

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN ENHANCING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA-BASED LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the effect of digital marketing on customer engagement among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Bengkalis Regency. Specifically, it investigates how social media marketing, content marketing, and online customer interaction influence behavioral and emotional engagement. A quantitative approach with an explanatory research design was employed, using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) on 250 MSME respondents who actively use social media. Data were collected via online questionnaires distributed through social media and community networks. The results indicate that content marketing and online customer interaction significantly enhance behavioral engagement, while social media marketing and content marketing significantly increase emotional engagement. Conversely, social media marketing does not affect behavioral engagement, and online customer interaction does not affect emotional engagement. These findings suggest that MSMEs should prioritize value-driven content and authentic interactions to foster meaningful customer engagement.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; Customer Engagement; MSMEs; Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology over the past decade has profoundly transformed global marketing paradigms. This transformation has had significant implications for business strategies across all scales, from large corporations to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). One of the most notable outcomes of this transformation is the rise of digital marketing, which has emerged as a primary strategy for reaching, retaining, and cultivating long-term relationships with customers (Y. Wang et al., 2025). Through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, digital marketing enables two-way communication between businesses and consumers. Rather than serving merely as a one-directional promotional tool, these platforms facilitate interactive engagement, creative content development, and emotional connections (Lin et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, marketing digitalization has gained strong momentum in line with the increasing penetration of social media. The (We Are Social Indonesia, 2024) report indicates that more than 266 million Indonesians are active social media users, spending an average of over three hours per day on these platforms. This demonstrates that social media has become a central channel for shaping consumer perception, loyalty, and behavior in the modern era. The phenomenon extends beyond urban areas to regional settings, including Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, where digital transformation has also influenced local economic activities. According to the Bengkalis Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kadin Bengkalis, 2025), approximately 1,411 MSMEs operate in the region, the majority of which are engaged in the culinary sector and have begun utilizing social media as their main promotional medium.

Nevertheless, the utilization of social media by local entrepreneurs tends to be relatively limited in terms of strategic and interactive use. Most business owners simply upload product images without systematic content planning or active consumer interaction (Ng et al., 2020; Yasin et al., 2019). Social Media Marketing (SMM) plays a pivotal role in fostering customer engagement. Prior studies have confirmed that SMM exerts a positive influence on customer engagement and consumer loyalty, particularly in Indonesia's local cosmetics industry ((Calderón-Monge & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2022); (Muchardie et al., 2016). Other research has revealed that interaction, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and trend attractiveness on social media significantly contribute to consumer engagement and brand awareness in the fast-food sector ((Chen et al., 2020; Zahra, 2025).

Content Marketing also represents a vital component of modern digital strategies. (Nugraha, 2024) found that content marketing strategies implemented on the Instagram account @sukabumi_ contributed 60.8% to customer engagement, although interactivity aspects still require enhancement. Similar evidence was provided by (Choi et al., 2024; De Vries et al., 2018). Online Customer Interaction defined as the intensity and quality of online interactions between businesses and customers has likewise been shown to strengthen long-term brand relationships through mechanisms such as comments, direct messaging, and live streaming ((Utami et al., 2022). Active consumer participation in digital interaction fosters a sense of appreciation and belonging toward the brand, whereas insufficient interaction can diminish customer engagement, as observed in digital healthcare platforms such as Alodokter and Halodoc (Syukron et al., 2022).

Conceptually, Customer Engagement reflects the degree of customer involvement with a brand, encompassing both behavioral and emotional dimensions (Vinerean & Opreana, 2021). Behavioral engagement refers to tangible actions, such as liking, commenting, or repurchasing (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022), while emotional engagement involves psychological constructs including trust, satisfaction, and emotional attachment (Brodie et al., 2011). Accordingly, effective digital marketing strategies must integrate both dimensions in a balanced manner.

Several phenomena underscore the urgency for further investigation into the relationship between digital marketing and customer engagement. Local products such as traditional culinary items and handicrafts have occasionally gone viral on social media but often fail to sustain long-term engagement. Many consumers make only one-time purchases without developing emotional ties with the brand (Sheng, 2019; Yasin et al., 2019; Yumna et al., 2023). Furthermore, one-way communication patterns and the limited use of storytelling in local entrepreneurs' social media accounts suggest that engagement-oriented digital marketing strategies remain underdeveloped (Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

From an academic standpoint, previous research has examined the impact of digital marketing on customer engagement (Abdullah & Faisal, 2022; Mighfar, 2015). However, most studies have been partial, focusing on only one or two variables such as Content Marketing or Social Media Marketing independently. Empirical studies that simultaneously investigate the combined effects of three primary sub-variables Social Media Marketing, Content Marketing, and Online Customer Interaction on both dimensions of Customer Engagement (behavioral and emotional) remain limited, particularly in the regional MSME context (Nugraha, 2024).

