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Thriving Through Turbulence: How Young Entrepreneurs Leverage Marketing Strategies to Navigate Crises and Digital Disruption

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ABSTRACT

An era marked by global crises and accelerating digital transformation, young entrepreneurs face mounting challenges in maintaining business continuity. This study explores how youth-led ventures utilize digital marketing strategies to adapt, survive, and grow in the face of disruption. Drawing on theories of entrepreneurial resilience, digital innovation, and strategic marketing, the research employs a quantitative descriptive design to examine the behaviors and preferences of young entrepreneurs in turbulent environments. Data were collected through a structured survey targeting founders aged 18 to 35 across diverse industries. The analysis reveals that the most frequently adopted strategies include real-time social media engagement, influencer partnerships, A/B testing, content personalization, and the use of analytics dashboards. These strategies are positively associated with customer retention, brand visibility, and perceived business resilience. Additionally, the study finds that younger entrepreneurs tend to benefit more from platform-native features and interactive digital tools compared to their older counterparts. The findings highlight the critical role of adaptability, data-driven decision-making, and emotional branding in navigating crises. While digital marketing is not a one-size-fits-all solution, its strategic application significantly contributes to the sustainability and competitive positioning of youth-led businesses. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital entrepreneurship and offers actionable insights for policy makers, educators, and business development programs seeking to support resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems in uncertain times.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Youth Entrepreneurship, Crisis Resilience, Innovation, Social Media Strategy.

I. Introduction

In today's volatile global economy, the landscape of entrepreneurship has become increasingly dynamic and uncertain. A series of crises, including global pandemics, economic downturns, geopolitical



instability, and climate-related disruptions, have compelled business owners to rethink their strategies for survival and growth. Simultaneously, the rise of digital disruption has significantly altered the way businesses operate, communicate, and compete. This convergence of global crises and technological transformation has introduced a new entrepreneurial paradigm characterized by resilience, strategic agility, and marketing innovation. Within this shifting terrain, young entrepreneurs emerge as key players who possess the creativity and technological fluency necessary to reimagine business practices and customer engagement in a world marked by uncertainty.

Young entrepreneurs, typically defined by their digital literacy, willingness to experiment, and openness to innovation, have increasingly become agents of economic transformation. They represent a generation that is not only digitally savvy but also adaptive to the demands of crisis-prone and fast-evolving markets. Despite their potential, they face notable challenges such as limited access to financial capital, lack of experience, and heightened exposure to risk. These constraints place greater importance on the development and implementation of effective marketing strategies that can bridge the gap between innovation and sustainability (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). Marketing, particularly when used strategically, plays a central role in enabling businesses to create value, establish a competitive position, and adapt to consumer demands. Barney (1991) explained that sustained competitive advantage is achieved through the effective deployment of firm-specific resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and organizationally embedded. Among these resources, marketing capabilities are essential for businesses seeking to survive in turbulent conditions. For young entrepreneurs, marketing becomes not just a function of promotion, but a critical tool for communicating their value proposition, engaging stakeholders, and managing change.

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified the kind of global disruption that tested the resilience of entrepreneurs across sectors. Bartik et al. (2020) found that many small businesses that adopted digital marketing practices and restructured their customer outreach strategies were better equipped to navigate the crisis. The study indicated that those who shifted toward e-commerce, social media engagement, and customer retention programs showed higher levels of continuity. Similarly, Ayala and Manzano (2014) emphasized the importance of strategic foresight and proactive behavior in maintaining business performance during crises. Their research showed that entrepreneurs with higher resilience were more likely to adapt, innovate, and lead their ventures through adversity. In parallel with these challenges, digital disruption has transformed marketing into an interactive, data-driven, and customer-centric discipline. The evolution of digital tools has allowed businesses to engage with consumers in real time, monitor market trends, and personalize offerings. Dwivedi et al. (2021) pointed out that digital and social media marketing now represent core elements of modern marketing strategy. These tools allow entrepreneurs to rapidly test marketing messages, measure customer response, and revise their strategies. This adaptability is especially beneficial for young entrepreneurs, who often lack the resources for traditional advertising but possess the digital fluency to capitalize on online platforms.

