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The Influence of Online Marketing and Its Impact on Business in Post-Covid-19: Sabah Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Purpose: This research investigates the influence of online marketing and its impact on businesses in the Sabah Tourism Industry post-Covid-19.

Design/methodology/approach: The research employs a quantitative approach using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze data collected from 217 industry players who utilize online marketing platforms for business promotion. The data is analyzed to understand cause-and-effect relationships within the proposed model, facilitated by the SmartPLS software.

Findings: The research results show that effort expectancy, observability, and social influence do not significantly influence online marketing usage. However, performance expectancy, facilitating conditions, relative advantage, and compatibility significantly influence online marketing usage. Additionally, the adoption of online marketing significantly impacts on business performance.

Research limitations/implications: The study focuses on the Sabah Tourism Industry, and the findings may not be generalizable to other regions or industries. Future research could explore a broader geographical scope and include other sectors for a more comprehensive understanding.

Practical implications: The existence of online marketing can boost the performance of businesses of all sizes, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In the competitive landscape of the tourism industry, where customers demand instant information and personalized experiences, the strategic utilization of online marketing can significantly boost visibility, drive customer acquisition, and foster loyalty.

Originality/value: This research highlights the critical factors that influence online marketing usage and its impact on business performance in the Sabah Tourism Industry post-Covid-19, providing valuable insights for industry players to enhance their marketing strategies.

Keywords: Online Marketing, Business Performance, Sabah Tourism Industry, Post-Covid-19

Introduction

Online marketing has emerged as an indispensable tool in the business landscape, significantly transforming how companies reach and engage with their customers. In addition to that, online marketing offers numerous advantages, including cost-effectiveness, extensive reach, and the ability to target specific audience segments (Patrick & Hee, 2019). Its adaptability and speed allow businesses to respond quickly to market changes and consumer preferences. The functionalities of online marketing encompass a range of strategies such as social media, email campaigns, content marketing, Search Engine Optimization, banner ads, and many others (Sharma, 2021). This platform enables businesses to enhance their visibility, drive traffic to their websites, and convert visitors into customers.

By leveraging online marketing, businesses can disseminate information swiftly, promote their products and services globally, and interact with consumers in real-time (Lies Setyawati & Anindita, 2022). For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), online marketing is particularly vital as it levels the playing field, allowing smaller firms to compete with larger enterprises. SMEs are encouraged to use this medium optimally to achieve more aggressive and innovative business quality (Omar et al., 2020). Utilizing online marketing strategies in digital marketing can help SMEs expand their reach, boost sales, and ultimately grow their business without requiring significant financial investments (Kano et al., 2022). This democratization of marketing has led to increased adoption of online marketing tools among SMEs, facilitating business expansion and customer acquisition.

The tourism industry, in particular, has greatly benefited from online marketing due to its ability to provide instant access to a wealth of information about tourist destinations, current promotions, and the best deals (Canet et al., 2023; Hartanto et al., 2022). This capability is crucial for tourism-related businesses striving to attract and retain customers in an increasingly competitive market. Recognized as an effective means to promote destinations both domestically and globally, online marketing holds significant promise for Sabah's tourism industry. Sabah holds substantial economic significance within Malaysia, prominently reflected by its robust contribution to the national GDP. In 2019, Sabah was a major contributor to Malaysia's national GDP, and in 2020, it ranked third in domestic visitors with 22 million tourists, trailing only Selangor and F.T. Kuala Lumpur (**Figure 1**) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). This underscores Sabah's pivotal role in Malaysia's tourism sector and highlights its integral position in the country's economic landscape. However, despite the recognized effectiveness of online marketing, Sabah's tourism industry remains underutilized in this regard due to limited internet connectivity compared to more developed states in Peninsular Malaysia (Kaur, 2017; Lo, 2019).

