

Building a Theoretical Model of Sustainable Marketing Strategies for MSMEs in West Muna, Indonesia: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract: This study develops a holistic theoretical model of sustainable marketing strategy for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in archipelagic and remote regions, using West Muna Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, as its setting. A qualitative Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) was applied through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis with 42 informants across six stakeholder groups: MSME operators, local government, academics, business facilitators, consumers, and digital media managers. Data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding in NVivo. Four causal conditions were found to shape the core phenomenon of “MSME sustainable marketing strategy” marketing digitalization, green innovation, local cultural capital, and multi-stakeholder collaboration (the Hexa Helix model) with “MSME adaptive and innovation capabilities” emerging as the core category bridging them. From these findings, the study proposes five theoretical propositions underlying a “Resilient Digital-Green Marketing” model, showing that the four antecedent constructs affect marketing performance only through business owners’ adaptive capabilities. Marketing digitalization in West Muna remains minimally functional, dominated by WhatsApp and Facebook; green practices remain implicit and uncommunicated as marketing value; and local cultural capital, together with social relationships, plays a key role in building customer trust amid limited digital infrastructure. Theoretically, the study enriches the literature on dynamic managerial capabilities and the marketing mix from the perspective of micro MSMEs in rural-archipelagic regions; practically, it offers a basis for designing more contextual, phased MSME support policies and sustainability programs.

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INTRODUCTION

For micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), a sustainable marketing strategy typically combines digital adoption, environmentally conscious practices, and adaptive responses to the post-pandemic business climate, with the ultimate aim of balancing profitability against long-term resilience. Evidence across several countries suggests that this combined approach strengthens competitive positioning, largely through the use of social media platforms, influencer partnerships, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), each of which has been linked to higher purchase intention and stronger business outcomes. Medina and Lodeiros-Zubiria (2025), for example, traced a positive effect of influencer activity and eWOM among textile-based MSME clusters in Peru, and Alkufahy et al. (2023) showed that social media acts as a moderating factor that reinforces entrepreneurial marketing in the Jordanian context. Within Indonesia, Supriaddin et al. (2025) together with Santoso and Rahayu (2025) point to digital marketing competencies that differ across product categories, both reporting a favorable effect on the marketing performance of agribusiness and culinary MSMEs.

Beyond digital tools, environmentally oriented business practices have also been found to reinforce digital marketing efforts and contribute to what Shwawreh et al. (2025) term Sustainable Business Intelligence. In a Balinese setting, for instance, Yasa et al. (2024) found that blending local cultural values into digital marketing activities lifts the sustainable performance of weaving-sector SMEs. Elsewhere, Casidy et al. (2024) connect the religious identification of business executives to a deliberate Strategic Green Marketing Orientation, while Chishty and Sayari (2024) show that an environmentally sustainable, market-oriented posture improves the export performance of Indian MSMEs.

Several intervening variables shape how marketing strategy translates into productivity and sustainability outcomes, including digital and financial literacy (Sakti et al., 2025), innovation capacity (Sari et al., 2023; Muchtar et al., 2024), and multi-actor collaboration through the Hexa Helix framework (Melany et al., 2024). Within export-oriented research, Marques and Didonet (2024) alongside Noya et al. (2025) draw attention to export market orientation (EMO) as a mechanism mediated by access to information and shaped by government policy. Closer to the present study's setting, Sope's (2023) investigation of the MSME "Bany Shop" in West Muna found that a structured marketing approach segmentation, targeting, positioning, and the marketing mix raised sales, although the degree of success depended heavily on context and the resources available locally. Looking more broadly at marketing-mix scholarship, the conventional 4Ps and 7Ps frameworks still dominate research from developing economies such as Indonesia, even as scholarly attention gradually turns toward green, digital, and experiential marketing (Panggabean & Noviaty, 2026).

Even with this accumulating body of empirical evidence, a notable gap persists: few theoretical models have been built specifically for MSMEs operating in remote settings such as West Muna. Much of the existing literature isolates single variables or applies broad frameworks like TOE or TPB (Nazir, 2025), stopping short of constructing an integrated theory grounded in local empirical data. Sope's (2023) work on West Muna marketing strategies, for example, stopped at the level of practical analysis without producing a sustainability-oriented theoretical model that ties together digital, environmental, and Southeast Sulawesi's cultural dimensions. International studies confirm that the effectiveness of a given strategy is context-dependent (Supriaddin et al., 2025; Marques & Didonet, 2024), yet rural Indonesian settings like West Muna where digital infrastructure, market access, and environmental sustainability challenges in agriculture and tourism take on a distinctive character remain comparatively unexamined. Two gaps stand out in particular: limited understanding of how local factors shape sustainability strategy, and a scarcity of inductive work using approaches such as Grounded Theory Analysis (GTA). Although the mediating function of innovation has received attention (Aljabari et al., 2024; Khatimah et al., 2025), no existing model yet accounts theoretically for sustainability dynamics inside resource-constrained MSMEs, particularly against the backdrop of climate change and digital transformation (Gössling & Reinhold, 2025).