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) argued that the digital marketing ecosystem is defined by integrated communication, customer analytics, and cross-channel engagement. These elements are particularly important for entrepreneurs seeking to maximize outreach while minimizing cost. Young entrepreneurs, who are often early adopters of new technologies, utilize platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Shopify not only for promotion but also for customer feedback and product development. However, digital marketing requires strategic alignment with business goals, and its effectiveness depends on how well the entrepreneur understands and applies analytics, storytelling, and customer relationship management. This study is motivated by the observable trend of youth-led ventures that

have demonstrated resilience and growth during recent periods of crisis. These businesses have successfully adopted innovative marketing approaches that enabled them to respond to changing consumer behaviors, competitive pressures, and operational disruptions. Papadopoulos, Baltas, and Balta (2020) found that digital transformation among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) improved customer outreach, operational agility, and crisis responsiveness. Their findings underscore the relevance of aligning digital tools with marketing strategy in order to achieve resilience.

The implications of these developments are both theoretical and practical. On the theoretical level, they challenge traditional models of marketing by emphasizing adaptability, interactivity, and user engagement. On the practical level, they reveal a new set of entrepreneurial practices rooted in digital fluency, customer-centricity, and rapid experimentation. Kumar et al. (2020) highlighted that technologies associated with Industry 4.0, such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and Internet of Things (IoT), have reshaped marketing functions into more responsive and ethically sustainable operations. Despite growing interest in entrepreneurial marketing, there remains a significant gap in understanding how young entrepreneurs, particularly in developing contexts, utilize marketing strategies to navigate crises and digital change. Much of the current literature is based on general small business practices, often overlooking the demographic and generational nuances that influence strategic decision-making. De Massis et al. (2018) argued that younger entrepreneurs differ from their older counterparts in terms of risk perception, technological orientation, and entrepreneurial motivation. Their approach to marketing is typically faster, more experimental, and reliant on digital ecosystems rather than traditional networks.

Marketing in the digital age has become increasingly complex, requiring a combination of creativity, analytical skills, and technological know-how. Naidoo (2010) found that firms operating in turbulent environments benefit from adopting a market-oriented strategy that integrates customer feedback, innovation, and real-time responsiveness. For young entrepreneurs, this translates into using customer reviews, social listening tools, and feedback loops to refine marketing campaigns. It also involves testing various pricing models, promotional strategies, and distribution channels to find the most effective path forward.

This research employs a quantitative descriptive design to investigate how young entrepreneurs formulate and apply marketing strategies in response to crises and digital disruption. The descriptive approach is suitable for understanding existing conditions, behaviors, and outcomes without influencing or manipulating variables. By surveying a targeted group of youth-led businesses that have operated during recent crises, this study aims to capture strategic patterns, platform usage, and perceived impacts on business performance. The objective is to develop a comprehensive profile of entrepreneurial marketing behavior under pressure. The research objectives are fivefold. First, to identify the most frequently used marketing strategies among young entrepreneurs during periods of disruption. Second, to examine the integration of digital marketing tools within their business operations. Third, to assess the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in terms of customer acquisition, brand visibility, and financial performance. Fourth, to explore the role of adaptability, resilience, and innovation in shaping marketing behavior. Fifth, to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the marketing capacities of young entrepreneurs in crisis-affected environments.

The significance of this research extends to various stakeholders. For aspiring entrepreneurs, the findings will offer insights into which marketing practices are most effective under challenging conditions. For policymakers and business incubators, the results can inform support programs, funding strategies, and educational initiatives aimed at building entrepreneurial resilience. For researchers, the

study adds empirical depth to the existing literature on digital marketing, entrepreneurship, and crisis management. In summary, young entrepreneurs face a unique set of challenges and opportunities in an era marked by global crises and digital disruption. Their ability to leverage strategic marketing can determine not only their survival but also their capacity to innovate and grow. This study builds on the foundational work of Ayala and Manzano (2014), Barney (1991), Bartik et al. (2020), Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), and Dwivedi et al. (2021), among others, and seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how young business leaders navigate turbulent environments through marketing innovation. By focusing on the behaviors and strategies of young entrepreneurs, this research aims to illuminate the pathways through which marketing can serve as a tool for resilience, transformation, and long-term success.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Conceptual Foundation and Definitions

