

Digital Creativity Strategies and Work Ethic of Gen Z Entrepreneurs: Case Study of Online Business Students Surakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the influence of digital creativity strategies and work ethic on the performance of Gen Z student entrepreneurs in online businesses at Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta (UMS) and Sebelas Maret University (UNS), with a focus on engagement and business sustainability in digital markets.

Research Method: A qualitative case study design was applied. Data were collected from 12 purposively selected student entrepreneurs through semi-structured interviews and three-month observations of their activity on Instagram and TikTok. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model with triangulation for validity.

Results and Discussion: Findings show that digital creativity is reflected in trend-based content, storytelling, and short videos, while work ethic is shown through discipline, responsibility, and time management. Both factors jointly enhance engagement and support online business continuity.

Implications: The study highlights the importance of integrating digital creativity and the development of a work ethic in higher education to strengthen student entrepreneurship ecosystems.

Originality: This research provides empirical evidence on the combined role of digital creativity and work ethic in students' entrepreneurial performance within Indonesia's digital economy.

Keywords: digital creativity; work ethic; student entrepreneurship; online business; Gen Z.

1. Introduction

Rapid technological advancements have fundamentally transformed marketing practices from conventional approaches to digitally driven ecosystems, in which consumer engagement, communication, and brand interaction are increasingly mediated by online platforms (Suranto *et al.*, 2023). This transformation has created a new competitive environment in which digital competence is no longer optional but essential for business sustainability. In this context, Generation Z represents a dominant group that significantly shapes digital consumption behavior due to their early exposure to internet-based technologies and mobile devices.

Generation Z, often defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2010, is characterized by high digital literacy, fast information processing, and strong reliance on digital platforms for both social interaction and economic decision-making (Saebah *et al.*, 2022). This generation tends to be highly



selective, value-driven, and responsive to authenticity in digital communication. They actively use social media and online platforms not only for consumption but also for entrepreneurship activities. As a result, the digital economy has created new opportunities for young entrepreneurs, particularly university students who operate online businesses in highly competitive digital markets. Despite increasing student participation in digital entrepreneurship, many still face challenges in building sustainable online businesses. These challenges stem from limited digital marketing competencies, an inconsistent work ethic, and a lack of structured strategies for managing online business activities. Therefore, understanding how student entrepreneurs adapt to digital transformation and develop competitive business strategies becomes an important issue both theoretically and practically.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of digital marketing in enhancing business competitiveness, particularly for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Digital marketing tools such as social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, and data analytics have been widely recognized as key drivers of business growth in the digital era (Rismayanti *et al.*, 2025). These tools enable businesses to reach broader markets, improve brand awareness, and increase customer engagement with relatively low costs (Astikarani & Yasa, 2024). In addition, research highlights that Generation Z consumers require a different marketing approach due to their behavioral characteristics, including a preference for interactive content, social media engagement, and value-based consumption patterns. Businesses are therefore required to develop strong brand identity and authentic communication strategies to attract this segment (Kharisma *et al.*, 2024). Ethical considerations in digital business practices also play a significant role in shaping consumer trust, particularly among Generation Z, who are highly sensitive to transparency and authenticity in branding (Syarofi, 2020). Furthermore, studies show that digital marketing training can improve technical competencies among business actors, including the ability to use digital platforms effectively for promotion and customer engagement. Such training is also associated with increased innovation, creativity, and collaboration among business actors (Rohmatiah *et al.*, 2025). Generation Z is also identified as a highly innovative and adaptive group capable of leveraging digital tools for entrepreneurial activities and creative problem-solving (Maharani, 2025). However, most of these studies focus primarily on MSMEs as organizational units rather than on individual student entrepreneurs.

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into digital marketing, Generation Z behavior, and MSME development, there remains a limited understanding of how these concepts operate in the context of student entrepreneurs running online businesses. Existing research tends to generalize digital marketing effectiveness at the MSME level without considering the unique behavioral, cognitive, and environmental characteristics of university students as digital-native entrepreneurs. Moreover, prior studies have not sufficiently examined how digital creativity and work ethic interact to influence the success of student-run online businesses. While digital marketing skills and brand development have been widely discussed, the internal factors that shape students' entrepreneurial performance remain underexplored. In particular, the concept of business success in student entrepreneurship is often not clearly operationalized in previous research, leading to conceptual ambiguity in understanding performance outcomes in online business contexts. This gap indicates the need for a more focused investigation that integrates behavioral (work ethic), cognitive (digital creativity), and performance (business success) dimensions within the framework of student entrepreneurship in the digital economy, particularly in local contexts such as Surakarta.



Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to analyze the influence of digital creativity and work ethic on the success of online businesses operated by university students in Surakarta. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How does digital creativity influence the success of student-run online businesses? (2) How does work ethic affect the performance and sustainability of student entrepreneurship in digital platforms? The objective of this study is to examine the role of digital creativity and work ethic as key determinants of business success among student entrepreneurs in the digital economy. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on university students as digital entrepreneurs, rather than on MSMEs in general, and in its integration of behavioral and creative dimensions to explain online business success among Generation Z.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review and hypothesis development. Section 3 presents the research method and design. Section 4 provides the results and discussion. Section 5 provides Concluding Remarks and Recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Digital Creativity Strategies

Digital creativity strategies have become a fundamental component of modern digital entrepreneurship, particularly in environments where technological advancement and consumer behavior are rapidly evolving. These strategies refer to the ability of individuals or organizations to generate, develop, and implement innovative digital content, interactive communication methods, and technology-based marketing approaches that enhance engagement and business performance. In contemporary digital ecosystems, creativity is no longer limited to aesthetic content production but also extends to strategic decision-making about how to use digital platforms effectively for competitive advantage.

Recent studies emphasize that digital creativity is closely linked to leadership, cognitive processes, and organizational capability. Wang & Shao (2024) explain that digital creativity is shaped by transformational leadership that encourages innovation, experimentation, and knowledge sharing within digital environments. This indicates that creativity in digital contexts is not merely an individual trait but also a socially constructed capability influenced by organizational support and learning dynamics. Similarly, Zheng (2024) highlights that digital business strategy significantly enhances innovation performance, with creativity serving as a core mechanism linking digital capability to strategic outcomes. This suggests that firms or individuals with a strong strategic digital orientation tend to develop more adaptive and innovative marketing solutions.

From a capability perspective, digital creativity is also strongly associated with the integration of digital skills and innovation capacity. Bui & Le (2023) demonstrate that digital capability and creative capability jointly contribute to firm performance and strategic differentiation, particularly in competitive markets. This finding indicates that creativity in digital environments must be supported by technical competence, enabling businesses to transform ideas into effective digital outputs that improve market positioning and sustainability. In a similar direction, Chen *et al.*, (2024) emphasizes that short-video marketing strategies, such as those used in platforms like TikTok, rely heavily on creative storytelling, visual engagement, and audience interaction, which significantly enhance entrepreneurial visibility and customer acquisition.

Digital creativity strategies are increasingly shaped by co-creation and consumer engagement mechanisms. Dretsch *et al.*, (2024) argue that brand co-creation activities enable firms to increase digital



consumer engagement by directly involving users in content creation and brand development. This reflects a shift from traditional one-way marketing communication to interactive and participatory digital ecosystems. In addition, X. (Shane) Wang *et al.*, (2024) highlight that modern marketing strategies have moved beyond text-based communication toward multi-modal and visually driven content, requiring marketers to continuously innovate in how messages are designed and delivered to audiences.

At the practical level, digital creativity strategies have also been widely applied in small business and MSME contexts. Herawati *et al.*, (2023) show that structured digital marketing implementation programs significantly improve marketing performance through creative content development, platform optimization, and strategic digital adaptation. This demonstrates that creativity in digital marketing is not only relevant to large firms but also essential for small-scale entrepreneurs to enhance competitiveness and market reach.

2.2 Work Ethics

Work ethics strategies refer to systematic approaches used by individuals or organizations to develop disciplined, responsible, and value-driven work behavior that enhances performance, reduces deviant behavior, and strengthens organizational sustainability. In contemporary organizational and entrepreneurial contexts, work ethics is no longer understood merely as individual moral conduct, but as a structured behavioral system shaped by leadership, human resource practices, motivation, and cultural values.

