

The ASAH-E Model: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Asahan, Through Digital Transformation

Suhailah Kassim¹, *Ijlal Saja², Soo Yew Phong³, Aemillyawaty Abas⁴, Noorain Mohd Nordin⁵, Nurul Azlinda Chek Talib⁶, Darinah Daud⁷

^{1,4,5,6} Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka

^{2,3} Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka

⁷ Pusat Komuniti Desa Asahan, Pusat Komuniti Desa, Asahan, Jasin 77100 Melaka

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Women entrepreneurship serves as a core economic pillar for rural and semi-urban communities in Asahan, Melaka, Malaysia. However, moving from manual commercial methods to modern digital platforms remains a major operational challenge for micro-retailers. This study evaluates the practical outcomes of the Empowering Women Entrepreneurs: Asahan Community Center Initiative (Program Pemerkasaan Usahawanita Pusat Komuniti Desa Asahan). Utilizing a qualitative framework, the study examines the experiences of six purposefully selected women entrepreneurs over a 6-month post-program period. Data collection was handled through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically across seven areas: knowledge, attitude, aspirations, skills, finance, income, and motivation. The results demonstrate a massive practical shift, highlighting how accessible digital tools like WhatsApp directly improve transactional speed, build social media confidence, and establish strict financial tracking through dedicated ledger books. The ASAH-e model from this study helps entrepreneurs to improve their business. The study concludes by aligning these results with national frameworks, including the Madani Economy and MyDIGITAL blueprints.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Digital Transformation, Qualitative Framework, Micro-enterprises, Model

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Women entrepreneurship plays a major role in boosting local economic development and community resilience. In developing countries like Malaysia, micro-enterprises run by women provide critical income for families and help reduce poverty in semi-urban areas. For example, in Abas (2023) study, created an entrepreneurship program for small business owners and successfully improved their businesses at Selandar. However, modern market conditions require businesses to shift quickly away from traditional physical methods toward digital systems. Traditional retail setups face rising competition, making digital adoption a necessity for survival rather than a luxury. This study evaluates the Empowering Women Entrepreneurs: Asahan Community Center Initiative (Program Pemerkasaan Usahawanita Pusat Komuniti Desa Asahan), an initiative designed to help women micro-entrepreneurs move away from manual business patterns and adopt practical digital solutions to ensure long-term stability.

Problem Statement

Many women-led micro-enterprises face systemic barriers that hinder their business scalability. A critical deficit in digital literacy and operational expertise often relegates these businesses to informal, manual management

practices, leading to fragmented financial record-keeping and ineffective client engagement (Mead & Liedholm, 1998). Furthermore, a pervasive 'techno-anxiety' where digital platforms are viewed as threats rather than growth catalysts prevents these entrepreneurs from adopting modern marketing strategies (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008). This phenomenon is closely linked to the 'gendered digital divide,' where social and psychological barriers prevent women from leveraging ICTs for economic gain (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). Without structured, targeted educational interventions, these businesses remain trapped in a cycle of income instability, ultimately failing to contribute fully to national economic development goals, as outlined in the 12th Malaysia Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). Based on this, the ASAH-e model developed to solve those problems.

Research Objectives

To solve these core problems, this research sets up three major targets:

1. To assess the structural change in digital knowledge, daily operational skills, and record-keeping habits among participants before and after joining the training program.
2. To examine modifications in operational attitude, social media confidence levels, and future business goals among the women entrepreneurs.
3. To analyze the direct outcomes of digital marketing applications on overall weekly revenue, customer growth, and business motivation.

Alignment with Malaysian Government Agenda

This study directly supports several key national economic blueprints launched by the Malaysian government. First, it matches the core goals of the Madani Economy Framework (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2023), which emphasizes elevating local communities, reducing financial gaps, and boosting micro-enterprise survival. Second, it aligns with the National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030 (Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, 2019), which promotes a progressive entrepreneurship ecosystem through tech adoption across all business classes. Lastly, by preparing women micro-retailers for digital transition, the project advances the digital inclusion guidelines of the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint or MyDIGITAL (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). This alignment guarantees that vulnerable business owners are fully included in Malaysia's shift toward a digital nation.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design to capture the detailed, real-world experiences of women entrepreneurs undergoing digital transformation. Qualitative tracking is highly useful here because it uncovers personal changes in confidence, behavior, and structural understanding that numbers alone cannot show (Welter, 2011). The research focuses on six purposefully selected women micro-entrepreneurs who completed the training and participated in a rigorous six month post-program monitoring process.

