



Employing Marketing Graduates in MSMEs for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: A Dual Perspectives from MSMEs and Marketing Graduates in North Sri Lanka

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Employing Marketing Graduates in MSMEs for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: A Dual Perspectives from MSMEs and Marketing Graduates in North Sri Lanka

This paper examines the integration of marketing graduates in MSMEs in Sri Lanka, focusing on their contribution to the achievement of SDGs. The study uses a qualitative methodology, collecting data from 30 MSMEs owners and 40 marketing graduates from Northern University. Results show that marketing graduates are increasingly being incorporated into MSMEs, making substantial contributions to specific SDGs. However, limited resources and insufficient skills persist. The study provides insights on how to maximize the performance of marketing graduates and align MSMEs operations with SDGs. Policymakers, academic institutions, and MSMEs managers can better utilize the potential of marketing graduates for sustainable business practices in Sri Lanka. Customized training programs, such as case studies, hands-on seminars, and SDG-related projects, can be developed. Collaboration between universities and MSMEs is also suggested to develop internship programs, research



projects, and consulting opportunities that meet both academic learning and real-world business demands.

Keywords: *Deployment Practices, Marketing Graduates, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Sri Lanka*

INTRODUCTION

The necessity for creative strategies to promote sustainable economic growth has been highlighted by the growing emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Eisenmenger *et al.*, 2020). SMEs are the backbone of the world economy since they directly affect employment creation, income distribution, and economic growth (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Particularly in developing nations, Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) are essential to promoting local economies and accomplishing these objectives (Himachalam Dasaraju *et al.*, 2024).

MSMEs, or micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, are essential to Sri Lanka's economic development, job creation, and innovation culture. They have a major GDP contribution and are necessary for local industry growth, poverty alleviation, and regional development. Encouraging MSMEs can propel the nation's resilient and sustained economic growth (Herath and Ramanayake, 2023).

MSMEs incorporate sustainable practices into their business operations, MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises) are crucial in furthering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Williams and Murphy, 2023). They promote local economies by generating jobs, encourage innovation through environmentally friendly goods and services, and lessen their negative effects on the environment by implementing energyefficient procedures (Yu *et al.*, 2023). Social justice and economic inclusion are enhanced by MSMEs through their support of community projects and promotion of fair labour standards (Kumar, 2023). They solve particular sustainability issues and match their business models with global SDGs like clean water, affordable electricity, and responsible consumption because of their adaptability and strong connections to local markets. Encouraging MSMEs increases their ability to successfully advance these objectives (Saluja, 2023).

It has been demonstrated that businesses that incorporate sustainability into their marketing campaigns receive higher levels of appreciation than those that do not. Furthermore, the sustainability framework's actions taken by organizations across various sectors necessitate the development of a comprehensive and lucid scheme that unifies and clarifies the various types of these actions and their contribution to the SDGs (Gardoqui *et al.*, 2024). There is a lot of room for marketing to positively influence sustainable development and the SDGs. While researchers in the field of marketing have started to emphasize this potential to support sustainability (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2022). With their modern knowledge and abilities, marketing graduates can help MSMEs overcome the difficulties they have in



reaching their target consumers, streamlining their business processes, and encouraging sustainable practices(Hübscher et al., 2024a).

In the ever-changing world of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), marketing graduates play an increasingly important role as these Enterprises work to align their operations with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The incorporation of marketing graduates into MSMEs in North Sri Lanka, where they play a crucial role in regional economic growth, offers a chance to improve their operations and support wider sustainability goals.

The integration process between marketing graduates and MSME owners can enhance organizational performance and promote sustainable development, despite potential obstacles. Understanding the multiple viewpoints of MSME owners and marketing graduates in the context of North Sri Lanka is severely lacking, despite the fact that marketing is becoming an increasingly important factor in driving MSME success. The inability to build practical plans for integrating recent graduates in marketing into MSMEs and optimizing their contributions to sustainable development is hampered by this lack of understanding.

On the other hand, little empirical data is available regarding the perceptions and experiences of MSME owners and marketing graduates about this integration, especially in the context of North Sri Lanka. Leveraging the full potential of marketing graduates for MSME success and sustainable growth requires an understanding of various viewpoints.

Although earlier studies (Hübscher *et al.*, 2024a) have examined the function of marketing graduates in a variety of organizational contexts, few empirical studies concentrate particularly on MSMEs in North Sri Lanka (Sathana et al., 2021; Sayanthan & Sarathpapu, 2021; Shanmuganathan & Shivany, 2021). To find out how marketing graduates may best support MSME performance and sustainability, a focused examination is required, given the region's distinct socio-economic and cultural background.

Previous research frequently looks at the function of marketing graduates from a solitary viewpoint, either the graduates' own or the employers' (Elhajjar, 2024). Studies that combine and contrast the perspectives of marketing graduates and MSME owners are scarce, which is important for developing a thorough grasp of the integration process and its effects.

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises are crucial for fostering economic expansion, job creation, and sustainable advancement, especially in developing areas such as North Sri Lanka(Omokhoa et al., 2025). Nevertheless, numerous MSMEs encounter considerable obstacles in aligning their operations with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, frequently due to inadequate technical skills, human capital, and marketing expertise(Suprihanti et al., 2025).