Recent studies emphasize that ethics-oriented human resource management (HRM) systems play a critical role in shaping employee moral attentiveness and reducing deviant workplace behavior. Shahzad *et al.*, (2024) explain that organizations implementing ethics-based HRM systems are more effective in strengthening ethical awareness among employees, which ultimately improves behavioral consistency and work discipline. This indicates that work ethics strategies are not only normative values but also embedded in formal organizational systems that regulate employee behavior and decision-making. In addition to structural HR approaches, leadership plays a central role in strengthening work ethics. Arciniega *et al.*, (2024) Highlight that post-pandemic work environments have significantly reshaped employee attitudes toward work, requiring adaptive leadership strategies to maintain ethical commitment, responsibility, and productivity. This suggests that work ethics strategies must evolve in response to changing work environments, particularly in digital and hybrid workplaces where autonomy and flexibility are increasingly dominant.

From behavioral and value-based perspectives, the Islamic work ethic has been widely recognized as an effective framework for enhancing organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and employee engagement. Suryani *et al.*, (2023) demonstrate that the Islamic work ethic, combined with humble leadership, significantly contributes to thriving at work and improved organizational performance. This finding reinforces the idea that ethical values embedded in cultural and spiritual systems can serve as strong motivational drivers of disciplined and productive work behavior. Similarly, Udin (2024) emphasizes that ethical leadership, supported by Islamic work ethics and knowledge-sharing mechanisms, improves employee performance. This indicates that work ethics strategies are most effective when ethical values are integrated with leadership practices and knowledge management systems, creating a collaborative environment that strengthens accountability and performance.

At the operational level, work ethics strategies are also influenced by discipline, motivation, and human relations within organizations. Bagea & Yunus (2023) find that work discipline and motivation



significantly shape employee work ethics, particularly in public sector organizations. Furthermore, Martina & Firdaus (2024) highlight that strong workplace relationships can enhance work ethic by fostering communication, trust, and collaboration among employees. Finally, Hosen *et al.*, (2024) confirm that work motivation and work discipline are key determinants of both work ethics and employee performance. Their findings suggest that consistent motivational systems and disciplinary frameworks must support work ethics strategies to ensure sustainable performance improvement.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative case study design to examine in depth the relationship between digital creativity strategies and the work attitudes of Gen Z entrepreneurs. This study uses a case study design because it focuses on the specific conditions of Gen Z students running online businesses in Surakarta, whose characteristics and contexts differ from those of other groups. This approach allows researchers to explore in depth their experiences, digital creativity strategies, and the work ethic they apply. The study was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia, during March–June 2025. A total of 12 student entrepreneurs were selected as key informants through purposive sampling. The informants were active students from Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta and Sebelas Maret University. The selection of these two universities aimed to capture variation in academic background while maintaining a consistent geographical context within Surakarta.

The informant criteria included students who had run an online business for at least six months and actively used digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or e-commerce in their marketing strategies. The types of businesses operated by the informants included fashion reselling, online food and beverage businesses, digital services, and creative content-based microbusinesses. The informants consisted of 7 female and 5 male students aged between 19 and 24 years. These two campuses were selected to obtain diverse data from students with different academic backgrounds within the same city.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who are active in business to understand their methods for expanding ideas to create digital content and how they maintain discipline in their work. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted both face-to-face and online using WhatsApp video calls and Zoom meetings. The interview protocol covered three main dimensions: digital creativity practices, work ethic behavior, and perceived business success in online platforms. Meanwhile, observations were conducted by paying attention to digital creativity in the business activities they undertake. Observational data were collected by analyzing students' digital business activities on Instagram, TikTok, and e-commerce platforms, focusing on content creation patterns, posting frequency, customer engagement, and responsiveness to online interactions over a three-month observation period.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed triangulation by comparing interview and observation results. Triangulation was conducted through multiple sources (informants), multiple methods (interviews and observations), and temporal consistency checks to ensure data credibility and validity.