Data collection was handled through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. This method allowed the participants to talk freely about their original business challenges, operational changes, and post-program results. The collected data went through thematic analysis based on an analytical monitoring framework. The responses were organized into seven distinct operational areas: digital knowledge, social media attitude, long-term aspirations, operational skills, financial management, income generation, and internal motivation. The framework carefully cross-examined the participants' starting points (original baseline state) against their operational data collected six months after completing the program, providing clear proof of the program's practical impact.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The qualitative data analysis shows a highly positive shift across all seven monitored areas. The section below provides a heavily saturated analysis of the real outcomes experienced by the six entrepreneurs based on the

collected interview transcripts.

Knowledge & Skills: Transitioning to Digital Media and Speedy Order Handling

Before joining the program, the participants faced a total lack of exposure to modern digital business tools. They operated completely in a manual bubble, which severely limited their communication and operational capacity. Six months after the program, the data shows an intensive practical transformation. WhatsApp emerged completely as their primary, standalone digital business lifesaver. The participants developed strong operational independence, using their mobile applications to interact directly with customers and manage orders with massive speed.

The transition from absolute digital avoidance to functional proficiency is deeply highlighted in the transcripts. The women shifted their core consumer interaction onto mobile text platforms, discovering that direct digital access made corporate communications highly effortless. A vital highlight of their improved operational skill is the immense reduction in transaction turnaround times. The participants developed the capacity to process incoming client orders smoothly within a 10-minute window, demonstrating that digital familiarity builds real management speed. The raw field data provides rich proof of this practical skill upgrade:

"WhatsApp has helped me a lot to expand the business." (Participant A).

"My WhatsApp... WhatsApp is much easier. Inside it, I can easily include customer comments and feedback." (Participant B).

"I can take and manage orders well... within 10 minutes it can be done. I just do it... even if I face difficulties, I will ask my peers for help." (Participant C).

"I run my business via WhatsApp... My customer contact is through WhatsApp... it helps expand my operation." (Participant D).

Attitude & Aspirations: Social Media Confidence and Long-Term Goals

Initially, the micro-retailers displayed massive hesitation and extremely low confidence regarding social media applications. They looked at digital platforms as highly risky channels rather than useful business tools. Post-program monitoring showed a complete turnaround in their industrial mindset. Their personal confidence levels grew intensely as they experienced positive reinforcement, glowing customer comments, and stronger consumer trust.

This newly found psychological confidence directly expanded their corporate goals. Instead of focusing on day-to-day survival, the entrepreneurs began drafting active expansion strategies. They targeted physical layout expansions, buying higher volumes of raw materials, and increasing their overall production outputs to meet rising demand. The transcript text captures this profound psychological growth:

"Believe me... the level of self-confidence has truly increased." (Participant D).

"Later, customers can easily order again... because they trust you, madam. Insha Allah, this business will continue to grow." (Participant E).

"I want to buy more inventory and expand my business space. I want it to progress and succeed. There is a clear intention to expand." (Participant F).

"Now my confidence is up. The customers trust me... they order again and again because they believe in the product." (Participant B).

"My plan now is to modify my workspace... I want to make it spacious because dealing with the heat and strong food smells requires a comfortable environment for my customers." (Participant A).

Financial Management: Systematic Ledgers and Structured Control

One of the most valuable structural improvements occurred in the area of financial tracking. Before the program intervention, the entrepreneurs operated with no organized bookkeeping. They carried out transactions without tracking daily income, variable costs, or net margins, leaving their cash flow exposed to serious risks.

The introduction of a physical business ledger book acted as a key turning point for operational control. The six participants successfully built deep financial discipline, systematically listing incoming revenues, operating costs, and raw material expenses. This clear record-keeping eliminated cash flow confusion and gave them the clarity needed to make smarter purchasing decisions. The qualitative data shows a direct link between strict tracking and operational success:

"We record everything in that ledger book, and then we make our business orders. It helps manage sales, profits, and daily expenses." (Participant B).

"The ledger book gives clear control. We track what comes in and what goes out before buying new stock." (Participant E).

"Using the record book systematically has raised my business confidence immensely." (Participant C).

Income Generation & Marketing: Exploding Sales and Peer Promotion

The combination of active digital promotion and improved management skills resulted in a visible boost in weekly sales volumes. Before the intervention, the women suffered from highly unstable income and a very narrow local customer base. By applying consistent digital marketing techniques, they turned their businesses into highly profitable operations.