Concurrently, the number of marketing graduates entering the labor market with capabilities in digital skills, sustainability knowledge, and innovative strategies is increasing. Despite the possible synergistic relationship between these cohorts, the degree to which marketing



graduates are integrated into MSMEs and how their input facilitates the accomplishment of the SDGs remains under-explored(Iwara, 2025).

Current scholarly works indicate a dearth of investigation into the mutual viewpoints of MSMEs and marketing graduates concerning their professional collaboration. While MSMEs may foresee certain advantages from employing graduates, they often face structural and monetary obstacles that hinder recruitment and retention.(Mwaanga & Chrine, 2024) Conversely, marketing graduates, although potentially satisfied by engaging in impactful sustainability projects, may face difficulties arising from limited resources, insufficient mentorship possibilities, or disparities between their anticipations and actual work duties. Despite the acknowledged importance of entrepreneurial marketing in fostering organizational development and competitive advantage, further empirical research is needed to understand its specific impact on corporate sustainability within SMEs (Al-Shaikh & Hanaysha, 2022). This study seeks to address this gap by thoroughly investigating the perceptions of both MSMEs and marketing graduates concerning the integration of sustainability practices and the attainment of SDGs.

Although the significance of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is increasingly acknowledged, current literature predominantly concentrates on the broader challenges encountered by MSMEs in implementing sustainability practices, such as limited resources, insufficient awareness, and policy restrictions(Durrani et al., 2024). Similarly, distinct studies have investigated the employability of marketing graduates and their skill sets regarding workforce readiness and digital marketing capabilities. However, there is a noticeable absence of integrated research that specifically examines the intersection between employing marketing graduates and their subsequent contributions to MSMEs' sustainability initiatives, particularly within the context of developing countries(Hübscher et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence is notably scarce regarding the mutual viewpoints of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises and marketing graduates concerning their synergistic roles in advancing Sustainable Development Goal-related projects. (Hübscher et al., 2023). Prevailing research inadequately addresses the practical application of marketing graduates' academic insights and digital proficiencies in resolving tangible sustainability issues confronting MSMEs. Furthermore, the distinctive socio-economic and geographical characteristics of North Sri Lanka, a developing region recovering from conflict, have received insufficient scholarly attention, particularly in the context of youth employment and sustainable enterprise growth.(Navarathne, 2023).

This research addresses a notable gap by offering a detailed examination of the contributions of marketing graduates to the Sustainable Development Goals within Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises. It adopts a localized approach focusing on North Sri Lanka and integrates the perspectives of both employers and graduates. (Tolossa et al., 2024). Understanding their expectations, experiences, and challenges is crucial for informing



policymakers, educators, and business leaders on how to cultivate more productive collaborations for sustainable development.

This research endeavours to bridge this lacuna by scrutinizing the experiences, expectations, and challenges encountered by both MSMEs and marketing graduates in North Sri Lanka. It examines the contributions of marketing graduates to the sustainability objectives of MSMEs, pinpointing the impediments and prospects that impact the efficacy of this collaborative effort. Comprehending these dynamics is indispensable for formulating strategies aimed at augmenting the role of nascent marketing professionals in propelling the SDGs via MSMEs.

There is a significant study gap in understanding how these graduates are now deployed and how their responsibilities impact both organizational outcomes and SDG goals, despite the increased interest in using marketing graduates for MSME success and sustainable development. Studies that have already been done frequently concentrate on marketing strategies or the overall function of education in business development, but they rarely go in-depth into the particular dynamics of marketing graduates in the context of MSMEs. Furthermore, little is known about the viewpoints of employers and workers on the use of recent graduates in marketing and how these viewpoints affect the efficiency of these contributions to MSMEs.

By using a phenomenological qualitative approach to investigate the deployment of marketing graduates inside MSMEs in Sri Lanka, this study seeks to close this gap. The research aims to clarify how marketing graduates are incorporated into these MSMEs, their impact on reaching SDGs, and the opportunities and challenges that come with their roles by looking at the perspectives of both MSMEs and marketing graduates. In addition to presenting practical suggestions for improving the deployment of marketing graduates in MSMEs and coordinating their contributions with more general development objectives, the findings give a nuanced knowledge of the interaction between marketing expertise and sustainable business practices.

Research objectives

1. Explore how employing marketing graduates helps MSMEs in their efforts to meet the SDGs.
2. Identify expectations, experiences, and difficulties MSMEs have when employing recent graduates in marketing.
3. Understand the feedback from marketing graduates about their experiences, job satisfaction, and perceived impact on the SDGs.

Literature Review

MSME sector

It is crucial to acknowledge that micro, small, and medium enterprises play a vital role in the global economic landscape (David *et al.*, 2020) . MSMEs are the core of most enterprises,



accounting for two-thirds of employment and contributing over 50% of GDP in many countries. They provide significant employment, output, and contribute to a greater proportion of output in most countries worldwide (central bank, 2020).

These enterprises significantly contribute to job creation, revenue generation, innovation, and economic growth, thereby reducing poverty and promoting economic empowerment. Their growth has led to increased domestic and international transactions and trade values (Herr *et al.*, 2021) . Furthermore, MSMEs contribute to economic diversity, welfare, and income distribution, fostering social stability and economic diversity. They are essential contributors to various economic aspects (Amril and Sari, 2019) . It is important to note that MSMEs are not universally defined, and their definition varies across different countries based on their development levels (Kaserwa, 2022) . Micro, small, and medium enterprises are categorized based on factors such as employee count, annual revenue, and asset value in plant and machinery (Shanmuganathan and Shivany, 2021).