Data analysis was carried out using the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014), which consists of three steps: first, reducing data; second, presenting data; and third, concluding. Researchers

collected raw data and categorized it into main points that were relevant to creativity strategies and work attitudes. After that, the data was presented in a descriptive format that detailed the creativity and work ethic of the students studied. The final step was to formulate a basic pattern or theory related to the influence of Gen Z identity on the way of doing business in Surakarta.

The data reduction process involved systematic coding of interview transcripts into thematic categories, including digital creativity, work ethic, motivation, and online business performance. Data were displayed using narrative matrices to identify cross-case patterns among informants. The conclusion-drawing process was carried out iteratively by comparing empirical findings with relevant theoretical frameworks to ensure interpretive accuracy and analytical rigor.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis Results

The development of digital technology has triggered a significant transformation in entrepreneurial activities, particularly among students, a generation that grew up with technology. Easy access to social media has not only expanded business opportunities but also increased the need for adaptive and strategic marketing capabilities in highly competitive digital environments. In this context, digital innovation has become an essential skill for entrepreneurs, especially when facing rapid market changes and intense competition in the digital world. Furthermore, the technology-savvy nature of the younger generation provides a unique advantage in creating digital-based innovations. Students not only act as social media users but also as content providers, leveraging various platform features to build brand image and reach a wider audience. Therefore, understanding digital creativity strategies and work ethic is crucial in understanding how students can sustainably manage and develop online businesses.

Interviews with students running online businesses in Surakarta, particularly at Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) and Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS), revealed that they have implemented various digital creativity strategies in managing their businesses and work ethic practices. The informants consistently reported using structured digital creativity approaches, including creating visually engaging content, using short-form video formats aligned with current trends, and applying storytelling techniques to strengthen product identity. Instead of relying on passive trend-following, informants actively analyze trends on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to ensure their content remains relevant and competitive in the market. They actively follow trends on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to ensure their content aligns with market demand. However, challenges remain, such as a lack of innovative ideas, limited design skills, and insufficient time for repetitive content management. These challenges indicate that digital creativity is not only a matter of technical ability but also requires continuous learning, adaptability, and sustained effort in content production. This demonstrates that creativity in the digital world requires not only technical expertise but also dedication and continuous research.

Research findings indicate that digital creativity among Gen Z students in running online businesses is flexible and context-dependent. Creativity is not simply the ability to generate new ideas; it also involves observing emerging trends on social media platforms and adapting them to suit the product's characteristics. Thus, digital creativity functions as a strategic adaptation mechanism rather than a spontaneous creative activity.



Creativity in the digital realm is considered a strategic necessity to face the high level of competition. Informants realize that without the element of creativity, it is difficult to create competitive content and will tend to be lost among the many other existing contents. Therefore, creativity is a very important key to increasing product visibility and attractiveness. In addition, creativity in the digital environment directly increases sales. In this study, business success is defined operationally by four indicators: sales growth, customer engagement, repeat purchase behavior, and online visibility. Interesting content not only serves as a means of communication but also as a tool to convert audiences into buyers. In this case, the characteristics of Gen Z as digital users are the main supporting factor, because their closeness to technology makes it easier for them to adapt to ever-changing digital trends.

Trends are typically the primary source of ideas for informants when developing content. This process is not done by direct imitation; instead, it involves modifying and adapting to suit the company's needs. Analytical processes such as conducting trend research, using hashtags, and understanding digital platform algorithms contribute to the resulting creativity. However, the creative process is not free from challenges such as idea blockages. To overcome creative blocks, informants use reflective strategies such as taking temporary breaks, seeking alternative references, and engaging in peer discussions to generate new ideas. Conversely, structured planning, such as creating a regular posting schedule, ensures consistency in content production.

In terms of platform usage, informants predominantly use social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The content presented typically aligns with Gen Z traits, such as being light, fast, engaging, and less formal. Furthermore, branding is strengthened through consistent visual elements, such as uniform colors and content styles. Creativity is not the only factor; work ethic is also a crucial factor in running a business. Work ethic is reflected in consistency, discipline, and responsibility in managing the business. Informants demonstrated the ability to balance time between academic and business activities, as well as the ability to prioritize when faced with conflicts of interest. In facing business challenges, informants demonstrated a sense of responsibility and good adaptability, including responding to customers and finding solutions to emerging problems. Failure or loss was not seen as an obstacle, but rather as part of the learning process. Furthermore, the primary motivation driving informants in running a business was the desire to achieve financial independence.

