

Customer loyalty as the key driver of business performance: evidence from digital marketing, service quality, and pricing strategy in online gaming services

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh strategi digital marketing, kualitas layanan, dan strategi harga terhadap kinerja usaha dengan loyalitas pelanggan sebagai variabel mediasi pada jasa online gaming. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kuantitatif dengan desain explanatory research, dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui *purposive sampling* dari pengguna layanan boosting Mobile Legends. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling* (PLS-SEM) dengan SmartPLS 4. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi digital marketing, kualitas layanan, dan strategi harga berpengaruh signifikan terhadap loyalitas pelanggan, dengan strategi harga sebagai faktor paling dominan. Loyalitas pelanggan terbukti berpengaruh signifikan terhadap kinerja usaha. Namun, digital marketing hanya memiliki pengaruh langsung yang lemah, dan kualitas layanan tidak berpengaruh signifikan terhadap kinerja usaha. Selain itu, loyalitas pelanggan mampu memediasi pengaruh digital marketing dan strategi harga terhadap kinerja usaha, tetapi tidak pada kualitas layanan. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa dalam lingkungan digital yang kompetitif, kinerja usaha lebih ditentukan oleh loyalitas pelanggan dan persepsi nilai dibandingkan kualitas layanan semata.

Kata Kunci: digital marketing; kualitas layanan; strategi harga; loyalitas pelanggan; kinerja usaha

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the influence of digital marketing strategies, service quality, and pricing strategies on business performance with customer loyalty as a mediating variable in online gaming services. The approach used was quantitative with an explanatory research design, with data collected through purposive sampling from users of Mobile Legends boosting services. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The results showed that digital marketing strategies, service quality, and pricing strategies significantly influenced customer loyalty, with pricing strategy being the most dominant factor. Customer loyalty was proven to have a significant effect on business performance. However, digital marketing only had a weak direct effect, and service quality did not significantly influence business performance. Furthermore, customer loyalty was able to mediate the influence of digital marketing and pricing strategies on business performance, but not on service quality. These findings confirm that in a competitive digital environment, business performance is more determined by customer loyalty and perceived value than service quality alone.

Keyword: digital marketing; service quality; pricing strategy; customer loyalty; business performance

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the digital economy has significantly transformed the landscape of service-based industries, particularly in online gaming services, where competition is increasingly intense and customer behavior is highly dynamic. In such environments, customers are characterized by low switching costs, high price sensitivity, and strong exposure to alternative service providers, making it more difficult for firms to achieve sustainable business performance. As a result, companies are required to implement effective strategic approaches, including digital marketing, service quality enhancement, and competitive pricing, to attract and retain customers. However, existing literature suggests that the effectiveness of these strategies in directly improving business performance remains inconsistent, particularly in digital service contexts where customer decisions are strongly influenced by relational and behavioral factors (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Barari et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021; Homburg et al., 2017; Rust et al., 2004; Kumar et al., 2020; Wedel & Kannan, 2016; Kotler et al., 2021; Zeithaml et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Digital marketing has emerged as a critical tool for engaging customers and building brand awareness through interactive platforms such as social media, online communities, and digital advertising. It enables firms to reach broader audiences and foster closer interactions with customers in real time. Previous studies have demonstrated that digital marketing significantly influences customer engagement and brand perception, which are essential in shaping customer loyalty (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014; Bala & Verma, 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kingsnorth, 2022; Tuten & Solomon, 2020; Kumar et al., 2020; Barari et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Nevertheless, its direct impact on business performance is often found to be limited, as digital marketing primarily operates at the awareness and engagement stages rather than directly generating financial outcomes. This indicates that the relationship between digital marketing and business performance may be indirect and mediated by customer-related factors.

Service quality has traditionally been regarded as a key determinant of customer satisfaction and business success. The SERVQUAL framework highlights dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles as fundamental elements influencing customer perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2018). While numerous studies confirm that high service quality leads to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty, recent research suggests that in highly competitive and standardized digital markets, service quality may no longer serve as a significant differentiator. Instead, it is often perceived as a basic requirement that customers expect by default, thereby reducing its impact on competitive advantage (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Homburg et al., 2017). This shift raises important questions regarding the actual role of service quality in influencing business performance in digital contexts.

