

## PLATFORM GOVERNANCE AND SME MARKETING AUTONOMY: EVIDENCE FROM THE DIGITAL MARKETPLACE

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### Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital marketplaces has transformed how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) conduct marketing activities and access consumers within digital commerce ecosystems. While digital platforms provide important opportunities for market expansion and commercialization, growing concerns have emerged regarding the governance power exercised through algorithmic visibility systems, promotional infrastructures, and customer access control. Existing studies predominantly emphasize the enabling role of digital platforms while paying limited attention to how platform governance influences SME marketing autonomy, particularly in emerging-market contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how platform governance mechanisms shape SME marketing autonomy within digital marketplace ecosystems. This study employed a qualitative multiple-case design involving SME owners and managers operating within major digital marketplaces in Indonesia, including Shopee, Tokopedia, and TikTok Shop. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis inspired by the Gioia methodology. The findings reveal that algorithmic visibility systems strongly influence marketing decisions, promotional dependence reduces strategic flexibility, and platform governance constrains customer relationship ownership. However, SMEs also develop adaptive strategies, including multichannel selling and external branding efforts, to negotiate platform dependence. The study introduces the concept of negotiated marketing autonomy and contributes to understanding governance asymmetries within contemporary platform economies.

**Keywords:** Platform Governance; SME Marketing Autonomy; Algorithmic Governance; Digital Platforms; Emerging Markets

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital marketplaces has fundamentally transformed how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) conduct marketing activities, interact with consumers, and access broader markets. Digital platforms such as Shopee, Tokopedia, and TikTok Shop have become dominant intermediaries within the contemporary digital economy, enabling SMEs to expand market reach, improve transactional efficiency, and accelerate digital commercialization processes. In emerging economies, participation in platform-based commerce has increasingly shifted from a complementary strategy into a competitive necessity for SMEs seeking visibility and consumer access within highly digitized markets. SMEs are progressively integrating marketing activities, customer acquisition strategies, and promotional campaigns into digital marketplace ecosystems to remain competitive in rapidly evolving online environments.

Existing literature has predominantly portrayed digital platforms as enabling infrastructures that facilitate SME growth, innovation, and market accessibility. Digital marketplaces are frequently conceptualized as technological ecosystems capable of reducing market-entry barriers while enhancing business scalability and operational flexibility. Recent studies further suggest that platform participation may strengthen SME competitiveness through broader customer reach, ecosystem integration, and digital resource accessibility (Jovanovic et al., 2022). However, this optimistic perspective often overlooks the asymmetrical power relations embedded within platform ecosystems. As platform economies mature,

digital marketplaces increasingly exercise governance power through algorithmic ranking systems, promotional mechanisms, seller monitoring practices, and platform-controlled visibility infrastructures.

Platform governance refers to the mechanisms, rules, standards, and algorithmic structures through which digital platforms coordinate and regulate interactions among ecosystem participants. These governance mechanisms include algorithmic visibility systems, commission structures, customer review systems, paid advertising tools, and procedural monitoring practices that shape seller competition and platform participation (Gawer, 2021). While such mechanisms are frequently justified as necessary for maintaining ecosystem efficiency and consumer trust, they may simultaneously create structural dependencies that constrain SMEs' strategic flexibility and marketing autonomy. SMEs increasingly rely on platform-defined visibility rules and promotional infrastructures to sustain consumer engagement, sales conversion, and online legitimacy.

Recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge that digital platforms function not merely as neutral intermediaries but also as governance actors capable of shaping organizational behavior and market dynamics. Emerging evidence indicates that opaque algorithmic systems, inconsistent governance enforcement, and platform-controlled reputation mechanisms may significantly influence how sellers behave within digital ecosystems. Moreover, platform governance practices may generate uncertainty regarding visibility, customer access, and long-term business sustainability, particularly among resource-constrained SMEs that possess limited bargaining power relative to dominant platform operators.

Despite growing scholarly attention to platform governance, limited research has specifically examined how governance mechanisms influence SME marketing autonomy within digital marketplaces. Existing studies have largely focused on platform adoption, digital capability development, and seller performance outcomes, while comparatively overlooking the hidden governance structures that shape marketing decision-making and strategic independence among SMEs (Bambang Subeno, 2025; Mmieh Kwakye et al., 2026). Furthermore, the literature rarely explores how SMEs negotiate autonomy under conditions of algorithmic dependence, promotional pressure, and platform-controlled customer interaction. Consequently, the relationship between platform governance and SME marketing autonomy remains theoretically underexplored, particularly in emerging-market digital commerce contexts.