4.2 Discussion

The rapid development of digital technology and social media has changed the way businesses interact with consumers, especially the younger generation. This study shows that digital creativity plays a crucial role in supporting the success of Gen Z students' online businesses, particularly in attracting customers through relevant and flexible content. Digital creativity in this study is understood as the ability to adapt digital content in response to platform trends, audience engagement patterns, and product identity to generate consumer attention and interaction. Other research suggests that innovative, personalized, and interactive digital content can influence customer perceptions and purchasing decisions (Uswatu, 2026). This demonstrates that digital creativity is both a medium of expression and an effective marketing strategy for increasing product appeal on social media.

Informants' ability to capitalize on trends such as short videos and virality is reinforced by prior research indicating that Generation Z has an advantage in adapting to technological developments and digital communication trends (Cynthia *et al.*, 2025). Their proximity to technology allows them to be more responsive to changing trends and create content that aligns with their preferences. In the context



of student entrepreneurs in Surakarta, this adaptability becomes more specific, as it is not only driven by technological familiarity but also by academic exposure and peer-based digital learning environments. Digital creativity, in this context, is not static; it constantly changes in response to news on social media.

The use of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok as primary marketing tools demonstrates that digital platforms significantly influence brand awareness and consumer purchase intentions. This is supported by research indicating that social media marketing positively affects consumer engagement and purchasing decisions, particularly among Gen Z (Dania *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, the appropriate use of digital platforms is crucial for the success of a digital creativity-based marketing strategy. In this study, platform effectiveness is reflected in engagement indicators such as likes, comments, shares, and customer inquiries, which directly contribute to perceived business success.

Conversely, the findings of this study indicate that digital creativity cannot be separated from business standards. This aligns with research showing that creativity, motivation, and social media utilization simultaneously influence business success (Wijaya & Handoyo, 2023). To have a sustainable impact on business development, high creativity must be supported by consistency, discipline, and responsibility. Work ethic in this study refers to behavioral consistency in managing time, maintaining customer relationships, and ensuring continuous content production despite academic and business demands. Overall, the results of this study support the creative economy concept, which holds that creativity is key to value creation in digital businesses.

Previous research has shown that the growth of the creative economy enables students to start digital businesses (Hikmah & Hardianti, 2026). However, this study extends previous findings by demonstrating that in the Surakarta student context, digital creativity alone is insufficient without structured work ethic practices that ensure the sustainability of online business operations. Therefore, to build a competitive and sustainable business in the digital era, it is crucial to combine digital creativity with a work ethic.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how digital creativity strategies and work ethic influence the entrepreneurial practices of Gen Z student entrepreneurs at Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta (UMS) and Sebelas Maret University (UNS). The research employed a qualitative case study design involving 12 student informants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations of online business activities on digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings indicate that digital creativity is primarily expressed through trend-based content adaptation, short-form video use, and storytelling strategies. At the same time, work ethic is reflected in discipline, responsibility, and time management to balance academic and business activities.

The study contributes to the understanding of student entrepreneurship in the digital era by highlighting the complementary relationship between digital creativity and work ethic in sustaining online business activities. Theoretically, the study extends the concept of digital entrepreneurship by emphasizing that creativity is not only related to content innovation but also to adaptive strategic behavior in responding to dynamic social media environments. Practically, the findings provide insight for student entrepreneurs to strengthen their competitiveness by integrating creative digital practices



with consistent work discipline. From a policy perspective, the study suggests that higher education institutions may support student entrepreneurship by providing structured digital marketing training and experiential learning programs that enhance both creative and ethical work capacities.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of informants is relatively limited and focused only on two universities in Surakarta, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data are based on self-reported experiences, which may introduce subjectivity in interpretation. Third, the study focuses only on two main variables—digital creativity and work ethic—without examining other potential influencing factors such as financial capital, social support, or technological infrastructure. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the scope by involving a larger, more diverse sample across regions and incorporating additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student entrepreneurship in the digital economy.

Statement of Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to assist in improving clarity and readability of the text. The author reviewed and edited the output and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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