The empirical results show massive success stories. When promotions were executed intensely online, weekly stock sold out completely. The data reveals that participants managed to secure single orders of 30 lunch boxes or product bottles at one go, a major leap from their original baseline volumes. Furthermore, digital exposure triggered a powerful organic reaction, where satisfied clients actively promoted the products to their own circles through word-of-mouth marketing. The transcripts provide thick descriptions of this financial boom:

"If the promotion is strong, that whole week will be highly profitable. Customers who have tasted it will automatically promote it to their friends." (Participant A)

"The orders are completely overwhelming... they buy out everything until the stock is fully finished." (Participant C)

"I made 30 food packs at once because when people order regularly, the volume shoots up instantly." (Participant F)

"Once a customer tastes the product, they immediately tell their friends. The circle keeps growing." (Participant E)

Motivation & Sustainability: Driving Enterprise Velocity

The program acted as a strong catalyst for long-term internal motivation. Before receiving training, the micro-retailers suffered from a lack of external encouragement and clear operational guidance. Achieving visible financial progress and learning useful digital skills completely revitalized their entrepreneurial drive. The participants expressed a deep desire to step up their operations and move at a much faster corporate speed. They also showed great eagerness to enroll in advanced training modules to secure the future growth of their enterprises. The narrative evidence highlights this high motivation:

"When joining this program... I feel the business will move at a much faster pace. It gives great spirit to our business. I really want to join more programs like this in the future." (Participant D)

"This program gives a huge boost to our spirit... it makes us want to push faster and harder." (Participant A)

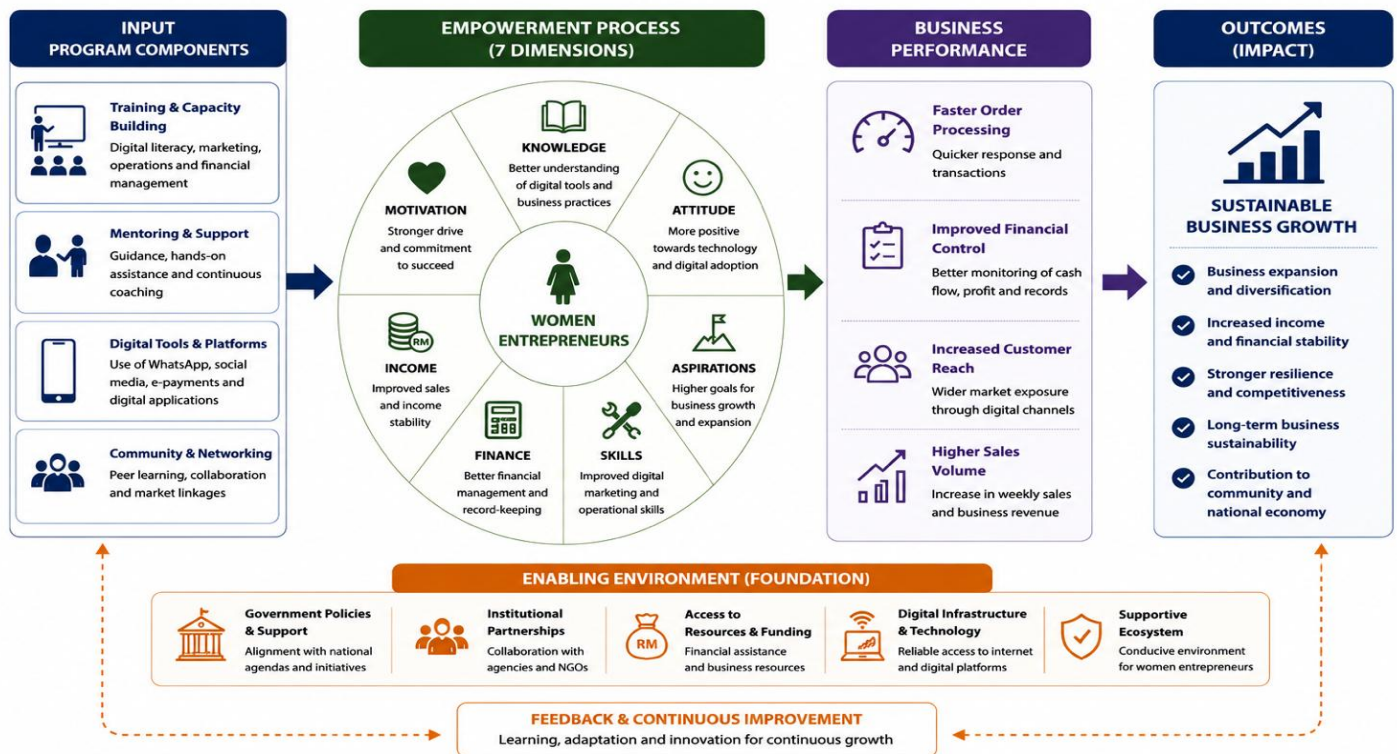
"I definitely want to join again... it opens our eyes to what we can achieve when we move forward." (Participant C)