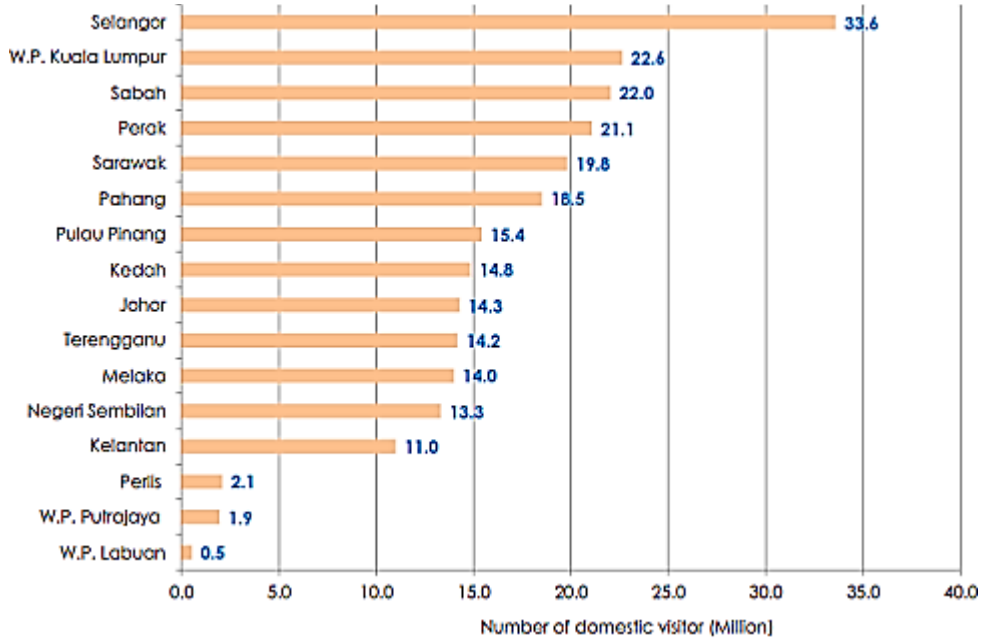

Figure 1. Number of domestic visitors by state visited, 2019

Based on data from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), tourists visit Sabah for a variety of reasons. Visiting relatives and friends, holidays, leisure, or relaxation trips, incentive travel or other miscellaneous purposes, official business or educational activities, and entertainment, such as attending special events or sports are among the reasons. These diverse motivations underscore the multifaceted appeal of Sabah as a travel destination, catering to both personal and professional needs of visitors. Sabah is continuously working towards achieving its tourism strategies as outlined in Sabah's strategic development plans, such as the State Development Agenda or Halatuju, the Sabah Development Corridor, and the Economic Transformation Programme (Sabah State Government, 2022). This study provides some new perspectives from tourism enterprises by focusing on the factors that may influence the adoption of online marketing in post-Covid-19 in Sabah, which does not have an advanced internet network like Peninsula Malaysia but is a well-known tourist destination.

This study adopted performance expectancy, effort expectancy, facilitating conditions, and social influence from the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) model, enhanced with three constructs from the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory: relative advantage, observability, and compatibility. An online survey questionnaire and a convenient sampling procedure are employed to gather data, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the determinants and effects of online marketing in Sabah. Moreover, the results of this study aim to assist the decision-makers and policy implementers in offering extra information, special programs, and professional training to the owners, managers, and employees to maximize the benefits of online marketing and in devising efficient strategies for their businesses to sustain during harsh times.

Literature Review

Sabah, situated in East Malaysia, serves as a notable example of a region where the tourism sector plays a crucial role in the economy. This Malaysian state is renowned for its diverse natural attractions, including Mount Kinabalu, the tallest mountain in Southeast Asia, and

Sipadan Island, an iconic diving destination. These natural wonders, along with the rich cultural heritage of the state, have made Sabah a sought-after destination for both domestic and international tourists.

According to previous data from the Sabah Tourism Board, tourism ranks as the third-largest industry in Sabah, providing employment for over 80,000 individuals (Sabah Tourism Board, 2021). In 2019, the tourism industry in Sabah experienced substantial growth, with 4.2 million tourist arrivals reported (MySabah.com, 2021). This increase in tourist numbers was a testament to the effective marketing strategies and the diverse attractions that Sabah offered, from its pristine beaches and rainforests to its vibrant cultural festivals. However, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic drastically altered this trajectory. National movement control orders and border closures, implemented around February 2020, resulted in a staggering decrease in tourist arrivals by over 74%. The drop in foreign travel has resulted in a global loss of $1.3 trillion in export revenues, which is more than 11 times what was lost during the global economic crisis of 2009 (Kumar & Ekka, 2023). The results reveal that the tourism sector is easily affected by global crises (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020). This dramatic drop brought the number of visitors down to less than one million within that year, gravely impacting the local economy (Lu et al., 2018). The tourism-related businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, tour operators, and transportation services, faced significant revenue and profitability declines. Many enterprises struggled to stay afloat, leading to layoffs and reduced business operations. The ripple effects extended to the entire community, impacting those in support services, from transport providers to souvenir shops.