SMEs and sustainable development

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are crucial for achieving sustainable development goals such as poverty reduction, job creation, sustainable consumption and production, and climate action. Several studies have highlighted the significant role of SMEs in poverty reduction, job generation, and economic growth in various regions. Additionally, businesses that integrate sustainable development goals into their strategic plans are more likely to succeed (Kovalov, 2024)

Abisuga-Oyekunle *et al.*, (2020) highlighted the significant role of SMEs in reducing poverty and generating employment in African nations. Lopes de Sousa Jabbour *et al.*, (2020) highlighted the significant role of SMEs in generating employment, income distribution, and expanding Asian exports. Inegbedion *et al.*, (2024) explored the link between the competitiveness of SMEs and their employment generation role.

Jasińska-Biliczak, (2023) found that businesses with sustainable development principles and goals increased their survival likelihood. Businesses that incorporate sustainable development principles and goals into their strategic plans have a higher likelihood of survival (Horobchenko & Voronenko, 2019)

The study examined the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by SMEs in Germany and Poland, revealing that the primary obstacle to achieving these goals is the lack of financial resources (Sonntag *et al.*, 2022). Gomes & Pinho, (2023) study highlights the significant role of European SMEs in achieving SDG 12 through carbon neutrality, revealing that their implementation of resource-efficient practices positively impacts their adoption of macro-level decarbonization measures. The adoption of micro-level practices is influenced by internal business investments, external funding sources, and regulatory/administrative obligations, with positive impacts (Inegbedion *et al.*, 2024).



Sustainability and sustainable development

Sustainability is a concept that aims to strike a balance between economic, social, and environmental dimensions (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2021) . Sustainability is the attainment of a balance between present needs and future generations' ability to meet their own needs, while sustainable development aims to achieve this balance without limiting future generations' ability to meet their own needs (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2018).

Sustainability and sustainable development have gained prominence in politics, society, and science in recent decades, particularly due to climate predictions and the apparent consequences of climate change (Fonseca *et al.*, 2020) . The United Nations established the 2030 Agenda in 2015, which consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. These goals represent global stakeholder needs and serve as a measure of progress towards sustainability (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2018).

Education for sustainable development

Education is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG 4 focusing on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD teaches knowledge, skills, and abilities to enable responsible decision-making and a sustainable environment, economic sustainability, and a just society (Giangrande *et al.*, 2019).

SDG 4 is interconnected with other 2030 Agenda goals as education equips change agents to develop and implement solutions to address the underlying issues (Hübscher *et al.*, 2024b). Education plays a crucial role in creating effective knowledge-based infrastructures, which can help address many of the problems that require immediate attention (Voola *et al.*, 2022).

The role of marketing in sustainable development

The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize the importance of learners acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, leading to the emphasis on education for sustainable development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2013) .. ESD empowers individuals to change their thinking and work towards a sustainable future, promoting sustainability literacy in formal and non-formal education and training It encourages changes in knowledge, skills, values, and attributes to create a more sustainable and just society (UNESCO., 2020). ESD is desirable at all levels of education and training, aiming to create a more sustainable and just society (UNESCO, 2013).

Sustainability marketing education is a crucial aspect of ESD, involving teaching, training, and learning about sustainability marketing practices of firms and consumer reactions (Rusinko, 2010) . It integrates environmental, social, and economic sustainability into marketing curricula, focusing on conservation, reuse, equity, diversity, social justice, and poverty reduction. This approach helps firms adapt to the expectations of stakeholders and promotes sustainable development (Agu *et al.*, 2022a)



Sustainable marketing is a contemporary approach that focuses on building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers and the social and natural environment, promoting an environmentally enlightened approach to marketing (Kumar *et al.*, 2013)

(Kemper and Ballantine, 2019) analysis of sustainability marketing articles identifies three conceptualizations: auxiliary sustainability marketing, reformative sustainability marketing, and transformative sustainability marketing. The latter focuses on producing sustainable products, promoting sustainable lifestyles and behavioral changes, and requiring transformation of institutions and norms. Sustainability marketing education must address these dimensions for effective implementation (Agu *et al.*, 2022b).

Sustainability marketing education aims to transform society by reorienting marketing education and helping students develop knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors that drive sustainable development, as traditionally, marketing and sustainability are incompatible, with marketing focused on selling more and sustainability on consuming less (UNESCO., 2020) . Efforts have been made to create frameworks for sustainability education, but marketing should be given more attention in promoting conscious and sustainable behavior in society.

The study indicates that despite positive attitudes towards eco-friendly products and services, a small percentage of consumers actually follow through with their purchases (Agu *et al.*, 2022b) . Consumption is closely linked to sustainability, as every decision affects the environment and future generations. Sustainability marketing education is crucial for changing society's trajectory (Trudel, 2019) . However, despite marketing firms adopting sustainable practices, attention to sustainability issues in marketing curricula is limited (Höse *et al.*, 2022) . The cumulative effect of individual consumption is devastating, making sustainability education essential for promoting sustainable business practices (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2015).

Marketing educators can help firms by developing curricula that equip graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to sustainable marketing efforts (Lam and Cook, 2017). However, Nigeria's undergraduate marketing curricula are not fully developed, with sustainability topics like environmentalism, green marketing, corporate social responsibility, cause marketing, and societal marketing being taught as adjuncts. Consequently, courses devoted solely to sustainable business strategy are rare (Agu *et al.*, 2022b).

