast, make today's information sharing more focused on uploading images and videos through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Ma et al., 2024).

Previous studies have also mentioned that the development of the tourism industry today is influenced by the characteristics of social media that further facilitate business activities between service providers and tourists (Alrashid, 2012). In addition, Mohamad (2022a) argues that the influence of social media should not be ignored by tourism businesses if they want to remain competitive in the market. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need to understand and adapt to market changes to leverage the opportunities created by social media as well as market their products and services (Hoang et al., 2024; Litvin et al., 2018; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This also applies to budget accommodation sectors such as budget hotels, homestays, guesthouses, chalets, and motels, which are seen to have limited resources and primarily focus on the local market and existing businesses (Mohamad, 2022b). Various factors will influence a budget accommodation establishment to adopt social media as their marketing medium, such as the size of the organisation, culture, market trends, cost, competition, and infrastructure. However, there is still a research gap on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators, particularly in Malaysia.

Research on the topic of social media is still insufficient despite its significance and its potential as an effective marketing tool. Existing studies focus on social media usage in large organisations, but seem to neglect its adoption by entrepreneurs, particularly in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Irwin et al., 2023; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021). Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the current level, patterns, and factors that influence the utilisation of social media as a marketing tool, specifically from the perspective of Malaysia (Bakar & Ahmad Zaini, 2022; Paracha et al., 2023). Hence, this study aimed to investigate factors that influence the homestay operators in Malaysia, particularly in Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor to adopt social media as their marketing medium.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Marketing Adoption

Generally, social media marketing can help SMEs increase website traffic, create conversations with audiences, enhance brand awareness, generate a brand identity and positive brand association, and encourage communication and interaction with audiences (Asamoah *et al.*, 2024; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021). Social media marketing includes posting text, images, videos, and other content that drives audience engagement. The more engagement between SMEs and the audience, the easier it is for SMEs to achieve their marketing goals (Mohamad, 2022b). Previous studies consistently indicated that social media marketing adoption as a marketing medium has positively increased business performance, generated sales, and enhanced business relationships with customers (Ali Abbasi & Abdul Rahim, 2022; Irwin et al., 2023). In Malaysia, the adoption of ICT among SMEs is still low. It could be due to a lack of information, skills, or resources, all of which are required to use social media for marketing goals in an efficient manner (Appel et al., 2019; Bakar & Ahmad Zaini, 2022).

It is important to ensure the effectiveness, efficiency, and competitive advantage of SMEs, the applications and utilisation of modern ICT are necessary to help improve the growth of SMEs, as well as the economy of a country (Liu et al., 2020). Through social media marketing, consumers easily connect with businesses' products, services, and brands regardless of time or geographic boundaries. From a business perspective, social media allows SMEs to get feedback from consumers to improve the quality of their products, services, and brands. As social media is based on Web 2.0, it can help SMEs to connect, not

only with consumers but also with other enterprises to improve their business widely. Scholars have discussed social media usage by entrepreneurs, and this topic is still in the developmental phase (Ali Abbasi & Abdul Rahim, 2022).

Customer Pressure and Preference

Customer pressure and preference refer to customers' perceptions regarding the business and its products, as well as their individual needs and preferences. It can be categorised as one of the important elements when it comes to technological adoption (Ali Abbasi & Abdul Rahim, 2022). For homestays, customer pressure and preferences are influenced by various factors, including location, facilities, accessibility, amenities, rental rates, and cultural preferences. Understanding these factors is crucial for homestay operators as it enables them to attract and retain customers more effectively. By aligning their offerings with customer preferences, operators can enhance their appeal, leading to positive reviews, increased bookings, and overall business success.

Previous studies on technological adoption among SMEs have consistently proven that customer pressure has a positive correlation with business' intention to adopt the technology (Costea et al., 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Eid et al., 2020; Jamil et al., 2020). On the other hand, some argue that the adoption of social media marketing is influenced by customer pressure and preferences, as businesses can enhance their profitability through long-lasting relational exchanges that foster strong emotional ties with customers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formed:

H₁: Customer pressure and preference have a significant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P₁₅).