In contrast, pricing strategy has become increasingly important in shaping customer decisions, particularly in price-sensitive markets such as online gaming services. Customers tend to compare prices across platforms and select providers that offer the best perceived value. Value-based pricing, which aligns price with perceived benefits, has been shown to significantly influence customer loyalty and business performance (Monroe, 2003; Nagle & Müller, 2018; Kotler et al., 2021; Hinterhuber, 2004; Rumpf et al., 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that competitive pricing strategies play a crucial role in attracting and retaining customers, especially in markets with relatively homogeneous service offerings.

From a theoretical perspective, relationship marketing emphasizes the importance of customer loyalty as a key driver of long-term business performance. Loyalty reflects a customer's commitment to repurchase and recommend a service, which ultimately contributes to sustainable revenue growth (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oliver, 1999; Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Prior studies have consistently shown that marketing strategies influence business performance indirectly through customer loyalty, highlighting the mediating role of relational constructs in shaping business outcomes (Barari et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2021). However, the strength and significance of these relationships vary across contexts, particularly in digital environments where customer behavior is more volatile.

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a significant gap in understanding how digital marketing, service quality, and pricing strategy interact to influence business performance through customer loyalty, particularly in the context of online gaming services. Moreover, limited studies have explored the possibility that traditional determinants, such as service quality, may no longer play a dominant role in highly competitive digital markets. Therefore, this study aims to examine the direct and indirect effects of digital marketing, service quality, and pricing strategy on business performance, with customer loyalty as a mediating variable.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to provide a more nuanced understanding of business performance in digital service environments by highlighting the dominant role of customer loyalty and the relative importance of pricing strategy over service quality. This study contributes theoretically by extending relationship marketing and service quality literature in digital contexts, and practically by providing insights

for online service providers in designing more effective strategies to enhance business performance through customer-centered approaches.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid expansion of the digital economy has transformed the dynamics of service-based businesses, particularly in online gaming services, where competition is highly intense and customer switching behavior is relatively fluid. In such environments, business performance is no longer determined solely by operational excellence but increasingly by a firm's ability to create value and maintain long-term relationships with customers. Prior studies suggest that digital marketing, service quality, and pricing strategy are critical determinants of business performance; however, their effectiveness often varies depending on customer perceptions and behavioral responses (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kotler et al., 2021; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Barari et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021; Homburg et al., 2017; Rust et al., 2004; Kumar et al., 2020; Wedel & Kannan, 2016; Zeithaml et al., 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This indicates that the relationship between marketing strategies and business performance is not always direct but is often mediated by relational constructs such as customer loyalty.

Digital marketing strategy plays a crucial role in shaping customer perceptions and engagement in online service contexts. Through social media, interactive content, and real-time communication, firms are able to build brand awareness and establish closer relationships with customers. Empirical studies consistently show that effective digital marketing enhances customer engagement and trust, which in turn strengthens customer loyalty (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014; Bala & Verma, 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kingsnorth, 2022; Tuten & Solomon, 2020; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kumar et al., 2020; Barari et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). However, its direct impact on business performance is often found to be weak or insignificant, as digital marketing primarily operates at the awareness and engagement stages rather than directly generating financial outcomes. Therefore:

H1: Digital marketing strategy has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H2: Digital marketing strategy has a positive effect on business performance.

Service quality has long been recognized as a fundamental determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty. The SERVQUAL model highlights dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles as key drivers of perceived service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2018). In digital service contexts, quality is often associated with speed, security, and consistency. While numerous studies confirm that service quality significantly influences customer loyalty and business performance (Hapsari et al., 2017; Latif et al., 2023; Kankam, 2023; Islam et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2018), recent research suggests that in highly competitive and standardized markets, service quality may no longer serve as a strong differentiator, as it is perceived as a basic requirement rather than a value-adding factor (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thus:

H3: Service quality has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H4: Service quality has a positive effect on business performance.

Pricing strategy is considered one of the most influential factors in shaping customer behavior, particularly in price-sensitive markets such as digital services. Value-based pricing emphasizes the alignment between perceived benefits and costs, which directly affects purchase decisions and customer retention (Monroe, 2003; Nagle & Müller, 2018; Kotler et al., 2021; Hinterhuber, 2004; Rumpf, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that competitive and transparent pricing strategies significantly enhance customer loyalty and business performance, especially in markets with homogeneous service offerings (Lestari et al., 2023; Naufal et al., 2024; Arwina et al., 2025; Pebadja & Kholifah, 2025). Therefore:

H5: Pricing strategy has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H6: Pricing strategy has a positive effect on business performance.