Marketing graduates' views of MSMEs.

Graduates in various disciplines are often unaware of the opportunities in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), despite the economic benefits of higher education (Tereshchenko *et al.*, 2024). They are not convinced that SMEs can meet their needs in areas like pay, training, and career opportunities, and expect high stress levels. This has led to a reluctance to seek employment within SMEs. Despite the economic benefits, these statistics do not differentiate between business size and sector, making it difficult to understand the situation for marketing graduates working in SMEs (Cheng *et al.*, 2016; Martin and Chapman, 2006a; Schlee and Karns, 2017; Stephens *et al.*, 2010)



MSMEs' view of universities and graduates

Johnson et al., (1993) posit that a schism exists between the "business world" and the "academic world," a perspective that resonates with many small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) managers. The distinct cultures, timelines, priorities, and objectives of these environments necessitate bridging this gap to enhance the employment of marketing graduates in SMEs. Academics have faced censure for producing theoretically astute graduates lacking practical experience and for overlooking the SME sector. Martin & Chapman, (2006b) contends that small businesses embody a different paradigm from the "classical marketing approach," necessitating an alternative framework for engaging with SMEs.

SMEs often abstain from hiring graduates due to perceived threats to existing employees, managerial apprehensions, issues pertaining to mobility, retention, and recruitment challenges. Nevertheless, the propensity of owner-managers with academic or professional qualifications to recruit graduates is notably heightened. This inclination is applicable across SMEs. Distinct from larger organizations, SMEs exhibit decision-making traits more susceptible to influence by operational concerns. When contemplating the employment of a marketing graduate, the decision is equally likely to be predicated on financial liquidity or cost constraints as it is on the potential benefits that new skills could bring to the enterprise (Martin & Chapman, 2006a; Tereshchenko et al., 2024).

Research Methodology

Phenomenology aims to clarify the meanings of human experience and to understand the intricacy and importance of human behaviour. Phenomenological study in the business sector enables a comprehensive analysis of managers' experiences as they decide and act on behalf of their organizations. As a result, phenomenology can improve managers' and staff members' comprehension of the relationships and management practices within their organizations ((Odongo and Ntara, 2024). With this view to understand the views employer and employee perspective in a business setting this study concentrated on a Phenomenological approach to investigating the lived experiences and perspectives of both MSME owners and marketing graduates. It seeks to understand how they interpret the function and significance of marketing graduates and to extract the core of their experiences.

40 Marketing graduates graduated from a university located in the northern part of Sri Lanka, and the 30 MSMEs operating in the same place were chosen. Snowball sampling was used to select the participants to identify the marketing graduates working in MSMEs. 14 Focus group discussions and 10 in-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data from the MSME and marketing graduates selected through snowball sampling methods in five districts (Jaffna, Killinochchi, Mullaithivu, Vavuniya, and Mannar) of Sri Lanka.

focus group discussions and interviews were meticulously recorded and transcribed, with open coding employed to identify key phrases and patterns in participants' experiences and perceptions of marketing graduates' roles. The study analyzed marketing graduates' experiences in MSMEs by developing themes from coded data, organizing them coherently



and using bracketing to eliminate biases and preconceptions. The study aimed to understand the fundamental nature of participants' experiences related to their roles as marketing graduates by distilling themes. It explores the perceptions of MSME owners and marketing graduates in Sri Lanka, focusing on contextual factors affecting their experiences in five districts. The analysis's validity and credibility were ensured through member checking and data triangulation, which involved comparing findings from different focus groups to confirm consistency and reliability.

In this study, participants engaged in a structured briefing session to familiarize themselves with the Sustainable Development Goals before the interviews/focus groups. During this session, the SDGs were presented in a general context, with a specific emphasis on key goals aligned with business sustainability. Following the briefing, participants were encouraged to reflect on how their business practices related to SDGs, such as responsible consumption and production or climate action. While participants may not have been able to recite all 17 SDGs from memory, they demonstrated a broader understanding of the objectives, and we provided relevant context during the interviews to facilitate their connections. In the revised manuscript, we have clarified this process and included additional details on the introduction of the SDGs to ensure transparency.

A detailed table outlining the demographic characteristics of the study participants has been provided to enhance the transparency and rigour of the research. This includes information such as the participant's gender, age, income level, years of experience, and place of residence. Furthermore, the study methodology section describes the focus group sessions, including the duration of each discussion, the group sizes, and the seed questions that guided the dialogue.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants (Marketing Graduates)

Attributes	Details	Count
Total Participants		40
Gender	Male	20
	Female	20
Age Range	24-30 years	19
	31-36 years	12
	37-45 years	9
District	Mannar	9
	Mullaithivu	8
	Jaffna	8
	Kilinochchi	7
	Vavuniya	8



Income Level (LKR) Below 65,000	4
65,000 - 80,000	10
81,000 - 150,000	8
151,000 - 170,000	10
Above 170,000	8

A detailed table outlining the characteristics of the 30 participating firms has been provided. This table includes information on the size, industry, and years in operation of the sampled MSMEs. Furthermore, the researchers clarify that these firms were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of MSMEs across various sectors in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka.