These conditions raise three interrelated research questions: how a holistic theoretical model of sustainable marketing strategy for MSMEs in West Muna can be developed using a Grounded Theory approach that integrates digital technology, green practices, and post-pandemic adaptation; how local factors such as culture, regional policy, market access, and export dynamics mediate the formulation and implementation of such strategies; and how contextual barriers shape the effectiveness of digital technology and innovation within sustainable marketing strategies for MSMEs in remote areas.

To build a holistic theoretical model grounded in empirical data from West Muna's MSMEs, this study applies Grounded Theory Analysis (GTA). In practice, this involves in-depth qualitative data collection aimed at understanding how digital technology adoption, green practices, and post-pandemic adaptation interact with local conditions such as culture, regional policy, and export dynamics.

The analytical strategy for addressing these research problems centers on tracing how local factors mediate outcomes and on examining contextual obstacles digital infrastructure gaps,

technological literacy, and climate-change impacts among them. These findings are then translated into strategic recommendations and a collaboration model suited to the particular circumstances of remote regions.

Contemporary sustainable marketing for MSMEs brings together digital adoption, environmentally responsible innovation, and adaptation to post-pandemic conditions. A number of recent studies examine the application of artificial intelligence and big data to marketing innovation (Aljabari et al., 2024; Wang & Erorita, 2025), as well as the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework as a lens for digital technology adoption (Fu et al., 2024; Nazir, 2025), alongside mediating mechanisms such as the pairing of entrepreneurial marketing with technological resilience (Wahdiniwaty et al., 2025). On the sustainability side, notable directions include embedding CSR within the marketing mix (Kucharov et al., 2024) and adopting digital leadership styles that drive innovation (Khatimah et al., 2025). Systematic reviews likewise underscore the significance of dynamic managerial capabilities (DMC) in navigating market volatility (Wijayanti et al., 2024). Within Indonesia, local progress can be seen in models such as "Eco Cuty" (Aqmala et al., 2023) and in B2C commerce implementations geared toward post-pandemic recovery (Sari et al., 2023). At a global scale, the field appears to be moving toward live-streaming commerce and electronic word of mouth (Armawan et al., 2023; Medina & Lodeiros-Zubiria, 2025), while also drawing attention to psychological (Wang & Erorita, 2025) and environmental (Gössling & Reinhold, 2025) considerations. Additional systematic work confirms that the classical marketing-mix frameworks (4Ps/7Ps) continue to dominate the literature, particularly in developing countries, even as they are increasingly supplemented by green, digital, and experiential perspectives (Panggabean & Noviaty, 2026). Even so, most recent studies still center on urban settings or developed economies, leaving rural areas such as West Muna comparatively under-examined.

What this study contributes is an original, context-specific "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model, built through Grounded Theory Analysis (GTA) around MSMEs in West Muna. The model draws together digital technology, sustainable practice, post-pandemic resilience, and local wisdom, closing literature gaps through an inductive method attentive to the particular difficulties faced by remote areas (Yasa et al., 2024; Casidy et al., 2024). Because it is built from empirical data collected among West Muna's MSMEs, it fuses local cultural resilience with digital-green elements including adaptive AI support suited to remote regions, a combination previous research has explored only in limited depth (Aljabari et al., 2024). The study foregrounds Indonesia's rural context by folding in variables such as climate-change impacts on agricultural MSMEs as a core part of the analysis (Gössling & Reinhold, 2025), together with local collaboration arrangements aligned to Southeast Sulawesi policy that go further than earlier domestic work such as Sope (2023). Pairing GTA with literature-based verification (H. Wang et al., 2024) produces a model that can be empirically tested and, in principle, scaled to comparable regions across Southeast Asia representing a methodological step forward relative to conventional systematic literature reviews (Wijayanti et al., 2024). Practically, the model is intended to inform MSME training tools built around measurable sustainability indicators, giving it more direct applicability than purely descriptive studies (Sakti et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative, Grounded Theory-based approach to investigate a sustainable marketing strategy model that brings together digitalization, eco-friendly innovation, and local resilience among MSMEs in West Muna, Indonesia. Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Martin & Woodside, 2008) was chosen for its capacity to generate theory directly from field data, offering a flexible, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and yielding a theory attuned to the local realities faced by MSMEs.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- a. Develop a "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model relevant to the local context of MSMEs in West Muna;
- b. Identify the factors influencing the success of sustainable marketing strategies for MSMEs in West Muna; and
- c. Formulate policy recommendations for local government and relevant stakeholders regarding the implementation of sustainable marketing strategies for MSMEs.

Research Location

The study was conducted in West Muna Regency, Indonesia, chosen because of the strong potential of its agricultural and food-sector MSMEs to anchor a sustainable marketing strategy, alongside the region's distinct challenges around digitalization, environmental sustainability, and constrained local resources.