Therefore, this study holds both theoretical and practical relevance. Theoretically, it aims to enrich the digital marketing literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of how digital strategies influence customer engagement. Practically, the findings are expected to offer strategic insights for MSME practitioners in Bengkalis Regency in designing more adaptive, creative, and loyalty-oriented digital marketing strategies. Accordingly, this study seeks to empirically examine the effects of Social Media Marketing, Content Marketing, and Online Customer Interaction on Customer Engagement, encompassing both Behavioral and Emotional Engagement dimensions.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement refers to the psychological state reflecting customers' interaction, emotional attachment, and active participation with a brand or organization (Brodie et al., 2011). It encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Behavioral engagement involves voluntary actions such as feedback provision, forum participation, repeat purchases, or brand recommendation, driven by motivation, interest, and perceived value (Vivek et al., 2016); (Brodie et al., 2011). Emotional engagement denotes the affective bond fostering loyalty, satisfaction, and continued brand preference despite competitors, strengthened by personalized and narrative digital interactions (Harsya et al., 2022; Kim & Ko, 2018).

Digital Marketing

Digital marketing leverages technology and digital channels websites, social media, email, search engines, and e-commerce to promote products, enhance engagement, and drive sales (Chaffey, D., & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Social media marketing enables bidirectional, personalized interactions for promotion, loyalty, education, and feedback (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023). Content marketing focuses on creating valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract, retain, and influence audiences (Vinerean & Opreana, 2021). Online customer interactions on digital platforms foster engagement, trust, and commitment, which are essential for long-term loyalty (Yumna et al., 2023).

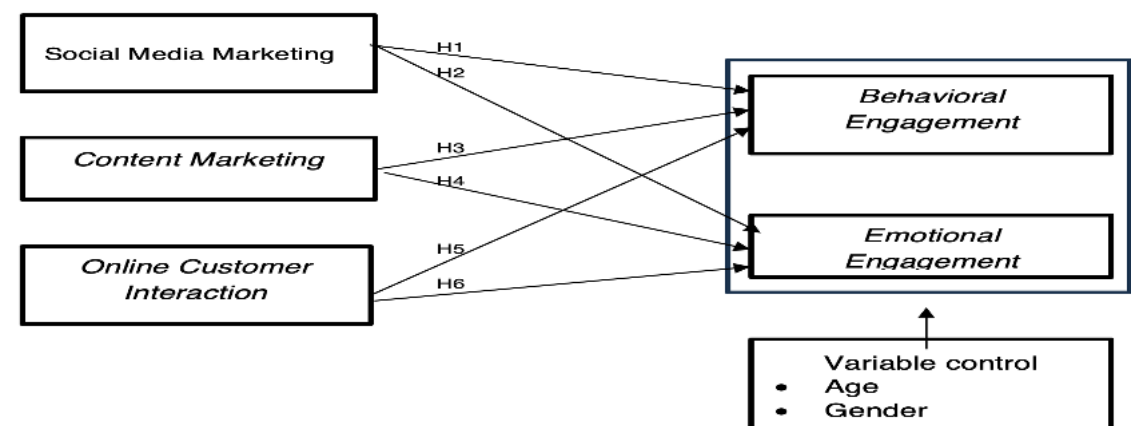


Figure 1. Conceptual Model
Source: Author Formulation (2025)

Based on the conceptual framework, the hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1: Social media Marketing positively affects Behavioral Engagement.

- H2: Social media Marketing positively affects Emotional Engagement.
 H3: Content Marketing positively affects Behavioral Engagement.
 H4: Content Marketing positively affects Emotional Engagement.
 H5: Online Customer Interaction positively affects Behavioral Engagement.
 H6: Online Customer Interaction positively affects Emotional Engagement

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design, aiming to elucidate the causal relationship between Digital Marketing and Customer Engagement. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling – Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), which is suitable for complex models, relatively small sample sizes, and non-normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2022). Research Variables of Digital Marketing, measured through Social Media Marketing, Content Marketing, and Online Customer Interaction. Next, Customer Engagement, measured through Behavioral Engagement, and Emotional Engagement.