Table 2: Demographic profiles of MSMEs

Attribute	Details	Count	Total Firms	30 Firm Size (Micro/Small/Med Micro (1-10 employees) / Large)
District	Small (11-25 employees)	8		
	Medium (26-50 employees)	8		
	Large (Above 50 employees)	4		
	Mullaitivu	6		
	Mannar	7		
	Kilinochchi	5		
	Vavuniya	6		
	Jaffna	6		
Industry	Primary Sector	10		
	Secondary Sector	10		
	Tertiary Sector	10		

The researchers utilized a purposive sampling approach to select 30 participating MSMEs based on specific criteria, including industry sector, demonstrated willingness to adopt sustainability practices, and firm size. Following the identification of the sample firms, individual participants - comprising either marketing graduates or firm representatives - were approached, resulting in a total of up to 40 informants. To gather insights on the challenges these MSMEs face in hiring marketing graduates, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants from each firm, such as business owners and HR managers.

To enhance the rigor and transparency of the data analysis, the researchers leveraged NVivo, a qualitative data management tool, enabling a more systematic approach. NVivo was employed to code and categorize the interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and opened survey responses. This facilitated the identification of key themes and patterns related to the challenges MSMEs face in hiring marketing graduates, as well as their



perspectives on the impact of marketing graduates on business sustainability. NVivo's features, such as coding queries, data visualization, and cross-tabulation, helped to organize the data efficiently, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of both individual and group-level insights. Additionally, the use of NVivo supported a more rigorous validation of the findings by promoting consistency and mitigating researcher bias during the analysis process.

Findings and discussion

The analysis revealed themes and sub-themes, highlighting the roles of marketing graduates in MSMEs and their implications for management practices and organizational relationships, based on focus group discussions.

MSMEs' responses

MSMEs responded that Through targeted digital marketing strategies and creative campaigns, marketing graduates assist MSMEs in reaching a wider audience and promoting economic growth. Marketing graduates assist MSMEs in expanding operations and boosting profitability by developing strong business plans and strategies, which promote general economic growth. Graduates support MSMEs in creating and promoting environmentally sustainable goods and services, encouraging consumers to make responsible purchases. In line with the objectives of responsible consumption, they offer guidance on effective resource management and waste reduction in marketing strategies.

Marketing graduates assist MSMEs in developing and disseminating communications about their sustainable practices and climate action programs, thereby increasing public awareness and encouraging climate-positive behaviour. They put into practice tactics that draw attention to MSMEs' initiatives to lower carbon footprints and promote climate action.

MSMEs mentioned that Graduates in marketing assist in planning and implementing campaigns that increase public awareness of clean water and sanitation projects, to gain financing and support for these causes. They help MSMEs who provide clean water and sanitation-related goods and services connect with their target market more successfully. MSMEs said that marketing graduates work to reduce inequality by supporting inclusive marketing strategies that foster diversity and target marginalized communities. They support MSMEs in cultivating inclusive business practices and lowering social inequality by helping them forge strong bonds with a variety of stakeholders. They help to progress SDG-related projects and efforts by facilitating partnerships and collaborations with other companies, organizations, and stakeholders. They contribute to increased transparency and stakeholder involvement by supporting MSMEs in communicating their joint ventures and efforts to achieve the SDGs. Graduates assist MSMEs in creating innovative goods that meet industry sustainability requirements and sustainable industrial processes. They help MSMEs become recognized as pioneers in environmentally friendly business operations by using powerful branding and communication techniques. How marketing graduates support MSMEs in achieving SDGs through various activities is shown in Table 3.



“For my enterprise, hiring a recent graduate in marketing has changed everything. They've been invaluable in helping us better understand and connect with our target market, which is essential to our mission of promoting locallymade goods and sustainable practices. Their knowledge is a wonderful fit for our mission to promote SDG 12: responsible production and consumption.”

"We've been able to create more compelling advertisements that highlight our dedication to environmental sustainability since adding a marketing graduate to our team. This has improved our brand's visibility and enabled us to support SDG 13's climate action.

"We've learned about cutting-edge techniques for assessing and disclosing our social effect thanks to our marketing graduate. This has strengthened our reputation as a responsible company and improved our responsibility and openness, in line with SDG 16.

MSMEs anticipate that recently graduated marketing students will contribute new, creative ideas that will revitalize their marketing plans. They appreciate the fresh styles and digital proficiencies that recent grads frequently possess. Graduates are expected to measure and enhance marketing performance by using analytical tools and providing data-driven insights.

MSMEs seek graduates who can pick up on industry knowledge and swiftly adjust to their unique business environment to offer pertinent marketing solutions. MSMEs gain from the fresh viewpoints and inventive methods that new graduates provide, which results in imaginative marketing plans. MSMEs mentor and develop young talent by working with recent graduates, which creates a good and growth-oriented work atmosphere.

"We were hoping the graduate would introduce fresh, original marketing ideas that we had not previously thought of. Their familiarity with digital tools and trends was a significant asset."

"We anticipated that the graduate would inform our marketing choices with data analytics. Their proficiency in data interpretation and campaign optimization has been indispensable."

"We were looking for someone who could quickly understand our business requirements and modify their approach accordingly. They needed to be able to adapt and learn."