Research Informants

Informants were drawn from stakeholders connected to MSME marketing strategy local government officials, MSME operators, community members, and marketing or sustainability experts. The informant groups comprised:

- a. Head of the West Muna Regency Trade and MSME Agency
- b. Representatives of local MSME operators (agricultural and food sectors)
- c. Community leaders and local residents
- d. Academics or practitioners knowledgeable about sustainable marketing and MSME innovation
- e. Digital media managers and local influencers associated with MSMEs

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques employed were:

- a. In-depth Interviews: Key informants took part in semi-structured interviews designed to surface their views, experiences, and perspectives on sustainable marketing strategy for West Muna's MSMEs, with particular attention to how digitalization, green innovation, and local resilience come together.
- b. Participant Observation: The researcher took part directly in MSME marketing activities across West Muna, observing firsthand how social interactions unfolded, how collaboration took shape, and how digital technology was put to use within marketing strategies.
- c. Documentation: Relevant documents and materials were reviewed, including government reports, promotional materials produced by MSMEs, and content published through digital media channels.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the Grounded Theory technique, carried out across the following stages:

- a. Open Coding: Data segments arising from interviews and observations were identified and labeled, marking the starting point of the categorization process.
- b. Axial Coding: The categories identified earlier were connected to one another, with relationships among phenomena traced to build meaningful patterns.
- c. Selective Coding: Core concepts capturing the central dynamics of sustainable MSME marketing in West Muna were developed, culminating in a broader theoretical account the "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model built on digitalization, green innovation, and local resilience.

Data processing and analysis were supported by NVivo software, which assisted with coding, organizing data into groups, and visualizing how categories and key findings relate to one another. It should be emphasized that terms such as causal condition, mediator (the core category), moderator (the contextual condition), and outcome, as used throughout this article and in Tables 3 and 4, follow the paradigm model of Grounded Theory coding (Strauss & Corbin) rather than the terminology of

variance-based or statistical analysis. These labels denote analytic categories that emerged inductively from the open, axial, and selective coding of qualitative data; they describe conceptual relationships identified through constant comparison and researcher interpretation, and are not causal or mediating/moderating relationships that have been tested through statistical procedures such as regression or PLS-based mediation-moderation analysis.

Data Validation

Within GTA, several concepts worked together to safeguard the validity and reliability of the data. Credibility rested on how closely findings tracked reality, established through member checking and qualitative simulation (H. Wang et al., 2024; Carcary, 2009); transferability concerned whether the results could reasonably be applied elsewhere; reliability referred to the stability of the data over time, supported by an audit trail; and confirmability ensured that findings traced back to respondents rather than researcher assumptions, reinforced through triangulation (Carcary, 2009). The GTA approach used here also drew on qualitative simulation checks, Multisource Evidence Fusion (MEF-GT), Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR), and Inter-Rater Agreement (IRA) to strengthen analytical transparency (Díaz et al., 2023). Theory development relied on the Constant Comparative Method (CCM), while member checking and triangulation functioned as practical safeguards for the accuracy of the findings.

Model Development

Drawing on the Grounded Theory analysis, this study built a "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model tailored to the sustainability needs and local context of West Muna's MSMEs. The model covered three components:

- a. Digitalization integration: technological elements, such as AI and social media, that can strengthen MSME marketing strategies.
- b. Eco-friendly innovation: how green practices and sustainability considerations can generate added value for MSME products.
- c. Local resilience: strategies that draw on local culture and cross-sector collaboration to respond to regional challenges.

Policy Recommendations

Building on both the analytical results and the resulting model, the study put forward policy recommendations for local government and other stakeholders on implementing sustainable marketing strategies for MSMEs. These recommendations set out practical steps for making fuller use of digitalization and green innovation, and for strengthening local resilience through collaborative arrangements such as the Hexa Helix model.

Dissemination of Research Findings

Findings were disseminated through publication in scientific journals, seminars, and presentations delivered to West Muna stakeholders, supporting the rollout of sustainable marketing strategies for MSMEs and contributing to models attuned to local conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Overview of Implementation and Informant Characteristics

This study examined how MSME operators in West Muna market their products while keeping their businesses running under real-world conditions. Data collection followed a qualitative process, with analysis carried out through the Grounded Theory approach. Altogether, 42 informants from six stakeholder groups took part in the study MSME operators alongside local government representatives, academics and practitioners, support communities, digital media managers or local

influencers, and consumers. Bringing in this range of groups was meant to view the same phenomenon from multiple angles and to cross-check findings that surfaced from the business-operator interviews.

Table 1. Characteristics and distribution of research informants

No	Informant Group	Count	Focus of Data Collection
1	Local Government (Trade and MSME Agency)	1	Policy direction, digitalization & green practice programs, post-pandemic support
2	MSME Players (culinary, handicrafts/weaving, livestock, fisheries, services/repair shops, tourism)	20	Business journey, existing marketing strategies, digitalization, green practices, local culture, obstacles, ideal model
3	Academics/Marketing and Sustainability Practitioners	5	Conceptual perspectives, remote area context, theoretical model construction, initial validation
4	MSME Communities/Mentors (including HIPMI)	3	Mentoring patterns, contextual constraints, multi-stakeholder collaboration
5	Digital Media Managers/Local Influencers	3	Digital promotion behavior, storytelling, eWOM, local culture as content
6	MSME Product Consumers/Customers	10	Purchasing behavior and trust, response to digital promotions and green/cultural attributes