The population comprises all Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Bengkalis Regency (1,411 units) that actively use social media, based on data obtained from the Bengkalis Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kadin Bengkalis, 2025). The sampling technique employed was random sampling. The population was stratified based on business sector (e.g., culinary, retail, and services), reflecting the dominant MSME classifications in the region. The proportion of samples drawn from each stratum was determined based on its relative size within the total population to ensure representativeness. Within each stratum, respondents were selected using a random approach by distributing online questionnaires to MSMEs that met the inclusion criteria, namely: (1) domiciled in Bengkalis Regency, and (2) actively using social media for marketing or customer interaction for at least the past six months. The final sample consisted of 250 respondents, which satisfies the recommended minimum sample size for SEM-PLS analysis (Hair et al., 2022). Primary data were collected through an online questionnaire (Google Form) using a 5-point Likert scale, distributed via WhatsApp, MSME communities, and social media platforms. See descriptive information in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1. Gender of MSME Owners (N=250)

Gender	Percentage	Description
Male	47.4%	Representing almost half of the total respondents, male entrepreneurs are actively involved in various business sectors.
Female	52.6%	Female entrepreneurs slightly dominate the MSME landscape in Bengkalis.

The data indicates that female participation in MSME activities is relatively higher (52.6%) than that of males (47.4%). This suggests that women play a crucial role in driving the local economy, particularly in micro and small-scale enterprises.

Table 2. Age of MSME Owners (N=250)

Age Range	Percentage	Description
15–25 years	10.8%	Representing the younger generation who are beginning to explore entrepreneurship.
26–35 years	41.8%	The dominant age group, representing the most active and productive business owners.
36–45 years	28.3%	Consists of experienced entrepreneurs managing established MSMEs.
46–55 years	13.9%	Represents mature entrepreneurs maintaining business stability.
55 years and above	5.2%	A small proportion, typically long-time business owners.

The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling – Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). This method was selected due to its advantages in examining complex latent variable

relationships, even with relatively small sample sizes and non-normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2022).

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through two sequential stages: evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and evaluation of the structural model (inner model). The outer model assessment aimed to examine the validity and reliability of the constructs through convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with threshold values above 0.70 and 0.50, respectively. Discriminant validity was evaluated using cross-loading analysis and the Fornell–Larcker criterion, while reliability was measured using Composite Reliability and Cronbach’s Alpha with minimum acceptable values above 0.70. After the measurement model satisfied validity and reliability requirements, the structural model was evaluated to analyze the relationships among latent variables. This stage included the examination of path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values obtained through bootstrapping procedures to determine the significance and direction of relationships. In addition, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to explain the variance of endogenous constructs, while predictive relevance was assessed using Q^2 values. All analyses were conducted using SmartPLS 4, which enables comprehensive component-based SEM analysis for simultaneously evaluating construct measurement and structural relationships.

RESULTS

Convergent validity assesses the extent to which the indicators of a particular construct share a high proportion of variance in common. It is evaluated through the factor loading of each indicator and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Table 3 presents the data.

Table 3. Convergent Validity

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Description
Social Media Marketing (X1)	X1.1	0.78	Valid
	X1.2	0.82	Valid
	X1.3	0.75	Valid
AVE		0.62	> 0.50
Content Marketing (X2)	X2.1	0.80	Valid
	X2.2	0.77	Valid
	X2.3	0.73	Valid
AVE		0.61	> 0.50
Online Customer Interaction (X3)	X3.1	0.74	Valid
	X3.2	0.76	Valid
	X3.3	0.71	Valid
AVE		0.57	> 0.50
Behavioral Engagement (Y1)	Y1.1	0.79	Valid
	Y1.2	0.81	Valid
	Y1.3	0.76	Valid
AVE		0.63	> 0.50
Emotional Engagement (Y2)	Y2.1	0.83	Valid
	Y2.2	0.78	Valid
	Y2.3	0.77	Valid
AVE		0.65	> 0.50

All factor loadings exceed 0.70 and AVE values are above 0.50, confirming that all constructs exhibit satisfactory convergent validity. Hence, the indicators adequately reflect their respective latent variables. Discriminant validity ensures that each construct is distinct from the others and that its indicators measure unique aspects of the concept. This was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which compares the square root of the AVE of each construct with the correlations between constructs.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity

Construct	X1	X2	X3	Y1	Y2
Social Media Marketing (X1)	0.787	0.45	0.38	0.31	0.43
Content Marketing (X2)	0.45	0.781	0.36	0.37	0.29
Online Customer Interaction (X3)	0.38	0.36	0.755	0.30	0.40
Behavioral Engagement (Y1)	0.31	0.37	0.30	0.794	0.55
Emotional Engagement (Y2)	0.43	0.29	0.40	0.55	0.806