Customer loyalty is widely recognized as a key driver of sustainable business performance. According to relationship marketing theory, loyalty reflects a long-term commitment that leads to repeat purchases, positive word-of-mouth, and reduced marketing costs (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oliver, 1999; Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Numerous studies confirm that customer loyalty significantly enhances business performance across various industries, particularly in service-based and digital contexts (Hapsari et al., 2017; Barari et al., 2020; Rust et al., 2004; Verhoef et al., 2021). Thus:

H7: Customer loyalty has a positive effect on business performance.

Furthermore, customer loyalty is often conceptualized as a mediating variable that links marketing strategies to business performance. Prior studies suggest that digital marketing and pricing strategies influence business outcomes indirectly through customer loyalty, while the mediating role of service quality remains inconsistent (Barari et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Therefore:

H8: Customer loyalty mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategy and business performance.

H9: Customer loyalty mediates the relationship between service quality and business performance.

H10: Customer loyalty mediates the relationship between pricing strategy and business performance.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative research approach with an explanatory research design to examine the relationships among digital marketing, service quality, pricing strategy, customer loyalty, and business performance in the context of online gaming services. A quantitative approach is employed as it enables the measurement of latent constructs using numerical data and facilitates hypothesis testing through statistical modeling. The explanatory design is appropriate for this study as it allows for the analysis of both direct and indirect relationships among variables, including the mediating role of customer loyalty. In addition, a cross-sectional design is applied, where data are collected at a single point in time to capture respondents' perceptions and experiences in using online gaming services.

The population of this study consists of users of online gaming services, specifically customers who have utilized Mobile Legends boosting services. This population is selected due to its relevance, as it represents active users who interact with digital service providers and are exposed to various marketing strategies, service quality levels, and pricing mechanisms. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, which allows respondents to be selected based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. The criteria include: (1) individuals who have used boosting services at least once within the last six months, (2) individuals who are familiar with the provider's digital marketing channels, and (3) individuals who have completed transactions and experienced the service process.

The sample size is determined based on the rule of thumb in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which recommends a minimum sample size of 10 times the maximum number of structural paths pointing to a construct. Considering the complexity of the model, a sample size of 100–150 respondents is considered sufficient to ensure statistical robustness.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed online to reach respondents efficiently. The questionnaire was developed by adapting measurement items from established literature to ensure content validity and contextual relevance. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted to evaluate the clarity, reliability, and validity of the instrument, ensuring that all items were well understood and accurately captured the intended constructs.

All variables in this study are conceptualized as latent constructs measured using reflective indicators. Digital marketing is measured through indicators reflecting the effectiveness of online promotional activities, social media engagement, and digital communication strategies. Service quality is measured using indicators adapted from the SERVQUAL dimensions, including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Pricing strategy is measured based on perceived fairness, affordability, and value for money. Customer loyalty is reflected through indicators such as repeat purchase intention, willingness to recommend, and long-term commitment. Business performance is measured through perceived growth, customer retention, and overall business success.

The data analysis technique employed is Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4. This method is chosen due to its suitability for predictive analysis, its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs, and its robustness in dealing with relatively small sample sizes and non-normal data distributions. The analysis is conducted in two stages: the evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model).

The measurement model is assessed through convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability. Convergent validity is evaluated using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity is assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis. Reliability is measured using Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha to ensure consistency among indicators.

The structural model is evaluated by examining path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and model fit using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Hypothesis testing is conducted using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples to generate t-statistics and p-values, with a significance level of 5% ($p < 0.05$).

Furthermore, mediation analysis is performed to examine the role of customer loyalty in mediating the relationship between digital marketing, service quality, pricing strategy, and business performance. Indirect effects are assessed using bootstrapping procedures, where significant indirect effects indicate the presence of mediation, while non-significant results indicate the absence of mediation. This approach provides a deeper understanding of how marketing strategies influence business performance through customer behavior.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The structural model results presented in Figure 1 provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among digital marketing strategy, service quality, pricing strategy, customer loyalty, and business performance. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, particularly for customer loyalty, which has an R-square value of 0.754, indicating that 75.4% of its variance is explained by digital marketing, service quality, and pricing strategy. This suggests that the three antecedent variables collectively play a substantial role in shaping customer loyalty in online gaming services. Furthermore, business performance has an R-square value of 0.809, indicating that 80.9% of its variance is explained by customer loyalty, digital marketing, service quality, and pricing strategy. These values indicate a high level of explanatory power, confirming that the proposed model is robust and suitable for explaining business performance in digital service contexts.