Marketing strategy has long been recognized as a vital component of business success, functioning as a systematic approach to achieving customer engagement, competitive positioning, and long-term value creation. In the context of entrepreneurship, particularly youth-led ventures, marketing strategy becomes both a navigational compass and a survival mechanism in times of crisis (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). It encompasses the selection and deployment of channels, the framing of brand messages, and the targeting of specific market segments, often with limited resources and time constraints (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2021). While marketing is traditionally considered a business-growth function, in the face of market disruptions, it serves as a lifeline for maintaining relevance and continuity. The notion of "crisis" in entrepreneurial literature typically refers to high-impact, low-predictability events that threaten the viability of a business. These may include economic recessions, natural disasters, health emergencies, political instability, or technological upheavals (Naidoo, 2010; Bartik et al., 2020). During such crises, resilience becomes a key differentiator among firms. Entrepreneurial resilience is defined as the dynamic ability to adapt, absorb shocks, and reconfigure strategies in the face of adversity (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). It entails a combination of psychological strength, resourcefulness, and proactive problem-solving.

Closely tied to the concept of crisis is digital disruption. This term refers to the transformation of traditional business models and customer relationships due to the accelerated adoption of digital technologies. These include social media, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, mobile platforms, and data analytics (Kumar et al., 2020). Digital disruption alters the competitive landscape, customer expectations, and the mechanisms of value delivery. For young entrepreneurs, digital disruption is not merely a threat but an opportunity to differentiate, scale, and engage audiences in new ways (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In integrating these constructs, a clear theoretical alignment emerges. Marketing strategies are not developed in isolation; they are shaped by external shocks and mediated by digital capabilities. Young entrepreneurs operate at the intersection of agility, digital fluency, and vulnerability, making their strategic choices particularly illuminating. As Ratten (2022) emphasizes, entrepreneurial innovation often emerges most vividly in volatile environments, where resource constraints and uncertainty compel unconventional thinking. The strategic use of digital tools in such environments allows young business owners to mitigate crisis impact, deepen customer connection, and pivot operations rapidly.

Recent studies suggest that young entrepreneurs' marketing behavior diverges significantly from traditional business approaches. Rather than relying on hierarchical planning or large-scale campaigns, youth-led ventures tend to adopt iterative, feedback-driven strategies. These involve rapid content creation, A/B testing, influencer partnerships, and micro-targeting using social media algorithms (Kapoor et al., 2021). The emphasis is on agility rather than stability, speed over scale, and engagement over exposure. This approach is not only reactive but strategic, enabling entrepreneurs to use disruption as leverage rather than merely as a challenge. The convergence of crisis, digital tools, and youthful innovation gives rise to a unique entrepreneurial ecosystem. This study aims to dissect how young entrepreneurs utilize marketing strategies not only to endure turbulence but to thrive within it. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how marketing evolves under pressure and how strategic digital engagement becomes a central pillar of entrepreneurial resilience. Understanding this intersection is critical for academics, practitioners, and policymakers who aim to support sustainable entrepreneurship in the digital era.

2.2. Recent Empirical Research on Marketing Strategies During Crisis

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic served as a global stress test for businesses of all sizes and sectors, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and youth-led ventures. Faced with sudden disruptions to supply chains, consumer demand, and operational continuity, entrepreneurs were compelled to adapt swiftly. Within this turbulent context, marketing strategy became a key area of innovation and experimentation. Numerous empirical studies have since examined how digital marketing, communication agility, and customer-centric approaches helped businesses navigate the storm (Bartik et al., 2020; Papadopoulos et al., 2020). One of the most consistent findings in recent literature is the strategic pivot toward digital platforms as a form of survival. Papadopoulos et al. (2020) observed that SMEs that rapidly adopted digital technologies such as e-commerce, social media marketing, and mobile platforms were more likely to remain operational and resilient during COVID-19. These businesses prioritized transparency, continuous engagement, and personalized communication. Likewise, studies by Juergensen et al. (2020) and Obal and Gao (2020) highlighted the use of real-time communication tools, automated messaging, and customer data analytics as mechanisms that allowed entrepreneurs to remain visible, accessible, and responsive amid uncertainty.