The square roots of AVE (diagonal values in bold) are higher than the inter-construct correlations (off-diagonal values), confirming discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was further assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT), as recommended by (Hair et al., 2022). The HTMT values for all construct pairs are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	SMM	CM	OCI	BE	EE
Social Media Marketing (X1)	—				
Content Marketing (X2)	0.78	—			
Online Customer Interaction (X3)	0.74	0.81	—		
Behavioral Engagement (Y1)	0.69	0.76	0.73	—	
Emotional Engagement (Y2)	0.72	0.79	0.75	0.77	—

All HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.90, indicating that discriminant validity is established among the constructs. Therefore, the measurement model demonstrates adequate discriminant validity based on both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT approach. Construct reliability evaluates the internal consistency of the indicators within each latent variable. Two statistical measures are used: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) as evident in Table 6. Both should exceed the threshold value of 0.70 to indicate satisfactory reliability (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 6. Construct Reliability

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Interpretation
Social Media Marketing (X1)	0.82	0.87	Reliable
Content Marketing (X2)	0.79	0.85	Reliable
Online Customer Interaction (X3)	0.76	0.83	Reliable
Behavioral Engagement (Y1)	0.81	0.86	Reliable
Emotional Engagement (Y2)	0.84	0.88	Reliable

All constructs meet the minimum reliability thresholds, confirming that the indicators consistently measure their respective latent variables.

Table 7. Path Coefficients

Construct	Coefficients (O)	T	P	significant
X1 → Y1 (Social Media Marketing → Behavioral Engagement)	0.134	1.640	0.101	Non-significant
X1 → Y2 (Social Media Marketing → Emotional Engagement)	0.430	3.653	0.000	significant
X2 → Y1 (Content Marketing → Behavioral Engagement)	0.374	3.534	0.000	significant
X2 → Y2 (Content Marketing → Emotional Engagement)	0.289	2.551	0.011	significant
X3 → Y1 (Online Customer Interaction → Behavioral Engagement)	0.301	3.283	0.001	significant
X3 → Y2 (Online Customer Interaction → Emotional Engagement)	0.038	0.419	0.675	Non-significant

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that social media marketing does not significantly stimulate behavioral engagement among MSME customers, suggesting that existing digital marketing activities remain insufficient to encourage active participation such as sharing, commenting, or repeat purchasing. This result reflects the gap between the theoretical potential of social media marketing and its practical implementation within MSMEs, which often face limitations in managerial capability, technological readiness, and strategic consistency. Prior studies emphasize that social media marketing becomes effective only when supported by professional management, interactive communication, and coherent engagement strategies (Felix et al., 2017; Muchardie et al., 2016). In many MSMEs, digital activities remain irregular, one-directional, and promotion-oriented, thereby generating passive awareness rather than active customer participation. Behavioral engagement requires dialogic communication, relevance, and participatory experiences that encourage customers to become involved in the brand ecosystem (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). Consistent with previous research, ineffective integration of narrative consistency and customer interaction reduces the capacity of social media marketing to sustain long-term engagement (Godey et al., 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020; Mangold & Faulds, 2019). Therefore, the insignificant relationship identified in this study reflects structural and strategic limitations in MSME digital practices rather than the ineffectiveness of social media marketing itself.

In contrast, social media marketing demonstrates a significant positive effect on emotional engagement, indicating that digital communication activities are more effective in fostering emotional attachment than stimulating direct behavioral responses. Emotional engagement is shaped through perceived closeness, enjoyment, and relational communication rather than transactional interaction alone (Kim & Ko, 2018). Even relatively simple digital activities can strengthen emotional connections when customers perceive authenticity, empathy, and value congruence within brand communication. Prior studies suggest that emotional attachment emerges when brands create meaningful and participatory experiences aligned with customer values (Abdullah & Faisal, 2022; Setiawati & Mastarida, 2022). Within the MSME context, emotional engagement is often reinforced through localized narratives, personalized interaction, and culturally embedded communication styles that resonate with consumers. Social media platforms enable MSMEs to humanize communication and establish trust-based relationships, particularly when supported by creative and emotionally appealing content (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Calderón-Monge & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2022; Zahra, 2025). This finding confirms that MSMEs are relatively more capable of leveraging social media to create emotional resonance than to generate direct behavioral action, thereby highlighting the importance of authentic and relationship-oriented communication strategies in sustaining customer loyalty.