Recognizing the critical role of tourism in Sabah's economy, the government and industry stakeholders initiated various measures to mitigate the impact and promote recovery. On December 11th, 2020, the Minister of Tourism indicated that recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic's impact would require concerted efforts spanning four years (Chan, 2020). This statement underscored the long-term nature of the recovery process and the need for sustained and coordinated action. One of the key initiatives was the launch of the #RinduSabah campaign in December 2020. This three-month campaign targeted domestic tourists through online platforms, aiming to rejuvenate interest in Sabah's tourist destinations. High-visibility advertisements promoting Sabah were strategically placed in high-traffic areas throughout the Klang Valley to reach both locals and expatriates (BIMP-EAGA, 2021). These efforts highlighted the recognized importance of both online and offline marketing strategies in promoting Sabah's tourism sector.

Looking ahead, Sabah is continuously working towards achieving its tourism strategies as outlined in the State Development Agenda or Halatuju, Sabah Development Corridor, and Economic Transformation Programme (Sabah State Government, 2022). Beyond its natural beauty, Sabah boasts a rich cultural heritage with over 30 indigenous groups, including the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut, and Rungus people. This cultural diversity, coupled with its natural attractions like the Sabah Parks, which feature diverse flora, marine species, and Mount Kinabalu, offers a wide range of tourism opportunities (Sabah Tourism Board, 2021). To capitalize on these opportunities, it is essential to utilize effective online marketing strategies. The integration of digital tools and platforms can enhance the visibility of Sabah’s attractions, improve customer engagement, and drive tourism recovery. As Riasi and Pourmiri (2015) argue, the tourism industry has entered the digital era due to the rapid advancement of information technology. Online marketing is increasingly vital for attracting tourists, with travelers frequently relying on online travel agents and digital platforms for trip planning. In

other words, by leveraging online marketing and focusing on sustainable tourism practices, Sabah can rebuild its tourism sector and continue to attract visitors from around the world.

Numerous studies have underscored the efficacy of online marketing across various sectors. Research has consistently demonstrated that online marketing strategies significantly influence consumer behavior, enhance brand recognition, and increase sales. In the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), studies by Coman et al. (2020), Humaid and Yasser Sabri (2019), Pollák and Markovič (2021), and Singh and Kalia (2021) highlight the pivotal role of digital marketing in driving growth and competitiveness. The consumer perspectives on online marketing have been extensively explored by Caescu et al. (2021), Mathew and Soliman (2021), and Suchada et al. (2018). There are very limited studies in the tourism industry, particularly in Sabah. To the author's best knowledge, no publications currently address the influence of online marketing and its impact on business in post-covid-19 in Sabah. This study, therefore, enhanced adoption model for online marketing by incorporating performance expectancy, effort expectancy, facilitating conditions, and social influence from the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) model with three more constructs from DOI, namely relative advantage, observability, and compatibility.

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) model was developed to integrate constructs from various technology acceptance theories. It has been widely used to understand user attitudes towards technology adoption (Dwivedi et al., 2011). The original UTAUT model includes four key determinants. Performance expectancy defined as the degree to which an individual believes that using the technology will help to improve job performance, effort expectancy defined as the degree of ease associated with the use of the technology, facilitating conditions defined as the degree to which an individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support the use of the technology, and social influence defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe they should use the new system (Venkatesh et al., 2012).

The Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory, developed by Rogers (2003), complements UTAUT by adding three constructs that are crucial for understanding technology adoption. Relative advantage defined as the degree to which a technology is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes, observability defined as the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others, and compatibility defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters (Rogers, 2003).