Young entrepreneurs, in particular, demonstrated a distinct reliance on digital-first marketing strategies. This is not surprising, considering that many of them are digital natives who view technology as integral to their entrepreneurial practice. According to Saura et al. (2021), youth-led startups were quicker to experiment with emerging platforms such as TikTok, Clubhouse, and Instagram Reels, leveraging their features for viral marketing and real-time feedback loops. These entrepreneurs often used short-form video content, interactive polls, and live sessions to sustain customer interest and brand engagement, even when physical interactions were impossible. Moreover, businesses that employed interactive storytelling and emotional branding were seen to build stronger consumer loyalty during lockdowns (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). Several quantitative studies have attempted to measure the impact of marketing adaptation on business performance. For instance, Liu et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study of 450 small retailers in Asia and found that firms using multichannel digital advertising combined with CRM systems experienced an average sales increase of 19% during crisis periods compared to non-digital peers. Similarly, Ghezzi and Cavallo (2020) analyzed 200 digital-native startups and concluded that those who maintained a dynamic marketing content calendar had more

stable revenues and greater customer retention. The findings suggest that consistency in messaging, combined with responsiveness to external change, is essential for performance during crises.

In addition to tools and channels, the tone and structure of communication have also evolved. Research by Rydén et al. (2022) demonstrated that brands employing empathic, community-focused messages during the pandemic built stronger psychological contracts with their audiences. Messages that acknowledged the crisis, offered solutions, or extended support (such as flexible return policies or free consultations) generated higher engagement and goodwill. This aligns with the broader concept of trust-based marketing, which becomes even more critical in times of uncertainty (Kitchen & Proctor, 2021). Despite the growing adoption of digital tools, some scholars warn that the “digital pivot” is not a panacea. Digital marketing during crises must be integrated with clear value propositions, operational readiness, and a strong understanding of customer behavior. Sharma and Kumar (2021) note that while many firms rushed into digital transformation, those lacking the internal capability to manage campaigns or analyze data often failed to capitalize on the shift. Overdependence on automation without strategic intent can lead to disconnection, message fatigue, and brand dilution.

Moreover, there is evidence that the benefits of digital strategies during crises are not uniform. Factors such as market maturity, consumer digital literacy, and infrastructure quality influence how well marketing efforts perform. For example, in emerging economies where mobile penetration is high but bandwidth is inconsistent, entrepreneurs often rely more heavily on messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram, rather than high-bandwidth platforms like YouTube or Facebook Live (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Gao & Yu, 2024). The customization of marketing channels to suit local realities is therefore critical. In summary, empirical evidence strongly supports the notion that adaptive marketing strategies are a key determinant of resilience during crises. Young entrepreneurs, in particular, appear to benefit from their digital orientation, willingness to experiment, and ability to engage customers through interactive and empathic communication. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends not only on access to tools but also on strategic planning, content quality, and contextual awareness. The next section explores how these patterns intersect with broader trends in digital transformation and generational innovation.

2.3. The Role of Digital Transformation and Youth-Led Innovation

The rise of digital technologies has transformed not only how businesses operate but also how they conceptualize and execute marketing strategies. For young entrepreneurs, digital transformation is not merely a response to environmental pressures; it is often embedded in the core of their business model. Unlike more established firms that may struggle to adopt digital processes, youth-led ventures are typically born in the digital age and thus exhibit a natural affinity for digital platforms, tools, and communities (De Massis et al., 2018). This generational alignment with technology affords younger business owners a comparative advantage in times of disruption, enabling them to respond with agility, creativity, and precision. One of the defining characteristics of young entrepreneurs is their intuitive understanding of digital communication. This fluency translates into their marketing behavior. According to Nambisan et al. (2023), Generation Z and younger millennials tend to use platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube not only for advertising but also for community-building and product development. For these entrepreneurs, marketing is not a separate department or external function—it is integrated into every aspect of the business, from design and messaging to delivery and