The findings further reveal that content marketing significantly influences behavioral engagement, indicating that educational, relevant, and value-oriented content encourages customers to interact more actively with MSME brands. Unlike general promotional exposure, content marketing directly shapes audience perception by providing useful and meaningful information that motivates participatory behavior. Interactive and creative content captures customer attention and stimulates actions such as sharing, commenting, and liking (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Behavioral engagement becomes stronger when content delivers tangible value and relevance to audiences, transforming customers from passive observers into active participants (Pulizzi & Brenner, 2015; Rowley, 2018). In the MSME context, visually appealing and consistently distributed content, particularly through social media platforms, plays a central role in maintaining audience interest and interaction (Lazuardi, F., Nurcahyo, A., & Pramesti, 2022; Nugraha, 2024). Consistency, personalization, and alignment with audience preferences further reinforce the effectiveness of content marketing in sustaining engagement (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Tafesse & Dayan, 2023). These findings indicate that MSMEs are more effective in utilizing content marketing than general social media promotion in driving customer participation within digital environments.

Content marketing also demonstrates a significant positive influence on emotional engagement, suggesting that MSME-generated content contributes not only to customer attention but also to emotional attachment. Emotional engagement emerges when digital content evokes trust, intimacy, enjoyment, and shared meaning rather than merely delivering functional messages (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). One of the central mechanisms underlying

this relationship is storytelling, which enables brands to create psychological resonance and memorable experiences (Rose & Pulizzi, 2017). Content reflecting social values, sustainability, or shared beliefs further strengthens emotional attachment by aligning brand identity with customer values (Chen et al., 2020). In MSMEs, authenticity and local identity become particularly important because customers often connect emotionally with narratives of perseverance, cultural uniqueness, and community involvement (Astari, 2021; Yuniarti et al., 2022). Prior research also emphasizes that emotional attachment bridges brand perception and long-term loyalty, making emotionally oriented digital strategies highly relevant for sustaining customer relationships (Choi et al., 2024; F. Wang et al., 2023; Purnama et al., 2025). Therefore, content marketing functions not only as an informational instrument but also as a strategic mechanism for developing emotional bonds and strengthening long-term customer loyalty.

The study additionally shows that online customer interaction significantly enhances behavioral engagement, indicating that active digital interaction between MSMEs and customers increases customer participation and behavioral involvement. Unlike passive content exposure, online interaction creates two-way communication that intensifies customer involvement and strengthens participatory behavior (Lin et al., 2020; Utami et al., 2022). Timely responses, active communication, and personalized interaction stimulate trust and encourage customers to engage more actively with the brand (Sheng, 2019). The quality of interaction also plays a decisive role because meaningful communication, positive feedback, and personalized responses contribute to customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth (De Veirman et al., 2017; Gremler et al., 2021). In digital environments where face-to-face interaction is limited, comments, messages, and interactive social media features become substitutes for direct relational experiences (Harsya et al., 2022; Ratnawati & Sanaji, 2024). Consequently, online customer interaction becomes an effective mechanism for transforming digital communication into active behavioral engagement and sustained customer participation.

However, online customer interaction does not significantly influence emotional engagement, suggesting that transactional digital interaction alone remains insufficient to generate deeper emotional attachment. Although interaction may increase communication frequency and short-term participation, emotional engagement requires affective, meaningful, and relationship-oriented experiences that extend beyond functional communication (Ng et al., 2020). Many online interactions within MSMEs remain task-oriented and transactional, focusing primarily on inquiries, orders, and basic customer service rather than emotional connection (Hariyanto & Trisunarno, 2020). As a result, such interactions improve efficiency and responsiveness without necessarily creating trust, intimacy, or emotional belonging. The effectiveness of online interaction in generating emotional attachment depends heavily on communication quality, empathy, warmth, and personalization (Singh & Rios, 2022). Functional communication without emotional depth tends to produce behavioral participation only, while emotional engagement emerges through consistent relational experiences across the customer journey (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These findings indicate that MSMEs need to move beyond transactional communication by adopting more empathetic, narrative-driven, and relationship-oriented interaction strategies that emphasize authenticity, trust, and emotional value in order to strengthen long-term emotional engagement.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

This study demonstrates that digital marketing strategies among MSMEs exert varying influences on customer engagement. Social media marketing shows no significant effect on behavioral engagement but has a positive effect on emotional engagement. Conversely, content marketing has a positive and significant impact on both forms of engagement, highlighting the critical role of content quality and relevance in fostering interaction and emotional closeness with customers. Meanwhile, online customer interaction significantly affects behavioral engagement but not emotional engagement. Overall, these findings underscore that the effectiveness of MSMEs' digital marketing is determined more by the depth of emotional value and content quality than by the mere frequency of promotion or interaction.

ETHICAL DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in full accordance with established research ethics guidelines. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were strictly maintained, and all collected data were used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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