Past studies have shown consistently that performance expectancy (Abbad, 2021; Alshaafee et al., 2021; Walrave et al., 2021), effort expectancy (Abbad, 2021; Alshaafee et al., 2021), facilitating conditions (Abbad, 2021; Alshaafee et al., 2021; Walrave et al., 2021), social influence (Alshaafee et al., 2021; Cheng, 2020; Patrick & Hee, 2021; Walrave et al., 2021), relative advantage, observability, and compatibility (Lou et al., 2017; Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015) influence technology usage or adoption or behavioral intention. Since these variables were significant in previous studies, the first seven hypotheses of this study are developed.

H1: There is a positive relationship between performance expectancy and online marketing usage.
H2: There is a positive relationship between effort expectancy and online marketing usage.

H3: There is a positive relationship between facilitating conditions and online marketing usage.
H4: There is a positive relationship between social influence and online marketing usage.
H5: There is a positive relationship between relative advantage and online marketing usage.
H6: There is a positive relationship between observability and online marketing usage.
H7: There is a positive relationship between compatibility and online marketing usage.

Online marketing, alternatively referred to as internet marketing or digital marketing, is the process of advertising and selling products and services through the use of interactive, virtual spaces. New synchronous, internet-based communication technologies had aided in the reorganization of important economic sectors, including marketing (Bostanshirin, 2014). Bostanshirin (2014) also asserted that internet marketing's cost-effectiveness, adaptability, and speed, as well as its extraordinary worldwide reach, have resulted in amazing gains for many organizations. Empirical studies conducted by (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020) and (Syaifullah et al., 2021), social media marketing plays a critical role in performance improvement. Thus, based on previous findings, this study formulates the following hypothesis to examine and confirm that online marketing usage in the tourism industry in Sabah also will bring a positive impact on business.

H8: There is a positive relationship between online marketing usage and its impact on business.

The conceptual framework of this study was developed through a comprehensive review of relevant literature and theoretical underpinnings, illustrated in **Figure 2**.

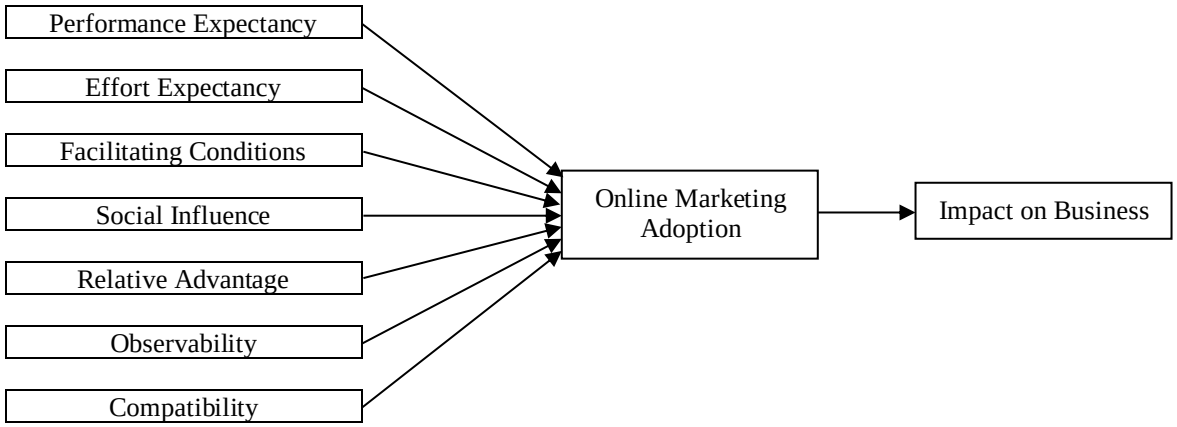

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprises travel agents and online travel agencies (OTAs) operating within the tourism industry in Sabah, Malaysia. Travel agents and OTAs were selected due to their integral role in marketing and promoting tourism products and services. To identify participants, we utilized social media analytics tools to focus on those with significant engagement and influence on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Convenience sampling will be employed to select participants from this population, with the selection process based on ease of accessibility and willingness to participate.