West Muna was chosen as the research site because it typifies MSMEs operating in archipelagic or remote areas where digital infrastructure remains limited, even as the region holds local cultural assets such as Muna weaving, distinctive culinary products, and marine and agricultural output that carry real marketing potential. An earlier study by Sope (2023) showed empirically that structured marketing strategies segmentation, targeting, positioning, and the marketing mix lifted MSME sales in West Muna, yet stopped short of a theoretical model that explains how digitalization, green practices, and post-pandemic resilience interact at the grassroots level. It is precisely this gap that the present findings seek to fill. A subsequent study by Sope et al. (2026) further found that marketing literacy among Muna's MSMEs remains limited and fragmented, marked by minimal digital adoption and a disconnect between local potential and digital strategy underscoring why the theoretical model proposed here is needed.

Interview and Observation Data: Open Coding

The open coding stage involved repeated readings of the interview transcripts, with each segment examined for the experiences, expressions, and issues embedded in informants' narratives. NVivo software supported data management and code tracking throughout, and newly emerging findings were continually compared against earlier ones so that codes with similar meanings could be grouped together. Through this process, several consistent patterns emerged: marketing conducted through social relationships, reliance on basic digital media, constrained digital capability, eco-friendly practices that have not yet been framed as sustainability strategies, the use of local culture, and difficulties accessing business support and mentoring.

Table 2. Example of Open Coding Results from Interview Transcripts

Open Category	Code Example	Informant Quote Example (summarized)
Relationship-based word-of-mouth marketing	WOM as a foundation	"It started with word-of-mouth... long-time customers bringing in others" (Culinary MSME owner)
Minimal-functional digitalization	WA/FB as a showcase, not a full transaction channel	"For now, it's WhatsApp and Facebook. Instagram isn't very active yet" (MSME owner)

Digital capability barriers	Time, network, content skills	"The obstacles are time and a lack of proficiency in creating content... the internet connection is also sometimes unstable"
Implicit/unrecognized green practices	Green practices without sustainability labeling	"They exist... reducing material waste, reusing items that are still usable" (MSME facilitator)
Green incentive gap	Higher eco-friendly packaging costs, minimal incentives	"Currently, there are no specific incentives... implementation is gradual because costs... are relatively higher" (Local government)
Local cultural capital as a differentiator	Product ethnicity (weaving, specialty cuisine)	"Muna culture can be a unique selling point... if packaged authentically and without artificiality" (Academic)
Social trust as transaction assurance	Trust based on familiarity, not platform ratings	"If the seller is already known and the food has been good in the past" (Consumer)
Post-pandemic adaptive resilience	Business scale adjustment, channel diversification	"It was most felt during the pandemic... a lot of food went to waste and sales dropped" (MSME owner)
Uneven multi-stakeholder collaboration	Centralized support, rural areas not yet reached	"It exists, but isn't often felt by MSMEs located far from the regional center"
Primary sector climate vulnerability	Climate change affecting raw material supply	"Climate change affects raw material availability, crop yields, and fishermen's catches" (Local government)

The field data point to a pattern that echoes prior research on MSMEs in infrastructure-poor regions. In West Muna, operators still lean heavily on word-of-mouth promotion, supplemented only modestly by social media mainly WhatsApp and Facebook while platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and online marketplaces see little use. This mirrors Supriaddin et al.'s (2025) observation that digital marketing competence among Indonesian MSMEs differs by product category and only benefits marketing performance when applied consistently, and it is also in step with Santoso and Rahayu (2025), who found that social-media-based lead generation among East Java's culinary MSMEs is driven by entrepreneurial marketing and owner knowledge rather than by sheer posting frequency.

Comparisons across different settings strengthen this reading of the data. Among a cluster of Peruvian textile MSMEs, Medina and Lodeiros-Zubiria (2025) found that social media influencers and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) meaningfully raise purchase intention, and in Jordan, Alkufahy et al. (2023) confirmed that social media marketing strongly moderates the link between entrepreneurial marketing and business performance. West Muna's informants, by contrast, have not yet put eWOM to structured use there is no evidence of endorsements or live-streaming activity, as most MSME owners acknowledged directly ("Never. So far, I have only promoted via WhatsApp and Facebook") which suggests that the eWOM and influencer-based marketing potential documented in those other studies remains an untapped opportunity locally rather than a practice already in place. Sustainability and resilience themes also came through strongly in the data. Several owners pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as the moment that forced them to rescale their businesses and rethink marketing channels, a pattern that fits with Muchtar et al.'s (2024) finding that social media use and innovation capability support MSME sustainability performance, and with Sari et al. (2023), who traced the role of entrepreneurial marketing and innovation capability in sustaining West Java MSMEs through the pandemic. The digitalization barriers informants described time pressure, patchy internet coverage, and weak content-creation skills line up with the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework that Fu et al. (2024) and Nazir (2025) apply to social media marketing adoption among MSMEs, where organizational readiness (human resource competence) and external conditions (infrastructure) act as the key determinants. A comparable pattern surfaces in Mushi's (2024) study of Tanzanian MSMEs, which found that digital marketing strategies only deliver real impact once digital literacy and infrastructure constraints are overcome a threshold West Muna has not yet fully reached.