Challenges in Employing Graduates in MSMEs

MSMEs responded that Marketing Graduates who are lured to well-known brands find it more difficult to get hired by MSMEs since they frequently lack the prestige and brand awareness of larger businesses. Marketing Graduates find MSMEs less appealing because they believe larger companies provide more vibrant and well-resourced work environments. MSMEs perceived that confront fierce competition from larger enterprises that provide more



lucrative roles and benefits in a competitive labour market. Larger companies with greater resources might be looking for graduates with specific marketing abilities to offer competitive packages. Marketing Graduates looking for chances to improve their abilities may find that MSMEs have fewer resources available for training and professional development.

More recently graduated individuals frequently desire career assistance and growth from formal mentoring programs, which smaller firms may not offer. MSMEs don't have specialized HR departments or recruiters on staff, which could result in hiring procedures that are less efficient and make it harder to draw in qualified applicants. A lack of resources also makes it difficult to offer new hires thorough onboarding and integration programs.

Recent graduates in marketing have preconceived notions about the kinds of jobs, duties, and career paths that aren't compatible with what MSMEs can provide. Recent graduates are looking for flexible work schedules and a healthy work-life balance, which some MSMEs may find difficult to offer. MSMEs in less affluent or urban areas may find it challenging to draw in graduates who would rather live and work in more desirable areas. The talent pool accessible to MSMEs may be impacted by graduates' reluctance to move for jobs in smaller towns or less developed areas.

"We often struggle to offer competitive salaries and benefits, which can deter talented marketing graduates who are attracted to higher-paying positions in larger corporations."

"Recent graduates may be hesitant to join MSMEs if they perceive limited opportunities for career advancement and professional growth compared to larger firms."

"The lack of brand recognition and prestige associated with MSMEs can make it difficult to attract marketing graduates who are drawn to well-known companies."

"The costs associated with recruitment processes, including job postings and interviews, can be a significant burden for MSMEs with limited budgets."

"it is difficult for us to offer the comprehensive training and development opportunities that recent graduates in marketing desire, the lack of training from us may be a huge gap they have for their career development."

Graduates' views

Graduates responded that MSMEs make good use of their capabilities, enhancing marketing initiatives and fostering business expansion in achieving SDGs. They run into restrictions because of the MSMEs' current infrastructure or because it doesn't correspond with their creative ideas. They could run into issues if they don't back them or if the MSME is unwilling to accept new strategic methods. Recent graduates in marketing frequently take great pride in their contribution to the introduction of sustainable practices and goods, perceiving it as a



major influence. They further said budget restrictions or a lack of support from all stakeholders might make it difficult to implement creative ideas.

Graduates said that their work raises customer knowledge of sustainability concerns and encourages greater consumer engagement. They could have trouble gauging the impact of their campaigns or deal with a lack of funding for successful engagement campaigns. Graduates like the chance to create communications that showcase the company's commitment to the SDGs, improving the company's reputation.

Being a part of an MSME that actively incorporates sustainability into its main goals makes me happy. Through the application of my marketing expertise, I have assisted the enterprise in more effectively communicating its SDG-related objectives and accomplishments, resulting in increased participation and awareness."

"Working with this MSME has allowed me to apply my experience in creating advertisements that highlight our dedication to social responsibility while simultaneously promoting our products. Seeing how our marketing initiatives contribute to SDG 8: decent work and economic growth: is tremendously fulfilling."

"I've been able to use innovative marketing strategies in my work here to help our organization achieve its aims of community development and gender equality. It's wonderful to support SDG 5 with programs that uplift and assist women in our area.

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Marketing graduates said that they assist MSMEs in planning and implementing campaigns that increase public awareness of clean water and sanitation projects, with the goal of gaining financing and support for these causes. They help MSMEs who provide clean water and sanitation-related goods and services connect with their target market more



successfully. A solid foundation in digital marketing tactics, data analysis, and customer behavior is often obtained by recent marketing graduates through their academic studies and internships supports MSMEs. They value practical experiences that improve their talents. Recent marketing graduates frequently appreciate dynamic, cutting-edge work settings where they can contribute creatively and witness the tangible fruits of their labours.

Many recent marketing grads said they are happy in positions that let them oversee projects, create marketing strategies, and interact with clients face-to-face. They value the chance to use their abilities in worthwhile endeavors. Higher work satisfaction is reported by graduates who have clear career promotion paths and receive continual professional development in MSMEs. Many recent graduates in marketing believe that their employment helps achieve several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including supporting climate action (SDG 13), promoting sustainable products (SDG 12), and boosting economic growth (SDG 8). They value being involved in projects that are meaningful and consistent with their beliefs.

Some graduates said that they've encountered issues with workplace culture, such as a lack of growth chances or mentorship, which might affect how happy they are in their jobs. It could be challenging for certain graduates to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Keeping up with the rapid evolution of digital marketing platforms and technologies can also be difficult.

Insufficient prospects for career progression or development experienced in discontent. Some recent grads had trouble locating jobs that fit their hobbies and professional goals. Because of the limitations of their jobs or how their employers' actions don't correspond with the SDGs, some graduates might feel that their influence is restricted. They could also have trouble estimating or quantifying how much of an influence they have on these objectives.

Marketing Graduates who work for MSMEs that prioritize social responsibility and sustainability report feeling more purposeful and more in line with their personal values. Most recent Marketing graduates find their experiences fulfilling, particularly when they can observe how their work affects the SDGs. Possibilities for career advancement, skill development, and significant contributions to sustainability are positive characteristics. Job satisfaction and perceived effect, however, can be impacted by obstacles including workplace culture, integrating personal values with business procedures, and putting theoretical knowledge into reality. They further said that by addressing these issues, marketing graduates' entire experience and ability to contribute to the SDGs can be enhanced.