Measures

This study investigates the adoption of online marketing (AoOM) and its impact on business (IoB) using a framework comprising seven independent constructs: performance expectancy (PE), effort expectancy (EE), facilitating conditions (FC), social influence (SI), relative advantage (RA), observability (OBS), and compatibility (COM). Each construct was measured using a Likert Scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree'). The questionnaire utilized in this research included 38 measurement items distributed across the constructs: performance expectancy (5 items), effort expectancy (5 items), social influence (3 items), facilitating conditions (4 items), relative advantage (4 items), observability (3 items), and compatibility (5 items). Items were adapted from established studies: (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020) for performance expectancy, effort expectancy, facilitating conditions, and impacts on business; (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021) for social influence and online marketing adoption; (Mamun, 2018) for compatibility; and (Tsai et al., 2021) for observability.

Data Collection Procedures

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative approach for data collection. Both offline and online survey questionnaires were distributed to collect data from the targeted respondents.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis for this study involved two distinct stages using different software tools. Firstly, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.24) for preliminary data screening, including identifying missing data, outliers, and normality tests. Subsequently, SmartPLS software was employed to analyze relationships within the research model.

Analysis and Results

Descriptive Analysis

The present study had a sample of 217 participants who completed either online or offline questionnaires. Among them, the majority were female (n = 134, 62%), followed by male (n = 83, 38%). The largest age group represented was 21-25 (n = 59, 27%). In term of education level, a significant proportion held a diploma or less (n = 99, 46%). A total of 102 participants identified their position as marketing managers (47%). The largest segment of participants belongs to the accommodation industry (n = 65, 30%). Regarding the duration of online marketing usage, the majority reported using online marketing for greater than 1 year but less than 5 years (n =81, 37%). A summary of the demographic characteristics of participants is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 217)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	83	38%
	Female	134	62%
Age	Below 20	22	10%
	21-25	59	27%
	26-30	30	14%

	31-35	37	17%
	36-40	25	12%
	41-45	26	12%
	Above 45	18	9%
Education level	High school	30	14%
	Diploma or less	99	46%
	Bachelor	59	27%
	Master	26	12%
	Doctorate	3	1%
Position	Owner	48	22%
	Marketing manager	102	47%
	IT manager	49	23%
	Others	18	8%
Industry	Transportation	31	14%
	Accommodation	65	30%
	Food and beverage	53	24%
	Recreation and entertainment	32	14%
	Travel services	36	17%
Duration of online marketing usage	Less than 1 year	41	19%
	Greater than 1-less than 3 years	81	37%
	Greater than 3-less than 5 years	59	27%
	More than 5 years	36	17%

Measurement Model Assessment

A measurement model was established in this study to assess the outer loadings, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the study constructs. As shown in **Table 2**, all outer loadings of the constructs surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.708, as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). Furthermore, all reliability coefficients exceeded 0.708, demonstrating high internal consistency and reliability of the constructs. Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE) values, all of which exceeded 0.50, indicating robust convergent validity across the constructs (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2. Results of the measurement model

Constructs	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
IoB	IoB1	0.837	0.871	0.885	0.661
	IoB2	0.832			
	IoB3	0.882			
	IoB4	0.789			
	IoB5	0.715			
AoOM	AoOM1	0.877	0.909	0.910	0.785
	AoOM2	0.879			
	AoOM3	0.912			

	AoOM4	0.878			
PE	PE1	0.796	0.871	0.876	0.720
	PE2	0.876			
	PE3	0.878			
	PE4	0.841			
EE	EE1	0.815	0.895	0.904	0.705
	EE2	0.805			
	EE3	0.870			
	EE4	0.824			
	EE5	0.881			
FC	FC1	0.864	0.882	0.890	0.738
	FC2	0.817			
	FC3	0.859			
	FC4	0.895			
SI	SI1	0.844	0.819	0.820	0.736
	SI2	0.909			
	SI3	0.817			
RA	RA1	0.716	0.822	0.826	0.655
	RA2	0.855			
	RA3	0.859			
	RA4	0.799			
OBS	OBS1	0.870	0.882	0.886	0.809
	OBS2	0.903			
	OBS3	0.925			
COM	COM1	0.835	0.912	0.913	0.741
	COM2	0.869			
	COM3	0.888			
	COM4	0.878			
	COM5	0.833			