Perceived Cost

Costs can be characterised as expenditures that can be quantified in monetary or physical terms, yielding corresponding benefits. They are also defined as exchange rates, expenses, or sacrifices made to attain benefits or accomplish specific objectives of consumers (Yamin et al., 2019). Cost is identified as a key technological factor that significantly influences the willingness of SMEs to adopt social media as they prefer to communicate with consumers while keeping expenses low costs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In other words, if the cost of adopting social media marketing is low, the level of adoption will be increased (Ali Abbasi et al., 2022; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020). However, perceived cost refers to an individual's assessment of the total expense associated with a particular product, service, or action. This evaluation may not align directly with the actual financial cost and includes other factors such as time, effort, accessibility, inconvenience, and psychological impact.

Earlier research has proven that perceived cost plays an important role in the acceptance and utilisation of technology. A study by Chatterjee and Kar (2020) indicated SMEs will be cautious regarding the cost involved in adopting social media marketing. Moreover, there is also a suggestion that perceived cost is an important indicator of social media marketing adoption in developing countries (Rahman et al., 2020; Tanaya et al., 2024). The study found that social media marketing among SMEs in India is significantly affected by costs. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formed:

H₂: Perceived cost has an insignificant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P₂₅).

Competitive Pressure

Competitive pressure refers to the influence driven by competitive businesses within the same industry. This pressure arises from competition for customers, market share, and resources and can manifest through pricing strategies, product innovation, marketing efforts, customer service improvements, and overall business performance. Businesses facing competitive pressure must often adapt and differentiate themselves to maintain or enhance their market position. Competitive pressure plays a crucial role in driving the adoption of new technologies among companies in the same industry.

Competitive pressure is a key driver in technology adoption. For SMEs facing numerous competitors within the same industry, it is essential to leverage technology to stay competitive. Adopting social media marketing allows SMEs to adapt to market trends, enhance their visibility, and maintain their presence in the industry (Hoang et al., 2024). Earlier studies indicated that competitive pressure has a significant effect on social media marketing adoption among SMEs in Malaysia (Ali Abbasi et al., 2022; Eid et al., 2020; Jamil et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2020), leading the following hypothesis is formed:

H₃: Competitive pressure has a significant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P₃₅).

Digital Skills

Digital skills refer to an individual's ability to effectively use digital devices, software, and applications to perform tasks efficiently across various areas of life, including work, education, communication, and entertainment. These skills encompass a range of competencies, including internet proficiency, basic technology literacy, computer skills, data analysis, and digital security. In the digital age, knowledge and digital skills are essential for the growth of SMEs. Previous research indicates that SMEs must enhance their knowledge and digital skills to keep up with market trends and meet consumer demands effectively (Hoang et al., 2024; Irwin et al., 2023; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021). It is worth noting that improving digital skills will equip SMEs with the capability to navigate digital challenges better and adapt to market changes. Recent research indicated that digital skills among owners of SMEs have a significant impact on social media marketing adoption (Effendi et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2020; Paracha et al., 2023; Trawnih et al., 2021). Nevertheless, due to a lack of resources, other studies mentioned that digital skills have negative relationships and insignificant impact on social media marketing adoption among SMEs (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020; Effendi et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formed:

H₄: Digital skill has an insignificant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P₄₅).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 exhibits the research framework that was developed according to the discussions provided in earlier sections. The research framework indicated the influences of exogenous constructs consisting of customer pressure and preference, perceived cost, competitive pressure, and digital skills on the endogenous construct of social media marketing adoption.

