

# **Bridging Digital Inequality: Enhancing Education and Skills to Support SME Growth in the Digital Era**

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## ***Abstract***

Persistent digital inequities continue to constrain inclusive economic development within Malaysia, with pronounced effects upon small and medium enterprises operating in the food and beverage sector under MARA auspices. In spite of the introduction of several national programs to speed up digital transformation, there exist significant obstacles to full uptake of digital technology by these businesses. These constraints are based on the insufficiency of digital literacy, the lack of technical skills, and the inconsistency of the implementation of digital business practice factors that together weaken organisational ability to develop robust digital customer relationships and provide engaging experiential results in an increasingly competitive marketplace. This study focuses on functionality interoperation of four individual digital capability dimensions namely; personalisation of services, customer feedback, interface and user experience design, and the development of digital marketing strategies. The study concern will be based on their respective efforts towards improving customer interaction modalities and improving the quality of aggregates customer experience. The research also challenges customer interaction as a mediating factor that adds value to the relationship channels between these online projects and experience results. The methodological approach used was quantitative and primary data was gathered on 340 customers of food and beverage SMEs registered by MARA spread everywhere across Malaysia. Data collection was done by means of structured questionnaires. The further analytical procedures were applied using SPSS version 29 including correlation analysis, and multiple regression. The empirical data suggest that the most substantively significant predictors of improved customer interaction and high customer experience are digital marketing policies and UI/UX design. On the other hand, service personalisation and customer feedback integration are still relatively underutilized in the investigated population of SMEs. The results of the analysis also prove that the customer engagement has a statistically significant mediational role in reinforcing digital customer relationships and increasing the quality of customer experience. These empirical results stress the paramount role of further development of educational and skills development programs, with specific focus on digital marketing skills, adoption of electronic commerce and customer engagement strategy planning. These programmatic investments are some of the necessary requirements of alleviating digital inequality, enhancing the competitive positioning of SMEs and the quality of customer experience in the increasingly digitalized economy of Malaysia.

## ***Keywords:***

*Digital Inequality; Education and Skills Development; Customer Engagement; SME Growth; Digital Transformation*

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