This study addresses this gap by examining how platform governance mechanisms shape SME marketing autonomy within digital marketplace ecosystems. Drawing upon platform governance perspectives and organizational dependency arguments, this research investigates how SMEs experience, interpret, and respond to algorithmic control, promotional dependence, and governance-induced marketing constraints. The study argues that although digital marketplaces provide important commercial opportunities, they simultaneously function as governance structures capable of reshaping SME marketing behavior and limiting strategic autonomy.

Using qualitative evidence from SMEs operating within major digital marketplace ecosystems, this study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it extends platform governance research by shifting analytical attention from platform efficiency toward issues of marketing control and strategic dependence among SMEs. Second, it introduces the concept of negotiated marketing autonomy to explain how SMEs adapt to, resist, and strategically navigate platform-imposed constraints. Third, the study enriches understanding of digital power asymmetries in emerging economies, where SMEs often face structural dependence on dominant digital platforms.

The findings are expected to provide important theoretical insights into the evolving relationship between digital platforms and SMEs while also offering practical implications for platform managers,

policymakers, and SME practitioners seeking to create more balanced and sustainable digital marketplace ecosystems.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Digital Marketplace Ecosystems and SMEs**

Digital marketplace ecosystems have transformed how SMEs conduct marketing activities, access consumers, and compete within digital commerce environments. Platforms such as Shopee, Tokopedia, and TikTok Shop provide SMEs with opportunities to expand market reach, improve operational efficiency, and accelerate digital transformation processes. Existing studies generally portray digital platforms as enabling infrastructures that support business scalability, customer engagement, and market accessibility for resource-constrained SMEs.

However, recent scholarship increasingly argues that digital marketplaces are not merely neutral technological intermediaries but also governance structures capable of shaping seller behavior and competitive dynamics (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). Platform ecosystems regulate visibility, promotional exposure, and transactional interactions through algorithmic systems and platform-defined rules. Consequently, SMEs often become dependent on platform infrastructures for customer access, sales performance, and digital legitimacy.

### **Platform Governance and Algorithmic Control**

Platform governance refers to the mechanisms and rules through which digital platforms coordinate and regulate ecosystem participants (Gawer, 2021). Within digital marketplaces, governance mechanisms include algorithmic ranking systems, commission structures, advertising tools, seller evaluation systems, and promotional regulations that shape market competition and seller visibility. Recent studies highlight that governance increasingly operates through algorithmic control. Platform algorithms determine product rankings, recommendation exposure, and search visibility, thereby influencing consumer purchasing behavior and seller competitiveness (Kellogg et al., 2020). As a result, SMEs frequently adapt marketing strategies according to platform-defined metrics to maintain visibility and transactional performance.

Although these governance systems are often justified as necessary for ecosystem efficiency, they may simultaneously create structural dependence and reduce strategic flexibility among SMEs (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). Platforms possess substantial authority over digital traffic, customer access, and promotional visibility, positioning them as dominant governance actors within marketplace ecosystems.

### **SME Marketing Autonomy**

Marketing autonomy refers to a firm's ability to independently determine branding strategies, promotional activities, pricing decisions, and customer engagement practices (Almeida et al., 2020). For SMEs, strategic flexibility is particularly important because adaptive decision-making often represents a key source of competitiveness in dynamic market environments.

Within digital marketplaces, however, SME marketing autonomy may become increasingly constrained by platform governance mechanisms. Algorithmic visibility systems, advertising dependence, and platform-controlled customer interaction frequently influence how SMEs design and implement marketing strategies. In many cases, SMEs gradually align business practices with platform preferences rather than internally determined strategic priorities.

Nevertheless, emerging evidence suggests that SMEs also develop adaptive strategies to negotiate platform dependence, including multichannel selling, external branding efforts, and marketplace diversification (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). These adaptive responses indicate that autonomy within platform ecosystems is not eliminated but continuously negotiated under platform governance conditions.