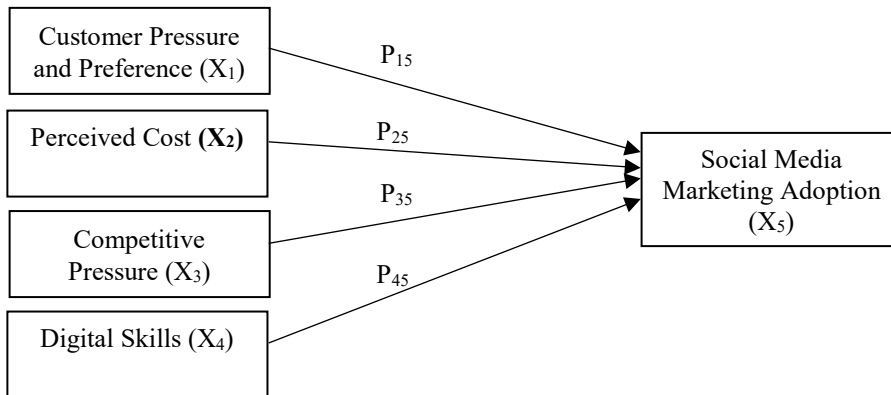


Fig 1. Research Framework

Source: Researchers

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sampling

This study used a cross-sectional research design and a convenience sampling technique for data collection. A total of 208 responses were collected using a self-administered questionnaire from homestay operators in Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor. This sample size is considered valid for further analysis based on two conditions. First, according to the PLS-SEM technique, the minimum number of respondents required for this study is 40 as per the rule to calculate sample size is that each structural path in the research model ought to be multiplied by 10 (4 structural paths x 10) (Hair et al., 2014). Second, sample sizes from 100 to 200 are appropriate for large or unknown populations (Hair et al., 2006).

Research Instrument

The research instrument consists of two sections. Section A addresses the profile demographic of respondents and questions related to the sample's social media usage for marketing purposes. Section B encompasses the social media marketing adoption, customer pressure and preferences, perceived cost, competitive pressure, and homestay operator's digital skills, which were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The construct of social media marketing adoption was measured using five items adapted from (Ali Abbasi & Abdul Rahim, 2022; Odoom et al., 2017). Five items were identified for the customer pressure and preferences construct (Ali Abbasi & Abdul Rahim, 2022; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020). Six items for the construct of perceived cost were adapted from Chatterjee and Kar (2020) and Rahman et al. (2020). In the competitive pressure construct, five items were measured based on the study by Ali Abbasi and Abdul Rahim (2022), Rahman et al. (2020), Cao et al. (2018), and Susanto et al. (2021). Lastly, five items from Ali Abbasi and Abdul Rahim (2022) and Rahman et al. (2020) were adapted for the construct of digital skills.

Data Analysis

The IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to conduct the descriptive analysis, which included examining respondents' demographics and related questions, such as the frequency of social media usage for marketing purposes, the types of social media used, and the number of years operating the homestay business. For hypotheses testing, inferential analysis was carried out using SmartPLS software to perform Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2014). The PLS-SEM technique was employed to evaluate both the reflective measurement model and the structural models. For the reflective measurement model, indicator reliability, internal consistency, and both convergent and discriminant validity were assessed. In contrast, to evaluate the significance of path coefficients between constructs in the research model, the structural model was analysed using the bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples (Garson, 2016; Hair et al., 2014).

Assessing the Reflective Measurement Model

The reflective measurement model is evaluated using four primary criteria, namely (1) internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) above 0.7); (2) reliability (factor loading (λ) above 0.708); (3) convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted-AVE value above 0.5); and (4) discriminant validity (cross-loading, Fornell-Larcker criteria ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ value more than r), and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio value greater than 0.9) (Hair et al., 2014).

Assessing the Structural Model

The structural model assessment was produced through the analysis of specific values, namely the Variance Inflation Factor value less than five ($\text{VIF} < 5$), path coefficient (β) value, standard error (SE) value, t -value greater than 1.96, p -value less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), and confidence interval (CI) value at 95%. Additionally, the structural model was provided as the research conceptual framework using the beta (β) and R^2 values. The structural model's prediction accuracy was measured using R^2 , which was used to evaluate the model. To explain the strength of R^2 and determine whether it indicates a weak, moderate, or strong coefficient of determination, the thresholds of 0.25, 0.5, and 0.7 were used. (Hair et al., 2014).

RESULT

Profile Demographic of Respondents

A total of 208 responses were received from respondents in Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor. The majority of the respondents are male (59.1%) followed by 40.9% female, which all fall under the age category of 31 to 40 years old (32.7%). Most of them are Malay (56.3%), owners of homestay (38.5%), and have already operated their homestay business for about 1 to 5 years (48.1%). Besides, 52.4% of them have experience using social media for marketing purposes for less than six years, of which the most preferred social media channels is Facebook (89.9%), followed by Instagram (66.8%) and TikTok (52.4%). The majority of respondents also preferred to upload content such as photos (96.2%), videos (86.5%), and texts (60.6%).