“Being a part of an MSME that actively incorporates sustainability into its main goals makes me happy. Through the application of my marketing expertise, I have assisted the enterprise in more effectively communicating its SDG-related objectives and accomplishments, resulting in increased participation and awareness.”



"Working with this MSME has allowed me to apply my experience in creating advertisements that highlight our dedication to social responsibility while simultaneously promoting our products. Seeing how our marketing initiatives contribute to SDG 8—decent work and economic growth—is tremendously fulfilling."

"I've been able to use innovative marketing strategies in my work here to help our organization achieve its aims of community development and gender equality. It's wonderful to support SDG 5 with programs that uplift and assist women in our area."

This study's primary goal was to investigate how the employment of marketing graduates aids Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises in their pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. The results indicate that marketing graduates are crucial in bolstering MSMEs' sustainability initiatives across various SDGs. For example, graduates contribute to SDG 12 by advocating for environmentally sustainable products and guiding consumer behavior toward more responsible choices. They also contribute to SDG 13 by promoting climate-positive actions through communications that highlight MSMEs' environmental efforts. Furthermore, graduates have supported campaigns focused on ensuring clean water and sanitation, promoted inclusive marketing practices in line with SDG 5, and facilitated the achievement of SDG 8 by assisting MSMEs in expanding their operations and improving profitability. Their involvement in developing transparent and collaborative messaging also supports SDG 16. These efforts emphasize the crucial role of marketing graduates in aligning MSME strategies with global sustainability goals. This aligns with broader research indicating that digital marketing strategies, when effectively deployed, can significantly contribute to sustainable development by encouraging more sustainable consumption patterns and communicating key messages through optimal channels (Rosário et al., 2023). This is particularly pertinent given the increasing recognition of digital marketing as a vital instrument for bridging the gap between societal expectations regarding sustainability and corporate practices (Diéz-Martín et al., 2019).

They also contribute to advancing environmentally responsible behavior, aligning with SDG 13, by utilising communications that highlight MSMEs' ecological endeavours. Furthermore, graduates have provided support for initiatives concerning clean water and sanitation, facilitated inclusive marketing practices consistent with SDG 5, and aided in the advancement of SDG 8 by assisting MSMEs in expanding their operational scope and enhancing their financial performance. Their involvement in crafting messages that promote transparency and collaboration also supports SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). These activities demonstrate that marketing graduates are instrumental in aligning MSME strategies with global sustainability targets.

Regarding the second objective, this study sought to ascertain the expectations, experiences, and challenges encountered by MSMEs when employing recent marketing graduates. MSMEs generally held high expectations, particularly regarding the infusion of creative and



innovative marketing strategies, proficient utilization of digital tools, and the provision of data-driven insights. A significant number of MSMEs expressed satisfaction with the novel perspectives and contemporary marketing methodologies introduced by these graduates, which served to invigorate their marketing strategies and enhance their engagement with target demographics. However, certain impediments were also observed. MSMEs often face challenges in attracting and retaining marketing graduates due to their resource constraints and comparatively lower brand recognition than larger corporations. The inability of many MSMEs to provide competitive compensation packages, structured orientation programs, or formalized professional development opportunities, coupled with limited mentorship capacity and recruitment process limitations, further complicates the effective integration of new graduates. Additionally, MSMEs located in rural or less economically developed regions have reported increased difficulties in attracting talent, owing to graduates' preferences for urban or more prosperous locales.

Regarding the third objective, the study aimed to explore the viewpoints of marketing graduates, focusing on their experiences, job satisfaction, and perceived influence on SDG achievement. Generally, graduates reported higher satisfaction levels when their work resonated with their personal values, such as sustainability and community enhancement. A significant number of graduates expressed pride in their contributions to SDG-related projects, deriving satisfaction from roles that enabled them to spearhead marketing initiatives, implement innovative strategies, and engage directly with clients. Graduates expressed appreciation for applying their academic knowledge in real-world scenarios and valued their involvement in socially responsible entities. Nevertheless, some graduates mentioned challenges such as insufficient resources for executing innovative concepts, inadequate mentorship, and difficulties in aligning their strategic perspectives with the MSME's capabilities or receptiveness to change. Additional challenges included measuring the tangible effects of their SDG-focused campaigns and feeling restricted by the organization's infrastructure. Despite these obstacles, graduates employed in MSMEs with robust sustainability objectives indicated higher levels of job satisfaction and a sense of purpose, especially when their roles entailed significant contributions to SDGs, notably SDG 5, 8, 12, and 13 (see the table 3)

Table 3: Objectives and findings

Objective	Key Matching Themes/Findings
Impact on SDGs	Contributions to SDGs 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 16; strategic sustainability communication; awareness and market reach
MSMEs' expectations and challenges	Expectations: innovation, adaptability, data insights; Challenges: attraction, retention, infrastructure, training gaps.
Graduates' perspectives	High satisfaction when values align; barriers include limited support, unclear impact measurement, mismatch in expectations.



Discussion

There is a complex interaction of advantages and disadvantages regarding marketing graduates helping Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to this study, marketing graduates greatly benefit MSMEs by expanding their market reach, encouraging sustainability, and developing inclusive practices.