This study draws upon platform governance perspectives and resource dependence arguments to explain how digital marketplaces shape SME marketing autonomy. Platform governance theory emphasizes that platforms regulate ecosystem interactions through technological and institutional mechanisms (Gawer, 2021), while resource dependence perspectives suggest that organizations become constrained when external actors control critical strategic resources. In digital marketplace ecosystems, platforms control essential resources such as customer access, algorithmic visibility, and promotional infrastructure. Consequently, SMEs may experience increasing strategic dependence and reduced bargaining power within platform-mediated environments.

Although prior studies have explored platform ecosystems and digital transformation, limited attention has been given to how platform governance influences SME marketing autonomy, particularly in emerging-market contexts. Existing research predominantly focuses on platform adoption and performance outcomes while overlooking the governance-related constraints embedded within algorithmic visibility systems and platform-controlled customer access. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how SMEs experience and negotiate marketing autonomy under conditions of platform governance and digital dependence.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine how platform governance mechanisms shape SME marketing autonomy within digital marketplace ecosystems. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore SMEs' experiences, interpretations, and strategic responses toward algorithmic governance, promotional dependence, and platform-controlled marketing environments (Aspers & Corte, 2021). More specifically, the research adopted a multiple-case qualitative design to capture variations in SME experiences across different digital marketplace contexts.

The study involved SMEs actively operating within major digital marketplaces in Indonesia, including Shopee, Tokopedia, and TikTok Shop. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on several criteria: SMEs had to be actively selling through digital marketplaces for at least two years, regularly conducting online marketing activities, and directly involved in marketing decision-making processes. A total of 15–20 SME owners or managers from sectors such as fashion, food and beverages, beauty products, and household goods participated in the study.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between January and March 2026. Interview questions focused on participants' experiences regarding algorithmic visibility, promotional dependence, pricing flexibility, customer relationship management, and perceptions of platform control. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. To strengthen contextual understanding, the study also reviewed supporting materials such as marketplace policies, seller guidelines, and promotional regulations within digital marketplaces.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis inspired by the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The analysis began by identifying first-order concepts derived from participant narratives, followed by the development of second-order themes related to platform governance, strategic dependence, and marketing autonomy. Finally, aggregate dimensions were constructed to explain broader patterns emerging

from SME experiences within digital marketplace ecosystems. The iterative coding process enabled deeper interpretation of how SMEs negotiate autonomy under platform-controlled environments.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied several qualitative validation strategies, including triangulation, member checking, and audit trail documentation (Stahl & King, 2020). Interview findings were compared with platform-related documents to improve analytical credibility, while selected participants reviewed summarized interpretations to confirm accuracy. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and participated voluntarily. Participant identities and business information were anonymized to maintain confidentiality and minimize potential commercial risks.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that platform governance mechanisms significantly shape SME marketing behavior, strategic flexibility, and decision-making processes within digital marketplace ecosystems. Although digital marketplaces provide SMEs with expanded market access and transactional opportunities, the findings indicate that platform governance simultaneously creates forms of strategic dependence that constrain marketing autonomy. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) algorithmic visibility shapes marketing decisions, (2) promotional dependence reduces strategic flexibility, (3) platform governance constrains customer relationship ownership, and (4) SMEs develop adaptive autonomy strategies.

### **Algorithmic Visibility Shapes Marketing Decisions**

One of the most dominant findings concerns the central role of platform algorithms in determining product visibility and transactional opportunities. Participants consistently reported that marketplace algorithms strongly influence sales performance, customer traffic, and promotional outcomes. Consequently, SMEs frequently adjust marketing strategies according to perceived algorithmic preferences rather than purely customer-oriented considerations.

Several participants explained that product rankings, recommendation visibility, and search exposure fluctuate unpredictably depending on platform-controlled metrics such as advertising participation, response speed, promotional intensity, and sales consistency. As one participant stated:

“If we stop joining platform campaigns or reduce ads, our products suddenly become difficult to find. Sales immediately decline even though the products and prices remain the same.”

This finding indicates that algorithmic visibility functions as an indirect governance mechanism shaping seller behavior within digital marketplaces. SMEs become increasingly motivated to align marketing activities with platform-defined performance indicators in order to maintain transactional visibility. Such conditions create a form of algorithmic dependence in which business sustainability becomes strongly tied to opaque platform systems.

This finding aligns with recent studies arguing that algorithmic governance increasingly regulates organizational behavior within platform ecosystems through automated visibility allocation and performance-based ranking systems (Kellogg et al., 2020). Rather than functioning as neutral technological infrastructures, algorithms operate as governance instruments that discipline seller behavior and influence strategic marketing decisions. The findings further support arguments from platform governance literature suggesting that digital platforms exercise substantial control over market participation through computational coordination mechanisms (Gawer, 2021).