Reflective Measurement Model Evaluation

Table 1 shows that the research model meets the requirements of measurement model assessment, where the Cronbach Alpha (α) value and composite reliability (CR) value are above 0.7, with factor loading (λ) value above 0.708 and loaded in their appropriate construct, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value is above 0.5. Additionally, results also show that the Fornell-Larcker criteria of which the AVE square root value for each construct is larger than the correlation coefficient value ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}} > r$), and the HTMT

ratio is above 0.9, indicating research data is fit to the discriminant validity (Garson, 2016; Hair et al., 2014).

Table 1. Reflective Measurement Model Assessment

Constructs	Items	λ (> 0.708)	(α) (> 0.7)	CR	AVE	Discriminant Validity
Competitive Pressure and Preference	COM1	0.817	0.871	0.907	0.661	Yes
	COM2	0.858				
	COM3	0.768				
	COM4	0.794				
	COM5	0.824				
Perceived Cost	COST1	0.836	0.889	0.914	0.64	Yes
	COST2	0.804				
	COST3	0.798				
	COST4	0.779				
	COST5	0.781				
	COST6	0.803				
Consumer Preference	CPP1	0.821	0.912	0.934	0.74	Yes
	CPP2	0.876				
	CPP3	0.877				
	CPP4	0.878				
	CPP5	0.847				
Digital Skills	KS1	0.844	0.903	0.928	0.721	Yes
	KS2	0.827				
	KS3	0.889				
	KS4	0.86				
	KS5	0.823				
Social Media Marketing Adoption	SMMA1	0.8	0.874	0.909	0.666	Yes
	SMMA2	0.857				
	SMMA3	0.817				
	SMMA4	0.758				
	SMMA5	0.845				

Structural Model Evaluation

The evaluation of the structural model discovered that all the predictive variables have VIF values less than five toward the endogenous variable. The result shows that the highest VIF value is shown through the relationship between digital skills and social media marketing adoption (VIF=3.664). The prediction accuracy analysis using the R^2 value found that the exogenous constructs consisting of customer pressure and preference, perceived cost, competitive pressure, and digital skills jointly explain 73.6% ($R^2 = 0.736$) of the variance in the endogenous construct, social media marketing adoption. This finding indicates that

all four exogenous constructs have a strong R^2 value concerning the endogenous construct, suggesting that the model has a good coefficient of determination.

Hypotheses Testing

Analysis of the hypotheses using the PLS-SEM technique has revealed that 'consumer preference has a significant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators in Malaysia ($\beta=0.275$, $t= 2.610$, $CI[0.052, 0.478]$). Consistent with Cao *et al.* (2018), consumer preference plays a significant role in influencing companies to adopt social media marketing. Effendi *et al.* (2020) indicated that the environmental context is marked by complexity and rapid changes. Therefore, homestay operators need to gain a deep understanding of technological advancements and their potential impacts on the business. As consumers increasingly rely on online platforms for product searches and comparisons, insufficient adoption of new technology can negatively affect business operations. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (P_{15}) is accepted.

Next, perceived cost was found to have an insignificant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators in Malaysia ($\beta=0.166$, $t= 1.955$, $CI[-0.009, 0.330]$). According to Chatterjee and Kar (2020) as well as Tanaya *et al.* (2024), SMEs have limited resources to adopt new technology and provide the facilities needed. Thus, it is common for SMEs to be more cautious about cost. It is worth mentioning that management needs to provide relevant courses so that the person in charge understands the nature of social media in detail, including how it attracts the target market. Furthermore, they also have to provide facilities such as the Internet and devices. As most of the homestay operators operate their business on a small scale as it is not the operators' main source of income, the willingness to invest high cost for social media marketing is low (Dube & Sharma, 2018; Effendi *et al.*, 2020; Tanaya *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 (P_{25}) is accepted.