feedback. Gao and Yu (2024) found that young business owners frequently utilize platform-native features like stories, reels, live streaming, and micro-influencer collaborations to humanize their brand and generate engagement. Another dimension of youth-led innovation lies in the personalization and emotional tone of digital marketing. Unlike conventional advertising, which often relies on broad appeal and polished messaging, young entrepreneurs tend to favor authenticity, relatability, and interactivity. Smith et al. (2023) demonstrated that Gen Z entrepreneurs often engage in behind-the-scenes content, day-in-the-life videos, and real-time Q&A sessions to develop a more intimate and transparent relationship with their audience. This approach not only builds trust but also increases customer retention and referral potential. Moreover, emotionally resonant content has been found to outperform rational appeals in crisis contexts, where consumers are more sensitive to sincerity and ethical alignment (Cortez & Johnston, 2020).

Sustainability and social responsibility also form a significant component of youth-led marketing innovation. According to Kapoor et al. (2021), younger entrepreneurs are more likely to incorporate environmental and social themes into their marketing narratives, reflecting both generational values and market demand. For example, brands led by Gen Z founders often emphasize ethical sourcing, inclusivity, mental health, and community support in their campaigns. These themes not only align with evolving consumer expectations but also differentiate brands in crowded digital spaces. Saura et al. (2021) noted that sustainability-driven marketing was particularly effective during the COVID-19 pandemic, where empathy, solidarity, and collective resilience became dominant narratives. Beyond content, the tools and systems used by young entrepreneurs also reflect their innovation orientation. Real-time analytics, customer data platforms (CDPs), social listening tools, and chatbot automation are commonly used to track behavior, personalize responses, and optimize marketing campaigns. Lee and Trimi (2023) found that entrepreneurs under 30 were more likely than their older counterparts to rely on analytics dashboards for decision-making and campaign adjustments. These digital tools allow for agile testing, segmentation, and A/B experimentation, enabling constant refinement of messages based on performance metrics.

Influencer marketing has become a central tactic for young entrepreneurs seeking visibility and credibility. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, micro-influencers and peer creators often yield higher engagement rates due to their relatability and niche appeal (Smart & Chen, 2024). For instance, small fashion or beauty startups often collaborate with local lifestyle creators whose followers align with their target demographic. These partnerships are not just transactional; they are often co-creative, with influencers involved in content ideation, feedback collection, and product co-development. This shift toward participatory marketing reflects broader consumer behavior and media consumption changes. Despite these advantages, young entrepreneurs face specific challenges in their digital marketing efforts. While they may be tech-savvy, they often lack formal training in marketing strategy, consumer psychology, and financial planning. As a result, some campaigns are driven more by intuition than by structured market research. Sharma and Kumar (2021) caution that overreliance on social media trends without alignment to business goals can lead to inconsistency and brand dilution. Additionally, the fast pace of digital platforms can create pressure for constant content production, risking burnout and declining creative quality.

There is also the issue of data literacy. While digital tools provide vast amounts of customer data, not all entrepreneurs are equipped to interpret or act on these insights. Bae et al. (2022) observed that many small business owners underutilize available analytics due to a lack of training or confidence. This results in missed opportunities for optimization and segmentation, especially in competitive

industries where customer experience is paramount. Programs that combine digital tool access with strategic training could significantly improve marketing outcomes for these entrepreneurs.

Young entrepreneurs must contend with algorithmic unpredictability. Platform changes in visibility, engagement, or monetization policies can disproportionately affect small brands that rely heavily on social platforms. Dwivedi et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of platform diversification, encouraging entrepreneurs to build omnichannel marketing ecosystems that include owned media (websites, newsletters), earned media (press coverage, user reviews), and paid media (ads, sponsorships). This diversification not only mitigates risk but also strengthens brand coherence across customer touchpoints. Overall, the role of digital transformation in youth-led entrepreneurship is multifaceted and deeply embedded in marketing strategy. Young entrepreneurs are not only early adopters of new tools but also active shapers of marketing culture, setting trends and redefining engagement. Their ability to combine innovation, ethics, and agility positions them uniquely to thrive in uncertain environments. However, to fully capitalize on digital opportunities, they must balance creativity with structure, intuition with data, and agility with long-term planning. These themes provide a foundation for developing targeted hypotheses about how young entrepreneurs navigate crises through marketing innovation, which will be explored in the next section.