From a resource dependence perspective, SMEs become structurally dependent on platform-controlled digital traffic and consumer exposure. Since platforms control access to critical resources such as visibility and customer reach, SMEs experience reduced bargaining power and increased pressure to comply with algorithmically preferred behaviors. Consequently, marketing autonomy becomes conditional upon platform compatibility rather than fully independent strategic decision-making.

### **Promotional Dependence Reduces Strategic Flexibility**

The findings further reveal that SMEs experience increasing dependence on paid promotional features and platform-sponsored campaigns to sustain competitiveness within digital marketplaces. Participants reported that marketplace ecosystems increasingly prioritize sellers participating in paid advertisements, flash sales, free shipping campaigns, and platform-organized promotional events.

Several informants emphasized that participation in these promotional systems has gradually shifted from optional marketing support into a competitive necessity. One participant explained:

“At first, ads were only additional support. Now it feels impossible to survive without ads because organic visibility keeps decreasing.”

Another participant noted:

“We often follow platform discounts even when profits become very small because if we do not join, traffic immediately drops.”

These findings demonstrate that platform governance mechanisms indirectly shape SME pricing strategies, promotional intensity, and profitability structures. SMEs frequently sacrifice pricing flexibility and marketing independence in order to maintain algorithmic exposure and transactional visibility within highly competitive platform ecosystems.

The findings support previous research indicating that platform ecosystems create structural incentives encouraging seller conformity through advertising systems and platform-controlled promotional infrastructures (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). Platform governance thus extends beyond operational coordination and increasingly influences strategic business decisions, including pricing, promotion, and campaign management.

This condition also reflects broader concerns regarding digital dependency within platform economies. As SMEs become increasingly reliant on platform-generated traffic, they may lose the ability to independently control marketing priorities and long-term brand positioning. Recent studies similarly suggest that digital marketplaces often reinforce asymmetric relationships where platforms capture increasing governance power while sellers absorb competitive pressure and operational uncertainty.

### **Platform Governance Constrains Customer Relationship Ownership**

Another important finding concerns the limited control SMEs possess over customer relationships within digital marketplace ecosystems. Participants frequently reported difficulties in building direct and sustainable customer connections because marketplaces mediate most communication processes and restrict access to customer data.

Several participants explained that although platforms facilitate transactions, they simultaneously prevent SMEs from fully controlling customer engagement processes outside the marketplace ecosystem. One participant stated:

“Customers remember the marketplace, not our brand. Even loyal buyers usually return through the platform instead of contacting us directly.”

Another informant added:

“We cannot freely access customer information, so it is difficult to build long-term relationships independently.”

These findings suggest that platform governance restructures customer ownership dynamics by positioning platforms as the primary intermediaries controlling transactional interactions and digital engagement processes. SMEs become dependent on platform infrastructures not only for visibility but also for customer retention and repeat transactions.

This finding is consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing that digital platforms increasingly centralize control over ecosystem interactions, data access, and customer relationships. Platform-centered ecosystems often reduce sellers’ ability to independently manage consumer relationships, thereby weakening long-term branding autonomy and relational marketing capacity.

From a theoretical standpoint, this condition reinforces the argument that platforms function as governance actors rather than passive intermediaries. Through data control and communication regulation, platforms shape the structure of market relationships while simultaneously increasing seller dependence on platform ecosystems.

### **SMEs Develop Adaptive Autonomy Strategies**

Despite experiencing increasing governance pressure, SMEs were not entirely passive actors within digital marketplace ecosystems. The findings reveal that many SMEs actively develop adaptive strategies to maintain partial autonomy and reduce excessive platform dependence.

Several participants described efforts to diversify sales channels through social media platforms, independent websites, offline networks, and multiple marketplaces. Some SMEs also attempted to strengthen external branding strategies to encourage repeat purchases outside platform ecosystems. One participant explained:

“We use the marketplace to gain customers, but we try to direct them to our social media so they recognize our own brand.”

Another participant stated:

“Now we sell on several platforms simultaneously because depending on only one marketplace is too risky.”