Furthermore, this study noticed that competitive pressure has a significant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators in Malaysia ($\beta=0.483$, $t=5.015$, $CI[0.274, 0.660]$). Previous studies suggested that competitive pressure can be the main motivation factor for business firms to adopt social media marketing (Effendi *et al.*, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2019). In line with a study by Cao *et al.* (2018), competitive pressure is the most influential factor in a company's decision to adopt social media marketing. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 (P_{35}) is accepted.

Finally, this study found that digital skills have an insignificant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators in Malaysia ($\beta=0.005$, $t= 0.048$, $CI[-0.189, 0.209]$). Previous studies have suggested that organisational management should support staff by providing continuous training on the use of social media applications for business purposes. This ensures that employees stay updated on the latest interactive features and can use them effectively (Abdullah *et al.*, 2022; Ahmad *et al.*, 2019). Hence, it is important to emphasize that support from top management in providing sufficient knowledge and digital skills is a crucial factor for organisations when adopting new technologies, including social media marketing purposes (Paracha *et al.*, 2023). However, for SMEs, a lack of resources can hinder the ability to provide adequate training in social media marketing (Effendi *et al.*, 2020; Irwin *et al.*, 2023). Due to the company's size, top management may perceive that they don't have to become experts in social media marketing, believing instead that self-learning to develop knowledge and digital skills is sufficient. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 (P_{45}) is accepted. Table 2 summarises the results of hypothesis testing, while Figure 2 illustrates the research model generated by PLS-SEM.

Table 2. Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis and Path	β	t	P	Results
H1: Customer pressure and preference have a significant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P15)	0.275	2.610	0.01*	Accepted
H2: Perceived cost has an insignificant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P25).	0.166	1.955	0.06	Accepted
H3: Competitive pressure has a significant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P35)	0.483	5.015	0.00*	Accepted
H4: Digital skill has an insignificant influence on social media marketing adoption among homestay operators (P45)	0.005	0.047	0.962	Accepted

*Significant level at 0.05 ($p < 0.05$)