The evaluation of the measurement model indicates that all constructs meet the criteria for validity and reliability. The outer loading values of all indicators exceed the acceptable threshold, demonstrating strong convergent validity, while Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values are above 0.70, indicating high internal consistency. These results confirm that the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable and valid for capturing the latent constructs.

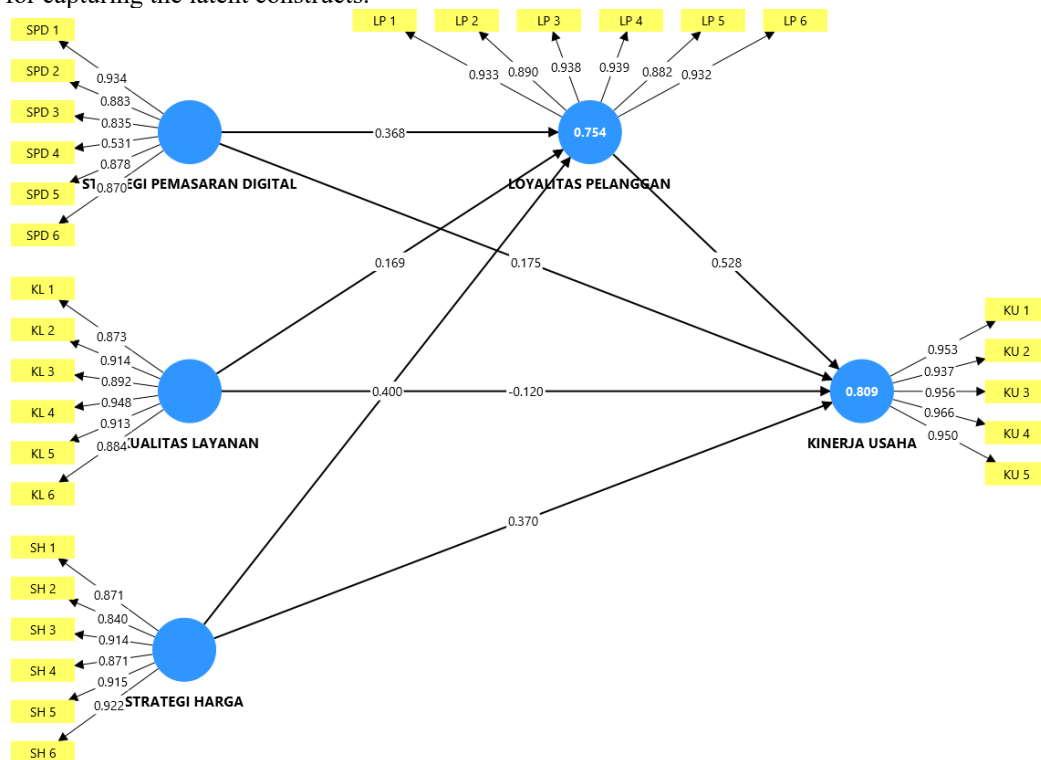


Figure 1. Structural Model Results Using PLS-SEM

The hypothesis testing results reveal that digital marketing strategy has a positive effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.368$), indicating that effective digital marketing activities, such as social media engagement and online promotion, are able to enhance customer attachment and commitment. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that digital marketing plays a crucial role in building customer relationships and engagement, which ultimately leads to customer loyalty (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Tuten & Solomon, 2020). However, the direct effect of digital marketing on business performance is relatively weak ($\beta = 0.175$), indicating that digital marketing does not directly translate into improved performance but instead operates through relational mechanisms, particularly customer loyalty. This finding reinforces the argument that digital marketing primarily functions at the engagement stage rather than directly influencing financial outcomes.