These adaptive practices indicate that SME autonomy within platform ecosystems is continuously negotiated rather than entirely eliminated. SMEs attempt to balance platform participation with independent branding and multichannel marketing strategies in order to reduce vulnerability to algorithmic uncertainty and governance changes.

The findings support recent arguments suggesting that platform-dependent firms often develop resistance and adaptation mechanisms to cope with governance asymmetries within digital ecosystems (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). Rather than fully complying with platform control structures, SMEs strategically navigate marketplace rules while seeking opportunities to preserve strategic flexibility and business sustainability.

This study conceptualizes these adaptive behaviors as negotiated marketing autonomy, referring to SMEs’ ongoing efforts to maintain strategic agency within structurally dependent platform environments. Negotiated autonomy reflects a dynamic condition in which SMEs continuously adapt, resist, and recalibrate marketing strategies under platform governance constraints.

## **Discussion**

The findings contribute to the growing literature on platform governance by demonstrating that digital marketplaces do not merely facilitate commercial exchange but actively shape organizational behavior and strategic marketing practices among SMEs. Existing studies often frame digital platforms as enabling infrastructures that enhance accessibility and efficiency. However, this study reveals that platform governance simultaneously generates structural dependence through algorithmic visibility systems, promotional incentives, and customer access control mechanisms.

The study extends platform governance literature by emphasizing the role of algorithmic systems as instruments of economic coordination and behavioral regulation within digital marketplace ecosystems. Algorithms function not only as technical tools but also as governance structures capable of influencing strategic business decisions, competitive positioning, and seller autonomy. This finding reinforces emerging perspectives suggesting that algorithmic governance increasingly transforms market relationships and organizational control within platform economies (Kellogg et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the study enriches resource dependence arguments by illustrating how digital platforms control critical strategic resources, including customer access, transactional visibility, and promotional infrastructure. SMEs operating within marketplace ecosystems experience asymmetrical dependency relationships because platforms possess disproportionate authority over visibility allocation and market participation conditions.

Most importantly, this study introduces the concept of negotiated marketing autonomy to explain how SMEs attempt to preserve strategic flexibility within structurally dependent platform environments. Rather than viewing autonomy as either fully present or absent, the findings suggest that autonomy becomes continuously negotiated under conditions of algorithmic governance and digital dependence. This concept contributes a more nuanced understanding of SME agency within contemporary platform economies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how platform governance mechanisms shape SME marketing autonomy within digital marketplace ecosystems. The findings demonstrate that digital marketplaces function not only as commercial intermediaries but also as governance actors that influence seller behavior through algorithmic visibility systems, promotional infrastructures, and customer access control mechanisms. Although platforms provide SMEs with important opportunities for market expansion and digital commercialization, they simultaneously create structural dependencies that may constrain strategic flexibility and marketing autonomy.

The study identified four major findings. First, algorithmic visibility systems significantly shape SME marketing decisions and competitive behavior within digital marketplaces. Second, increasing dependence on paid promotions and platform campaigns reduces SMEs' strategic flexibility, particularly regarding pricing and promotional strategies. Third, platform governance limits SMEs' control over customer relationships and long-term branding activities. Fourth, SMEs actively develop adaptive strategies, including multichannel selling and external branding efforts, to negotiate platform dependence and maintain partial autonomy.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the platform governance and digital marketplace literature by introducing the concept of negotiated marketing autonomy, which explains how SMEs continuously adapt and recalibrate strategic behavior under platform-controlled environments. The findings further extend

## **PLATFORM GOVERNANCE AND SME MARKETING AUTONOMY: EVIDENCE FROM THE DIGITAL MARKETPLACE**

Dwiyanti & Haruna, 2026

resource dependence perspectives by demonstrating how digital platforms control critical intangible resources such as visibility, customer access, and digital legitimacy within contemporary platform economies.

Practically, the findings suggest that SMEs should reduce excessive dependence on single-platform ecosystems by strengthening multichannel marketing strategies, independent branding, and customer relationship capabilities outside marketplace infrastructures. The study also highlights the importance of more transparent and balanced governance practices within digital marketplaces to support sustainable SME participation in the digital economy.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research focuses primarily on SMEs operating within Indonesian digital marketplace ecosystems and employs a qualitative approach with a limited number of participants. Future research may expand the geographical scope, incorporate comparative cross-country analysis, or apply quantitative approaches to examine the long-term relationship between platform governance, digital dependency, and SME performance outcomes.

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