Based on results, Table 1 showed that seven dimensions and Figure 1 showed the ASAH-e model.

Table 1. Saturated Framework Analysis Mapping Micro-Enterprise Evolution

Dimension	Monitoring Focus	Baseline State (Before)	Post-Program State (6 Months)	Empirical Evidence / Interview Transkrip Proof
Knowledge	Digital Marketing	Lacked exposure to digital tools.	WhatsApp core trade platform.	"WhatsApp has helped me a lot to expand."
Attitude	Media Confidence	Hesitant over online communication.	Strong digital confidence and trust.	"Believe me... the level of self-confidence increased."
Aspirations	Strategic Targets	Short-term operational focus.	Aims to enlarge premises and capacity.	"I want to expand my workspace... make it spacious."
Skills	Order Management	Relied entirely on manual routines.	Manages client transactions in 10 mins.	"within 10 minutes it can be done. I just do it..."
Finance	Bookkeeping System	No active tracking; chaotic cash flows.	Systematic physical financial ledgers.	"We record everything in that ledger book."
Income	Sales Volume	Fluctuating sales; tight local reach.	Massive orders; sold 30 packs at once.	"I made 30 food packs at once... circle shoots up."
Motivation	Project Drive	Low dynamic external pushes.	Energized; targeting structural velocity.	"I feel the business will move at a much faster pace."

Research Output



This model illustrates how program components empower women entrepreneurs across seven dimensions, leading to improved business performance and sustainable growth.

Figure 1. Model ASAH-e (Asahan Entrepreneurship Empowerment)

The model ASAH-e in Figure 1 showed the Women Entrepreneurship Empowerment Program provides a clear four-step path to help women in Asahan, Melaka, turn their small businesses into successful, long-term ventures. First, the program builds essential skills by teaching women how to use digital tools, manage orders, and organize their financial records. Next, it focuses on psychological empowerment, helping participants gain confidence, overcome their fear of technology, and stay motivated to grow their businesses. As these women apply their new knowledge and confidence, they see immediate results, such as faster order processing, improved financial control, and the ability to reach more customers. Ultimately, these improvements lead to sustainable growth, allowing the women to expand their production capacity and achieve long-term business success.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study prove that structural training programs can successfully bridge the digital gap for women micro-entrepreneurs. Moving from manual processes to digital tools like WhatsApp highlights that micro-businesses do not always need complex software to start their digital journey. Instead, using accessible, everyday technology can act as an effective starting point for digital transformation (Crittenden et al., 2019). The 10-minute order completion time demonstrates how digital accessibility improves operational efficiency, saving time that entrepreneurs can redirect toward product development and long-term planning.

Additionally, the increase in social media confidence emphasizes that entrepreneurial success relies heavily on a positive mindset shift (Lafortune et al., 2018). Building confidence helps break down psychological barriers, encouraging micro-entrepreneurs to set ambitious long-term goals, such as expanding their physical premises and increasing production capacities (Dy et al., 2017). The transition from short-term day-to-day survival to long-term business planning shows a deeper, professional evolution in their entrepreneurial identity (Ghouse et al., 2021).