To assess the discriminant validity of the constructs, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was employed. As indicated in **Table 3**, all HTMT values were found to be below the threshold of 0.90, as recommended by (Hair et al., 2017). This confirms that there is adequate discriminant validity between each pair of study constructs.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis

	COM	EE	FC	IMP	OBS	PE	RA	SI	USE
COM									
EE	0.668								
FC	0.806	0.736							
IMP	0.720	0.649	0.699						
OBS	0.740	0.687	0.724	0.684					
PE	0.589	0.788	0.503	0.546	0.540				
RA	0.778	0.768	0.747	0.710	0.895	0.725			
SI	0.711	0.782	0.794	0.683	0.690	0.599	0.798		
USE	0.743	0.573	0.664	0.777	0.595	0.533	0.680	0.587	

4.3 Structural Model Assessment

A structural model analysis was conducted using data from all 217 cases obtained. As depicted in **Table 4**, the findings indicate that five out of eight hypotheses proposed in the study were supported, revealing significant relationships. Specifically, performance expectancy (PE) was found to generate a significant and positive relationship with the adoption of online marketing (AoOM) PE→AoOM (β=0.111, *p*=0.074). Similarly, the path of FC→AoOM (β=0.153, *p*=0.037), RA→AoOM (β=0.178, *p*=0.067), COM→AoOM (β=0.393, *p*=0.000), and AoOM→IoB (β=0.703, *p*=0.000). Thus, H1, H3, H5, H7, and H8 were supported. In contrast, effort expectancy (β=-0.009, *p*=0.461), social influence (β=0.002, *p*=0.492), and observability (β=-0.015, *p*=0.450) were revealed to not significantly and positively influence the adoption of online marketing. Hence, the H2, H4, and H6 of this study were not supported.

Table 4. Structural model assessment and hypothesis testing

H	Path	Std. Beta	Std. Error	*t*-value	*p*-value	Decision
H1	PE→AoOM	0.111	0.077	1.448	0.074	Supported
H2	EE→AoOM	-0.009	0.093	0.098	0.461	Not Supported
H3	FC→AoOM	0.153	0.085	1.793	0.037	Supported
H4	SI→AoOM	0.002	0.076	0.020	0.492	Not Supported
H5	RA→AoOM	0.178	0.119	1.498	0.067	Supportede
H6	OBS→AoOM	-0.015	0.102	0.127	0.450	Not Supported
H7	COM→AoOM	0.393	0.102	3.860	0.000	Supported
H8	AoOM→IoB	0.703	0.042	16.761	0.000	Supported

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Statistical analysis revealed significant associations between several factors and the adoption of online marketing. Performance expectancy (β=0.111, *p*=0.074) demonstrated a significant positive relationship with the adoption of online marketing, consistent with findings reported by Abbad (2021), Alshaafee et al. (2021), and Walrave et al. (2021). Similarly, facilitating conditions (β=0.153, *p*=0.037) were found to predict the adoption of online marketing, aligning with previous studies (Abbad, 2021; Alshaafee et al., 2021; Walrave et al., 2021). Furthermore, relative advantage (β=0.178, *p*=0.067) significantly correlated with the adoption of online marketing, corroborating findings by Lou et al. (2017) and Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman (2015). Likewise, compatibility (β=0.393, *p*=0.000) exhibited a significant influence on the adoption of online marketing, consistent with prior research (Lou et al., 2017; Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman, 2015). The analysis also revealed a strong, significant relationship between the adoption of online marketing and its impacts on business (β=0.703, *p*=0.000), in line with Chatterjee and Kumar Kar (2020) and Syaifullah et al. (2021).

In contrast, effort expectancy (β=-0.009, *p*=0.461) was not found to be a significant predictor of the adoption of online marketing, contrary to the findings of Abbad (2021), Alshaafee et al. (2021), and Walrave et al. (2021). Social influence (β=0.002, *p*=0.492) also did not significantly predict the adoption of online marketing, in contrast to studies by Alshaafee et al. (2021), Cheng (2020), Patrick and Hee (2021), and Walrave et al. (2021). Additionally, observability (β=-0.015, *p*=0.450) was not found to be a significant predictor of the adoption

of online marketing, contradicting findings from Lou et al. (2017) and Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman (2015).

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