Similarly, service quality is found to have a positive effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.169$), although the magnitude of the effect is relatively small. This suggests that while service quality contributes to customer loyalty, its role is not dominant in highly competitive digital markets. More importantly, service quality does not have a significant direct effect on business performance ($\beta = -0.120$), indicating that improving service quality alone is insufficient to enhance business outcomes. This finding challenges the traditional SERVQUAL perspective, which assumes that service quality is a primary driver of business success. In the context of digital gaming services, service quality appears to function as a basic requirement rather than a competitive differentiator, aligning with recent studies suggesting that customers perceive quality as a minimum standard rather than a value-adding factor (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

In contrast, pricing strategy shows a strong positive effect on both customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.400$) and business performance ($\beta = 0.370$), making it one of the most influential variables in the model. This indicates that customers in online gaming services are highly sensitive to pricing and tend to develop loyalty toward providers that offer competitive and fair pricing. This finding supports value-based pricing theory, which emphasizes that perceived value is a key determinant of customer behavior (Nagle & Müller, 2018; Kotler et al., 2021). The strong effect of pricing strategy suggests that in markets with relatively homogeneous service offerings, pricing becomes a critical factor in shaping both customer retention and business success.

Furthermore, the results confirm that customer loyalty has a strong and significant effect on business performance ($\beta = 0.528$), indicating that loyal customers contribute significantly to revenue growth, repeat purchases, and positive word-of-mouth. This finding strongly supports relationship marketing theory, which posits that long-term customer relationships are a key driver of sustainable business performance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). The relatively large coefficient highlights that customer loyalty is the most dominant predictor of business performance in this study.

The mediation analysis further reveals that customer loyalty plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between digital marketing and business performance, as well as between pricing strategy and business performance. This indicates that both variables influence business outcomes indirectly through their ability to build customer loyalty. In contrast, the mediating effect of customer loyalty on the relationship between service quality and business performance is not supported, further confirming that service quality does not play a central role in driving performance within this context.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight a critical shift in the determinants of business performance in digital service environments. While digital marketing and service quality remain important, their roles are primarily supportive and indirect. In contrast, pricing strategy and customer loyalty emerge as the most influential factors in determining business success. The high R-square value for business performance (0.809) indicates that the model provides a strong explanation of business outcomes, while the dominance of customer loyalty suggests that relational strategies are more important than purely operational improvements.

These findings provide important theoretical implications by challenging traditional assumptions that service quality is the primary driver of business performance. Instead, the results suggest that in highly competitive digital markets, customer loyalty and perceived value play more significant roles. Practically, the findings indicate that businesses should prioritize strategies aimed at enhancing customer loyalty and optimizing pricing rather than focusing solely on improving service quality. By doing so, firms can achieve more sustainable competitive advantage.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that business performance in online gaming services is primarily driven by relational and value-based factors rather than purely operational dimensions. The empirical findings demonstrate that digital marketing strategy, service quality, and pricing strategy significantly influence customer loyalty, with pricing strategy emerging as the most dominant predictor. Furthermore, customer loyalty is found to have a strong and significant effect on business performance, confirming its central role as a key driver of sustainable business outcomes.

In contrast, service quality does not have a significant direct effect on business performance, indicating that in highly competitive and standardized digital markets, service quality is perceived as a basic requirement rather than a differentiating factor. Additionally, digital marketing shows a relatively weak direct effect on performance, suggesting that its influence is primarily indirect through customer loyalty. These findings highlight a critical shift in the determinants of business performance, where customer loyalty and perceived value—particularly pricing—play more decisive roles than traditional service quality dimensions.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture dynamic changes in customer behavior over time, particularly in rapidly evolving digital environments. Second, the study focuses specifically on users of Mobile Legends boosting services, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other types of digital services or industries. Third, although the model includes key variables such as digital marketing, service quality, pricing strategy, and customer loyalty, other potentially important factors—such as trust, brand image, perceived value, and emotional engagement—were not included and may further explain business performance. Finally, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias and perception-based limitations.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs in order to better capture the dynamic nature of customer loyalty and business performance over time. Future studies may also expand the research context by including different types of digital services or industries to enhance the generalizability of the findings. In addition, incorporating variables such as trust, customer engagement,

perceived value, and brand attachment is highly recommended to develop a more comprehensive model of customer behavior in digital environments. Further research may also explore moderating variables, such as customer demographics and usage intensity, to better understand variations in customer responses. By addressing these areas, future studies can provide deeper insights into the complex mechanisms underlying business performance in the digital economy.

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