Participatory Observation and Documentation Data

Interview findings were checked against direct observation and documentation gathered during fieldwork. In practice, digital media mainly supplemented face-to-face transactions business owners used product photographs and WhatsApp or Facebook status updates to keep customers informed, but little evidence pointed to any deliberately designed storytelling approach. On the other hand, some environmentally friendly practices were already visible, such as cutting back on certain materials and reusing items or packaging, though these tended to stem from necessity and cost efficiency rather than from a conscious sustainability strategy. Triangulating these three data sources helped sharpen the interpretation drawn from the interviews.

Axial Coding Results: Categories and Inter-category Relationships

At the axial coding stage, the initial categories were revisited to trace the relationships linking them, with attention paid to the conditions driving each phenomenon, the surrounding context, the actions business owners took, and the consequences those actions produced. This step showed that marketing digitalization, green practices, local culture, and multi-stakeholder collaboration are not separate elements but interconnected forces shaping how MSMEs approach marketing.

Table 3. Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) Data Analysis Flow in This Research

Stage	Description	Supporting Methods
Open Coding	42 informant transcripts (Local Government, MSMEs, Academics, Communities, Digital Media, Consumers)	NVivo assisted coding
Axial Coding	Linking categories: conditions, context, strategies, and consequences (paradigm model)	Constant Comparative Method & Source Triangulation
Selective Coding	Core category & theoretical propositions "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" Model	Member checking, Audit trail, Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR)

Four causal categories emerged as conditions that either encourage or hold back the core phenomenon of "MSME sustainable marketing strategy": marketing digitalization, innovation and green practices, local cultural capital, and multi-party collaboration under the Hexa Helix model. As noted above, these categories, together with the mediator (core category), moderator (contextual condition), and outcome elements referenced throughout this section, are theoretical constructs generated through axial coding rather than statistically tested causal, mediating, or moderating relationships. Interviews with academic informants consistently pointed to these constructs as central to the model nearly every academic informant, when asked about the model's components, answered along the lines of "digitalization, green innovation, local culture, adaptability, collaboration, and marketing performance," with only minor wording differences, a pattern suggesting these constructs had reached theoretical saturation. Moderating this relationship are contextual conditions such as the availability of capital, digital human-resource competency, internet quality, and local government policy support, echoing Sakti et al.'s (2025) finding that financial and digital literacy shapes MSME productivity in Indonesia through marketing intensity, and that without adequate literacy, digital adoption alone does not translate into better performance. Regarding local culture as a source of competitive advantage, the West Muna findings woven motifs, culinary storytelling, and family or mutual-cooperation values as a foundation for transaction trust resonate with Yasa et al.'s (2024) demonstration that integrating Tri Hita Karana cultural values into digital marketing lifts the sustainable performance of Bali's weaving SMEs, a comparison made relevant by the shared weaving sector and by academic informants' shared concern for preserving cultural authenticity rather than letting it slide into over-commodification.

On the green innovation dimension, the data suggest that West Muna's MSMEs practice environmentally friendly behavior such as reducing waste and reusing materials mostly implicitly, rather than as a deliberate point of differentiation. This differs from the picture painted by Casidy et al. (2024), who linked executives' religious identification to a deliberate Strategic Green Marketing Orientation, and by Chishty and Sayari (2024), who showed that a market-oriented environmental stance lifts export performance among Indian leather-manufacturing MSMEs. This local gap fits with the argument advanced by Kucharov et al. (2024) that CSR needs to be explicitly woven into the marketing mix if green practices are to generate competitive value rather than remain incidental cost savings a point echoed by a systematic review of marketing-mix literature that found sustainability and the classic marketing mix are rarely joined together explicitly (Panggabean & Noviaty, 2026). Evidence from the consumer side reinforces this: willingness to pay a premium for eco-friendly products proved conditional, with consumers generally open to paying more "if the price difference is small" but reluctant once the gap widened suggesting the green value proposition has not yet been communicated effectively as something worth paying extra for.

Business leadership also plays a part: several informants described family members, often children or younger relatives, taking charge of the business's social media accounts, pointing to an informal, household-level form of digital leadership consistent with Khatimah et al.'s (2025) finding that digital leadership contributes to MSME sustainability performance. At the same time, the exposure of agriculture, fisheries, and tourism to climate change which local government informants directly linked to raw material availability and business revenue underlines the need to build a climate-adaptation dimension into the model, in line with Gössling and Reinhold's (2025) call for tourism-sector MSMEs to engage more urgently with climate change.