The preceding discussion reveals a convergence of themes that define how young entrepreneurs respond to crises and digital disruption through innovative marketing strategies. The intersection of digital transformation, generational innovation, and external turbulence has created a dynamic environment in which marketing is both a survival mechanism and a tool for competitive advantage. While numerous empirical studies affirm the importance of digital tools and agile strategies, there remain critical gaps in the literature concerning the systematic behaviors, patterns, and outcomes of marketing among youth-led enterprises during crisis contexts. First, much of the existing literature is either qualitative or context-specific, making generalization difficult. For instance, while Bartik et al. (2020) and Papadopoulos et al. (2020) offer strong macro-level insights into business resilience during COVID-19, they do not disaggregate their findings based on founder demographics or business maturity. As a result, the specific nuances of youth entrepreneurship remain underexplored. Moreover, although many studies highlight the tools and tactics used by young entrepreneurs, few investigate the strategic frameworks or decision-making processes that guide their marketing choices in volatile environments (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

Second, most empirical work focuses on performance indicators such as sales growth or customer acquisition but neglects the deeper behavioral and psychological dimensions of marketing resilience. For example, constructs such as marketing adaptability, content experimentation, emotional branding, and digital identity formation are discussed anecdotally but rarely operationalized in a structured, measurable manner (Smith et al., 2023; Gao & Yu, 2024). This lack of theoretical integration limits the ability of researchers to build models or test hypotheses that reflect the full complexity of entrepreneurial marketing behavior.

Third, despite the proliferation of digital platforms and analytics tools, there is little consensus on what constitutes "effective" marketing under crisis conditions. While some scholars advocate for content consistency and brand empathy (Rydén et al., 2022), others emphasize the importance of analytics, automation, and real-time responsiveness (Lee & Trimi, 2023). These varying perspectives underscore the need for comparative and longitudinal studies that examine not just which strategies are used, but how they perform over time and across sectors. Fourth, there is a clear need for research that connects entrepreneurial age, digital literacy, and strategic outcomes. While De Massis et al. (2018)

and Nambisan et al. (2023) provide compelling arguments for the distinctiveness of youth-led innovation, they stop short of quantifying how generational characteristics shape marketing effectiveness. Understanding the moderating role of age, risk orientation, and digital familiarity could offer new insights into entrepreneurial performance during periods of disruption.

Drawing upon these gaps and synthesizing the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed for empirical investigation:

H1: The use of data-driven digital marketing tools (e.g., analytics dashboards, CRM systems) is positively associated with perceived business resilience among young entrepreneurs during crisis periods.

H2: Young entrepreneurs who employ iterative marketing practices (e.g., A/B testing, content optimization, real-time adjustments) will report higher levels of customer engagement and retention during crises.

H3: Influencer marketing mediates the relationship between digital marketing investment and customer acquisition in youth-led enterprises during times of disruption.

This hypothesis is drawn from studies that demonstrate the impact of peer-based credibility and niche targeting through influencers.

H4: Entrepreneurial age moderates the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies, such that younger entrepreneurs derive greater benefit from interactive and platform-native marketing channels than their older counterparts.

The literature indicates that young entrepreneurs are not passive recipients of crisis impact but active architects of adaptive, innovative marketing strategies. Their ability to leverage digital tools, cultivate customer relationships, and build resilient brand identities suggests that marketing is no longer a support function—it is central to survival and growth. However, further research is required to quantify these dynamics, test theoretical models, and provide actionable insights for practice and policy. The hypotheses developed here offer a starting point for such inquiry, forming the empirical core of a study designed to advance the understanding of marketing resilience in the age of digital disruption.

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