The improvement in financial management through basic logbooks underlines the value of keeping business education practical and accessible (Zimmerer & Scarborough, 2002). Structured financial tracking reduces financial risks and gives entrepreneurs a clear understanding of their profits, helping them make better business decisions. This financial transparency, paired with active digital promotion, created a powerful growth cycle. Higher sales numbers, such as single orders of 30 lunch boxes, combined with word-of-mouth marketing, confirm that local reputation remains a key asset when amplified by digital channels (Kapoor et al., 2018). Overall, the high participant motivation highlights the long-term value of these initiatives. When entrepreneurs experience clear financial improvements, they develop a strong appetite for continued learning and strategic growth (Yadav & Unni, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Research Impact

This study shows that the Women Entrepreneurship Empowerment Program has achieved an important structural impact. The ASAH-e model can be effective for entrepreneurs and women. It has successfully helped women-led micro-enterprises shift from fragile, manual businesses into organized, digitally driven micro-enterprises. Financially, the program has proven that basic digital tools and accessible financial logs can directly increase sales, stabilize weekly cash flow, and build long-term business resilience. Socially, the program has empowered women by raising their personal confidence, encouraging financial independence, and inspiring them to pursue long-term business growth. From a policy perspective, this research offers a clear, scalable roadmap for the government (Terjesen et al., 2016). It proves that targeted, community-level digital training can deliver visible economic results, directly supporting national goals like the Madani Economy Framework and MyDIGITAL.

RECOMMENDATION

While the six month monitoring data reveals excellent short-term progress, future research should explore the long-term sustainability of these digital changes over a multi-year period. Future studies could use mixed-method designs, combining long-term financial data with qualitative deep-dives to measure exact revenue growth patterns. The model can be used for other entrepreneur communities. Additionally, future research should

examine the benefits of introducing more advanced digital tools such as basic e-commerce setups, professional digital payment systems, and structured social media advertising once entrepreneurs master basic platforms like WhatsApp. Finally, exploring how peer-support networks and community mentoring help sustain business motivation will offer valuable insights for designing next-generation empowerment initiatives across Malaysia.

Future studies should explore the psychological and socio-cultural barriers such as family commitments, digital anxiety, and gender-related constraints that may influence the adoption rate of digital tools among women entrepreneurs. Investigating the role of peer support networks and family facilitation could also offer deeper qualitative insights into how personal support systems affect business sustainability. Finally, researchers are encouraged to perform a cost-benefit analysis of implementing the ASAH-e model to demonstrate its financial viability and scalability for large-scale government funding.

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Bibliography authors

Suhailah Kassim is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka, where she also serves as the Coordinator for the Industry, Community, and Alumni Network (ICAN). She holds a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) from UiTM and an MBA from Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Her research and academic pursuits focus on change management, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and mentorship frameworks. Currently, she drives community-based entrepreneurship initiatives, with a particular emphasis on rural development.

Ijlal Saja is a Senior Lecturer of Arabic Language as a Third Language at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Melaka Branch. She also serves as the Coordinator of the Industry, Community, and Alumni Network (ICAN). She holds a PhD in Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and a Master of Arts (MA) in Technical & Vocational Education from the University of Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). Her core research activities focus on Arabic studies, qualitative methodologies, translation, learning and teaching strategies, and Islamic studies.

Soo Yew Phong is a Senior Lecturer of Mandarin Language at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Melaka Branch. He also serves as the Coordinator of the Industry, Community, and Alumni Network (ICAN). He holds a Master of Modern Language Studies from the University of Malaya (UM). His localized research activities include Teaching Mandarin as a Foreign Language, Survival Chinese development, Mandarin translation and editing processes, sociolinguistics, and Chinese lexicology. He is actively involved with various statutory bodies and private corporations as a professional Chinese language consultant.

Aemillyawaty Abas is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka. She holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and is currently a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) candidate, with research focusing on consumer responses to corporate sustainability and ESG-related brand communication. Her academic interests include marketing research and analytics, social media marketing, digital content strategy, consumer behaviour, and community-based entrepreneurship development. She is actively involved in university–community knowledge transfer initiatives that strengthen the digital capabilities, market engagement, and business sustainability of micro-entrepreneurs, particularly women entrepreneurs.

Noorain Mohd Nordin is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka. She holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA). Her main research

activities and scholarly interests cover the areas of social innovation & entrepreneurship, strategic marketing, and corporate management.

Nurul Azlinda Chek Talib is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kampus Bandaraya Melaka. She holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a Bachelor of Business Administration (Hons) in Operations Management from UiTM. Her principal research interests focus heavily on Supply Chain Management and Risk Management, exploring practical operational models that enhance organizational resilience in dynamic environments.

Darinah Daud is the Manager of the Pusat Komuniti Desa (PKD) Asahan, Melaka. Her core contributions and organizational activities related to this research project involve the direct supervision, training, and strategic management of local micro-entrepreneurs operating within the Asahan district.