Selective Coding Results: Core Category and Theoretical Propositions of the "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" Model

To make the derivation of the model traceable, the flow from data to theory can be summarized as follows. Open coding (Section 2) generated first-order codes describing informants' concrete experiences (e.g., reliance on WhatsApp/Facebook, implicit eco-friendly practices, use of local culture, limited access to mentoring). Axial coding (Section 4) grouped these first-order codes into four causal categories digitalization, green innovation, local cultural capital, and Hexa Helix collaboration and identified the contextual/moderating conditions (capital, human-resource competency, infrastructure, policy support) that strengthen or weaken their effects. Selective coding then integrates these axial categories around a single core category, "MSME adaptive capabilities and innovation," and links that core category to the outcome of resilience and sustainable marketing performance; this integrative step is the direct source of Propositions 1 to 5 below, each of which traces back to one or more of the axial categories just described (P1 to digitalization, P2 to green innovation, P3 to local cultural capital, P4 to Hexa Helix collaboration, and P5 to the climate-vulnerability context identified during axial coding). At the selective coding stage, the axial categories are drawn together around the core category that best accounts for variation in the data "MSME adaptive capabilities and innovation" which mediates between the four causal conditions (digitalization, green innovation, local cultural capital, and multi-stakeholder collaboration) and the resulting outcomes of resilience and sustainable marketing performance. Table 4 sets out the resulting construction of the model.

Table 4. Construction of the "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" Model Based on Selective Coding

Model Element		Component / Content	
Causal	Condition	1	Marketing Digitalization (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, simple AI)
Causal	Condition	2	Green Innovation (packaging, material efficiency, waste management)
Causal	Condition	3	Local Cultural Capital (weaving, signature culinary products, social trust)

Causal	Condition	4	Multi-stakeholder Collaboration (Hexa Helix: government, academia, community, media)
Core (Mediator)	Category		MSME Adaptive Capabilities & Innovation
Contextual (Moderator)	Condition		Capital, human resources, digital infrastructure, policy support
Consequence (Outcome)			Resilience and Sustainable Marketing Performance of MSMEs

This model fits with the Sustainable Business Intelligence perspective put forward by Shwawreh et al. (2025), in which green business strategies boost the effectiveness of digital marketing when the two are managed together rather than kept separate. Five initial theoretical propositions follow from the data analysis:

Proposition 1 (P1): Marketing digitalization improves MSMEs' sustainable marketing performance only when the business owner's adaptive capability mediates the relationship; absent that mediation, digital presence remains a passive "digital display" rather than an active transaction channel.

Proposition 2 (P2): Green innovation adds to MSME product differentiation only when it is explicitly built into the marketing mix, echoing Kucharov et al. (2024); green practices that stay implicit, without a supporting marketing narrative, fail to register as added value in consumers' minds.

Proposition 3 (P3): Local cultural capital builds customer trust and loyalty through social channels such as kinship ties and personal recommendations, effectively standing in for the online ratings and reviews that local MSMEs have not yet widely adopted.

Proposition 4 (P4): Multi-stakeholder collaboration under the Hexa Helix model affects MSME resilience unevenly by location, with MSMEs near government activity hubs benefiting more than those in remote villages, pointing to the need for a more decentralized collaboration model.

Proposition 5 (P5): Climate vulnerability within the agriculture, fisheries, and tourism sectors functions as a contextual condition that heightens the need for genuinely adaptive sustainable marketing strategies, rather than superficial "green" branding alone.

Findings on export market orientation lend further support to Propositions 1 and 4. The data show that West Muna's MSMEs still sell mainly into local and regional markets, with export access remaining very limited a picture consistent with Marques and Didonet (2024), who found export market orientation mediating the link between innovation capability and MSME export performance, and with Noya et al. (2025), who highlighted the moderating role of government policy and the mediating role of information access in MSME market performance. Taken together, this suggests that without stronger innovation capability and collaborative access to market information (P4), the export potential of West Muna's signature products marine goods, woven textiles, processed agricultural products is unlikely to materialize despite their cultural distinctiveness. This synthesis also aligns with Sudjatkomo et al.'s (2025) systematic review, which concluded that MSME sustainability hinges on the simultaneous interplay of supply chain management, operations, and marketing strategy rather than on any single factor reinforcing the relevance of the multi-construct approach taken in this study.

Analysis of Perceptual Differences Among Informant Groups

Comparing responses across informant groups revealed a difference in how MSME operators, on one hand, and academics or facilitators, on the other, understood sustainability. MSME operators tended to read "sustainable marketing" in pragmatic terms simply the ability to keep the business running and retain customers without necessarily connecting it to environmental or cultural considerations. Academic and facilitator informants, by contrast, consistently framed sustainability around three dimensions at once: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural. This is a gap in terminology more than in substance, and it matters: as one MSME facilitator put it, many operators "are actually already implementing practices that support sustainability without calling them by that

term" implying that policy interventions ought to build on existing, concrete practices rather than on academic language unfamiliar to operators on the ground.

On the consumer side, purchasing decisions hinge mainly on product quality, a sense of fair pricing, and trust in the seller. Local cultural attributes and eco-friendly packaging do draw attention, but mostly function as added value rather than the primary driver except for products where cultural identity is intrinsic, such as Muna woven fabric. This suggests that folding cultural identity into marketing works best when it matches the product's own character, rather than being applied uniformly across every type of MSME.