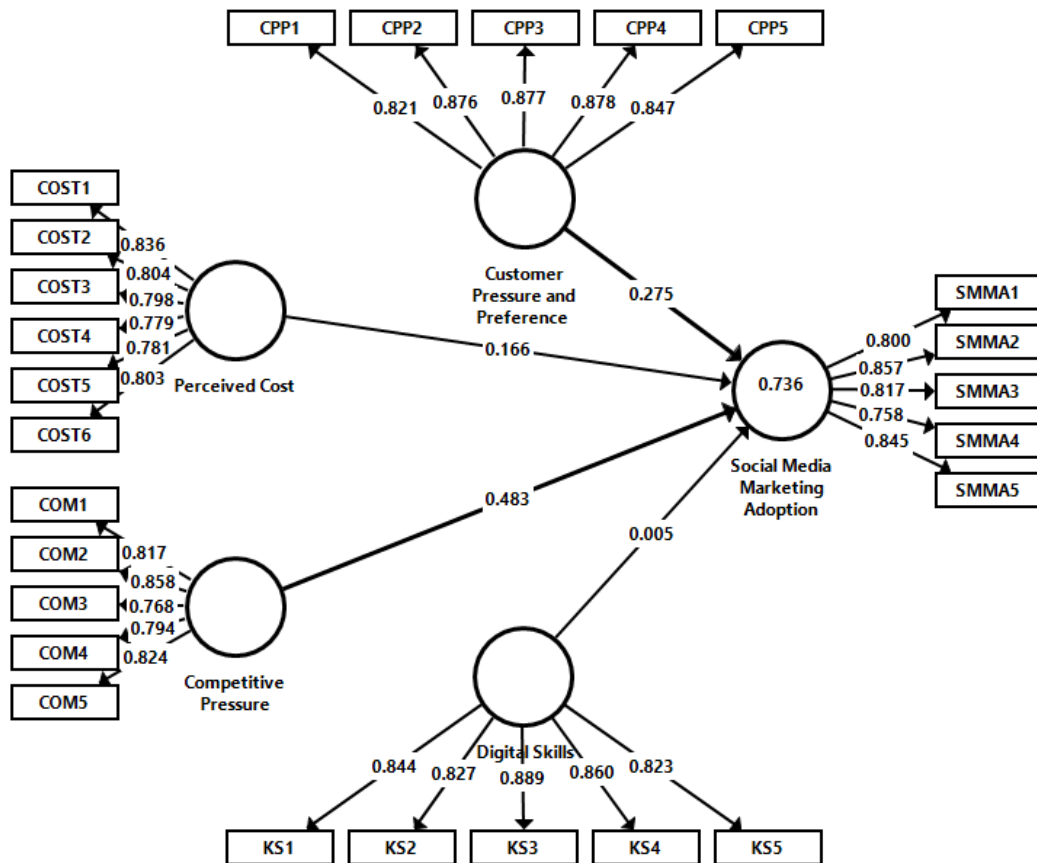


Fig 2. Research Framework (Source: Researchers)

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the understanding of social media adoption by SMEs in the tourism industry, particularly homestay operators, and highlights how these businesses integrate new technology for marketing purposes. Based on the findings, authorities such as the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) should continue to encourage homestay operators to use social media effectively to attract tourists. Additionally, homestay operators are advised to be innovative in promoting their products or services on social media to generate interest and drive purchases. Furthermore, homestay management must be supportive and proactive in ensuring the success of social media as a marketing strategy. This includes providing motivational support, necessary facilities, and relevant training to staff to develop the skills needed for social media marketing.

The research findings emphasize the significant impact of consumer preference, perceived costs, competitive pressures, and digital skills on homestay operators' intention to adopt social media as a marketing medium. These results highlight the importance of leveraging social media for marketing, given that modern consumers increasingly rely on social platforms to gather information about accommodations, including homestays. For homestay operators, utilising social media offers several business benefits. Marketing through these new media channels is generally more cost-effective than traditional methods, providing unique advantages such as interactivity, broad connectivity, and user-friendliness. Additionally, adopting social media can give homestay businesses a competitive edge, as many operators use online platforms to promote their services, allowing customers to easily compare various providers on a single platform. While these benefits are notable, the choice to use social media as a marketing tool also indirectly enhances employees' understanding and skills in social media marketing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research highlights the substantial influence of social media marketing on the performance of SMEs, especially homestays. As the hospitality industry adapts to the digital era, utilising social media platforms has become essential for success in a competitive market. Social media marketing presents a valuable opportunity for homestay operators to strengthen their brand, increase visibility, attract a broader audience, drive bookings, and ultimately enhance revenue. To maximise these benefits, homestay operators must actively engage with their target audiences on popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This engagement can be fostered through the creation and sharing of compelling content in various formats like videos, images, and live streams. By adopting a strategic approach to content creation, maintaining regular posting schedules, and interacting effectively with followers, homestay businesses can build a robust online presence that appeals to potential customers.

Despite the potential benefits, social media usage among SMEs, especially homestays, remains notably low. This study aims to help homestay management teams develop effective marketing strategies by leveraging the benefits of social media marketing while addressing its potential drawbacks. However, the study has certain limitations. It focuses on only a few factors like customer pressure and preferences, perceived costs, competitive pressure, and digital skills. There may be other important factors from organisational and technological perspectives that warrant attention, including the size of the organisation, government support, market trends, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2020; Alrousan et al., 2021; Asamoah et al., 2024; Salah et al., 2021).

Future research should explore these possibilities further. Additionally, since this study utilised a cross-sectional design with the PLS-SEM technique, future studies should consider a longitudinal approach to evaluate samples over different periods. This would allow for an assessment of the effectiveness of social media adoption among homestay operators in various phases. Moreover, advanced analytical techniques,

such as Multilevel Structural Equation Modelling (MSEM), could be employed to produce more robust findings. For contributions to the field, future research could also include bibliometric analysis. This approach provides a systematic and comprehensive overview of social media marketing among SMEs, both in Malaysia and globally. It helps identify emerging trends and offers a broad understanding of relevant concepts in social media marketing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial, or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Noraihan Mohamad carried out the research, wrote, anchored the review, and revisions, and approved the article submission.

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