Validation and Reliability of Findings

Four procedures set out in the original research proposal were used to establish the credibility of the findings: member checking, in which interview summaries were returned to selected key informants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation; triangulation of sources and methods across interviews, participant observation, and documentation; an audit trail recording the coding process from open through to selective coding, maintained in NVivo; and cross-coding checks, or peer debriefing, to gauge consistency in how categories were interpreted. The audit-trail and qualitative-simulation procedures build on H. Wang et al.'s (2024) "qualitative simulation checking" approach for programmed grounded theory, developed to strengthen the traceability between raw data and the theoretical categories that emerge from it. Cross-coding checks applied the principles of Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR) and Inter-Rater Agreement (IRA) as described by Díaz et al. (2023) for collaborative grounded theory research, with two team members independently coding the same subset of data before reconciling their categorizations. At this stage, the analysis points to strong inter-coder agreement on the axial categories, most notably minimal-functional digitalization and local cultural capital, while the green innovation category still needs further discussion, since some transcripts did not draw a clean line between "green practices" and simple "cost efficiency."

DISCUSSION

Brief Discussion and Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

These findings sharpen the novelty claim set out earlier: that a holistic theoretical model of sustainable marketing for MSMEs, built inductively from empirical data in an Indonesian rural or archipelagic region, is still uncommon. Primary data from 42 West Muna informants show that the four constructs digitalization, green innovation, local culture, and collaboration do not operate independently but are bridged by business owners' adaptive capabilities, which form the core category. This adds to a literature that has generally treated these constructs separately and quantitatively, and mostly within urban or developed-country settings. The contribution here is therefore twofold: substantively, it broadens understanding of how remote-area MSMEs implicitly interpret and practice marketing sustainability; methodologically, it illustrates a grounded theory application built on layered validation member checking, audit trail, IRR a practice seldom reported explicitly in Indonesian MSME research.

Theoretical Implications: Expanding the Discussion within the Body of Knowledge

That "MSME adaptive capabilities and innovation" emerges as the core category bridging the four causal conditions deserves further discussion against the dynamic managerial capabilities (DMC) literature. Wijayanti et al. (2024) note that DMC is typically shaped through structured routines at the upper-middle management level, yet this does not fully hold for the micro-MSMEs studied in West Muna, where informants' adaptive capabilities appear to stem more from daily improvisation and social capital than from formal routine. This nuance has received relatively little attention in mainstream DMC scholarship, which has long focused on medium and large enterprises. It also responds to a call, made in a systematic review of marketing-mix literature, to enrich conventional frameworks such as

the 4Ps/7Ps with perspectives like the Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities, and Service-Dominant Logic (Panggabean & Noviaty, 2026).

The resilience patterns observed here also partly align with the "entrepreneurial technology resilience" concept documented by Wahdiniwati et al. (2025) for batik MSMEs in Java, though West Muna's resilience mechanisms lean more on diversifying informal sales channels and social-familial networks than on technology adoption per se. This suggests that technology-based resilience and relationship-based resilience can coexist rather than function as competing alternatives, a possibility not explicitly raised in earlier studies.

The implicit green practices found among most informants sit at an earlier stage than the "Eco Cuty" model developed by Aqmala et al. (2023), which packages environmental sustainability as an explicit marketing value proposition. That West Muna's MSMEs practice green behavior without strategic framing points to an intermediate stage that the literature has not mapped in much detail. A local digital media manager reinforced this, observing that "stories make products more appealing for instance, sharing who made the product, the production process, and the region's distinctive characteristics" a storytelling potential recognized as valuable but not yet systematically used by MSME operators themselves. This is exactly where the "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model proposed here makes one of its key contributions: connecting green practices that are currently latent with the strategic framing they could eventually carry.

Practical and Policy Implications

On a practical level, the digital capability gap identified earlier points toward interventions aimed at key community figures rather than standardized mass training alone. Borah, Iqbal, and Akhtar (2022) show that digital leadership plays a decisive role in turning social media use into sustainable MSME performance, which supports programs that equip MSME mentors and community leaders to act as grassroots catalysts for digital leadership, rather than training business owners one by one in isolation. The limited use of structured reviews and peer support also opens room for eWOM-based interventions: local digital media managers emphasized that customer testimonials carry weight "When people see positive feedback from other customers, they tend to be more trusting especially if the recommendation comes from someone they know." This echoes Armawan et al. (2023), who showed that eWOM mediated by brand image and trust can meaningfully lift purchase intention for small businesses. Mentoring programs could therefore encourage owners to actively solicit reviews from satisfied customers, working loosely alongside the local digital media managers identified in this study an approach consistent with Arapi's (2025) finding that social media marketing strategies for micro and small enterprises work better when scaled incrementally to fit resource constraints, rather than importing large-scale digital marketing frameworks wholesale.

At the policy level, local government could weigh tiered incentive schemes for green product certification grounded in local wisdom, since eco-friendly practices already exist but have not yet translated into clear economic value for business owners. The Hexa-Helix collaborative support scheme, already under way as noted earlier, would benefit from a more geographically balanced monitoring mechanism so its advantages reach beyond MSMEs situated near government centers. Local government informants themselves recognized this opening, noting that "AI can assist in creating promotional content, simple designs, and captions, thereby making marketing easier and more engaging" a sign of openness toward incorporating simple AI-based tools into future digital support programs.

Research Limitations and Methodological Reflections

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample of 42 informants, while spanning six stakeholder groups, may not fully capture theoretical saturation for every category. Ünlü and Qureshi (2023) argue that judging theoretical saturation depends heavily on the particular Grounded Theory paradigm adopted and on how consistently constant comparison is

applied across coding stages; the evaluative tools they propose offer a useful benchmark for checking whether this study's core categories are genuinely saturated. Future research could extend the sample and revisit theoretical sampling to further strengthen the categories identified here.

Second, balancing inductive depth against the practical constraints of fieldwork is a tension widely noted in the methodological literature. Dahwa (2024) observes that Grounded Theory is often seen as demanding, costly, and time-intensive, prompting many researchers to combine it with case study techniques to keep the approach feasible. This study preserved depth through triangulating data sources interviews, observations, and documentation and by drawing on six distinct informant groups; even so, the theoretical propositions developed above should be treated as a working model, open to refinement in future studies, potentially through a combined Grounded Theory and case study approach. Consistent with this, Propositions 1 to 5 are best read as working propositions grounded in the accounts of 42 informants from West Muna rather than as causal relationships already confirmed; extending them to other regions, or testing them as statistically verified causal or mediating effects, would require further empirical, quantitative follow-up beyond the scope of the present qualitative study.

Third, on the confirmability of the findings, Ahmed (2024) summarizes qualitative research trustworthiness as resting on four pillars: credibility, transferability, dependability (through documentation and audit trails), and confirmability (through peer debriefing and reflective journaling). This study addressed dependability through field notes and transcripts managed in NVivo, supported by an audit trail of the coding process; nonetheless, formal peer debriefing with marketing experts outside the research team was limited, and future studies would benefit from strengthening this aspect further.

Directions for Further Research

The five theoretical propositions and the "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model developed in this study provide a foundation that future research can build on for example, by validating the model with a wider set of informants and through cross-case comparisons with MSMEs in other island areas of Southeast Sulawesi, testing how well the model generalizes across island economies that are similar but not identical.

The multi-stakeholder collaboration dimension, addressed here mainly in descriptive terms, would also benefit from deeper examination through case studies of each Hexa Helix element in future work, allowing a more precise picture of how individual stakeholders contribute to the sustainability of MSME marketing in West Muna.

CONCLUSION

At this point, the study has gathered and analyzed primary data from 42 informants across six stakeholder groups involved in MSME marketing in West Muna Regency: local government, MSME operators from multiple sectors, academics and practitioners, support communities, digital media managers or local influencers, and consumers. Working through the open, axial, and selective coding stages required by the Grounded Theory approach, the study arrived at the core category of "MSME adaptive capability and innovation," which links four causal conditions marketing digitalization, green innovation, local cultural capital, and Hexa Helix collaboration to the outcomes of MSME resilience and sustainable marketing performance.

Several key conclusions follow from these findings. First, marketing digitalization among West Muna's MSMEs remains at a minimally functional level WhatsApp and Facebook serve as promotional showcases and transaction communication channels but have not yet become active marketing channels integrated with eWOM, endorsements, or live-streaming, practices seen elsewhere nationally. Second, eco-friendly practices already exist implicitly among local MSMEs, such as reducing material waste and reusing packaging, but have not been explicitly framed as a "green value

proposition" within the marketing mix, leaving their differentiation potential underused. Third, local cultural capital Muna weaving, signature culinary products, and kinship or mutual-cooperation values plays a central role in building transaction trust, effectively taking the place of the online reviews and ratings that local business owners have yet to adopt widely. Fourth, multi-stakeholder collaboration among government, academia, communities, and the private sector is under way but not evenly distributed geographically, with MSMEs farther from the administrative center generally having less access to support programs. Fifth, the exposure of agriculture, fisheries, and tourism to climate change highlights the need to build an explicit environmental adaptation dimension into MSME sustainable marketing strategies, rather than settling for cosmetic sustainability rhetoric.

On this basis, the study puts forward five theoretical propositions underpinning the "Resilient Digital-Green Marketing" model, arguing that the four antecedent constructs do not affect marketing performance directly; rather, their influence runs through business owners' adaptive capabilities and is shaped by contextual conditions such as capital availability, digital workforce competence, internet infrastructure quality, and local government policy support. These findings support the novelty claimed at the outset: an inductive, contextual, and empirically grounded theoretical model for MSME sustainable marketing in Indonesia's archipelagic and remote regions, an area the existing literature has explored far less than urban or developed-country settings.

On the practical side, the study recommends that policy interventions and MSME support programs in West Muna be rolled out incrementally and grounded in actual field practice, rather than relying on academic terminology unfamiliar to business owners. Digital marketing training should aim at strengthening transactional functions moving beyond mere promotional display; "green" narratives and local culture should be communicated explicitly within the marketing mix; and multi-stakeholder collaboration models should be decentralized to give MSMEs in remote villages more equitable access to support. Methodologically, the study shows how a layered validation mechanism member checking, triangulation, audit trails, and inter-rater reliability checks can strengthen the credibility of Grounded Theory-based qualitative findings.

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