However, luring and keeping these graduates presents several challenges for MSMEs. Marketing graduates and MSMEs face both challenges in achieving sustainable development goals through employing marketing graduates in MSMEs as explained in Figure 1.

The capacity of marketing graduates to support business development and market expansion is consistent with earlier studies highlighting the critical role that marketing knowledge plays in MSMEs. A study by (Bruce *et al.*, 2023) found that marketing graduates may greatly boost MSME growth by bringing crucial abilities in business strategy and digital marketing. MSMEs can expand into new areas and strengthen their position in the competition thanks to their expertise in modern marketing technologies.

Previous research demonstrating the influence of efficient communication on consumer behaviour lends credence to the role that recent marketing graduates can play in promoting climate action via environmentally friendly messaging. research of (Ullah *et al.*, 2023) emphasizes how crucial green marketing is in swaying consumer perceptions of environmental sustainability. According to ((Rachmawati *et al.*, 2023)) MSMEs can increase their visibility and credibility in the climate action space by utilizing the persuasive environmental messaging abilities of marketing graduates.

The contribution of marketing graduates to innovation and long-term brand positioning is consistent with research by (Hult *et al.*, 2004) which highlighted the importance of creative marketing strategies in differentiating MSMEs in cutthroat marketplaces. The application of modern branding strategies by graduates helps MSMEs establish themselves as industry leaders in sustainable sectors (Risdiyanto *et al.*, 2023). The literature has shown the difficulty in luring graduates to MSMEs because of the attraction of larger enterprises with superior resources. According to studies by Green *et al.* (2018), smalls firms struggle to an attractive offer to for career development (Castro-Silva and Lima, 2023). It is often known that MSMEs lack the resources necessary for professional development and training. (Sutrisno *et al.*, 2023) research reveals that micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) frequently have difficulties in offering comprehensive training programs, which may affect their capacity to draw in and keep talented graduates.

Research on labour mobility supports the notion that talent acquisition is hampered by geographic location. The talent pool that is available to MSMEs in less desirable regions may be reduced by studies by (Bartik *et al.*, 2020) that show graduates prefer to work in urban areas or desirable locations. Working with MSMEs is frequently satisfying for marketing graduates, especially when their efforts help achieve SDGs. The findings of (Hübscher *et al.*,



2022) research, support the idea that graduates value positions that enable them to meaningfully apply their skills and support social and environmental goals.

The issues graduates encounter with MSME infrastructure and support are a reflection of the difficulties described in research by (Musiolik *et al.*, 2020) , which demonstrate how the implementation of innovative ideas can be hampered by a lack of resources and support systems (refer to Flow charts of impact pathways of employing graduates in MSMEs (figure 2).

Conclusion

The study highlights the crucial role of marketing graduates in assisting MSMEs in achieving Sustainable Development Goals, yet they face challenges in talent retention, particularly in less demand and competitive labour markets. MSMEs should focus on strategic recruitment, training, and development, utilizing digital and green marketing, and catering to geography and lifestyle preferences to maximize hiring marketing graduates. Resolving issues and leveraging marketing graduates' talents can enhance collaboration between MSMEs and recent graduates, promoting innovation, sustainability, and SDGs, and benefiting businesses and the community. Further research may explore obstacles.

MSMEs must develop strategic plans to attract and retain marketing graduates, highlighting value propositions, career progression, and SDG contributions. Offering flexible work schedules, mentorship programs, and a positive work atmosphere can attract more applicants, while targeted recruitment techniques can connect graduates with their goals. MSMEs should invest in training and development for recent marketing graduates, forming alliances with academic institutions and business associations for affordable initiatives. This will enhance performance, job satisfaction, and skill development, while promoting a streamlined onboarding process. MSMEs can leverage recent graduates' green and digital marketing expertise to enhance their market presence and sustainability initiatives. This can improve brand perception, cater to customer demand, and highlight the MSME's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. MSMEs in rural areas can enhance their employment opportunities by offering remote work, relocation aid, and additional benefits. Fostering a positive work environment and community relationships can also aid talent retention. Inclusive marketing practices can promote diversity and reduce inequality, supporting SDG 10.

Marketing graduates should consider working with MSMEs for diverse experiences, career growth opportunities, and ongoing education. Participating in career counseling and industry workshops can also enhance their understanding of these opportunities. Universities should promote proactive learning, pursue further degrees or certifications, participate in networking and mentorship initiatives, and consider curriculum development and continuous mentoring programs for marketing graduates. Graduates should focus on developing skills in digital and green marketing techniques, such as data analysis, digital communication, and sustainable marketing, to enhance their employability and competitiveness. Marketing graduates should explore employment opportunities in diverse regions and consider the benefits of working in different settings. Supporting inclusive policies and gaining expertise



in diversity can help craft marketing strategies that cater to diverse consumers and promote social justice. **References**

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Table 4: Categorization of the different roles and how marketing graduates help MSMEs to achieve sustainable development goals.

Marketing graduates' activities	SDGs
Market expansion and business development	Encouraging economic growth (SDG 8)
Promotion of sustainable practices , resource efficiency	Responsible consumption (SDG 12).
Eco friendly messages and green marketing strategies	Climate action (SDG 13)
Innovation and sustainability and brand positioning	Sustainable industries (SDG 9).
Awareness campaign and sustainable solutions	Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6)
Inclusive marketing and stake holder engagement	Reduction of inequality (SDG 10)
Partnership development and effective communication	Collaborations for the goals (SDG 17).

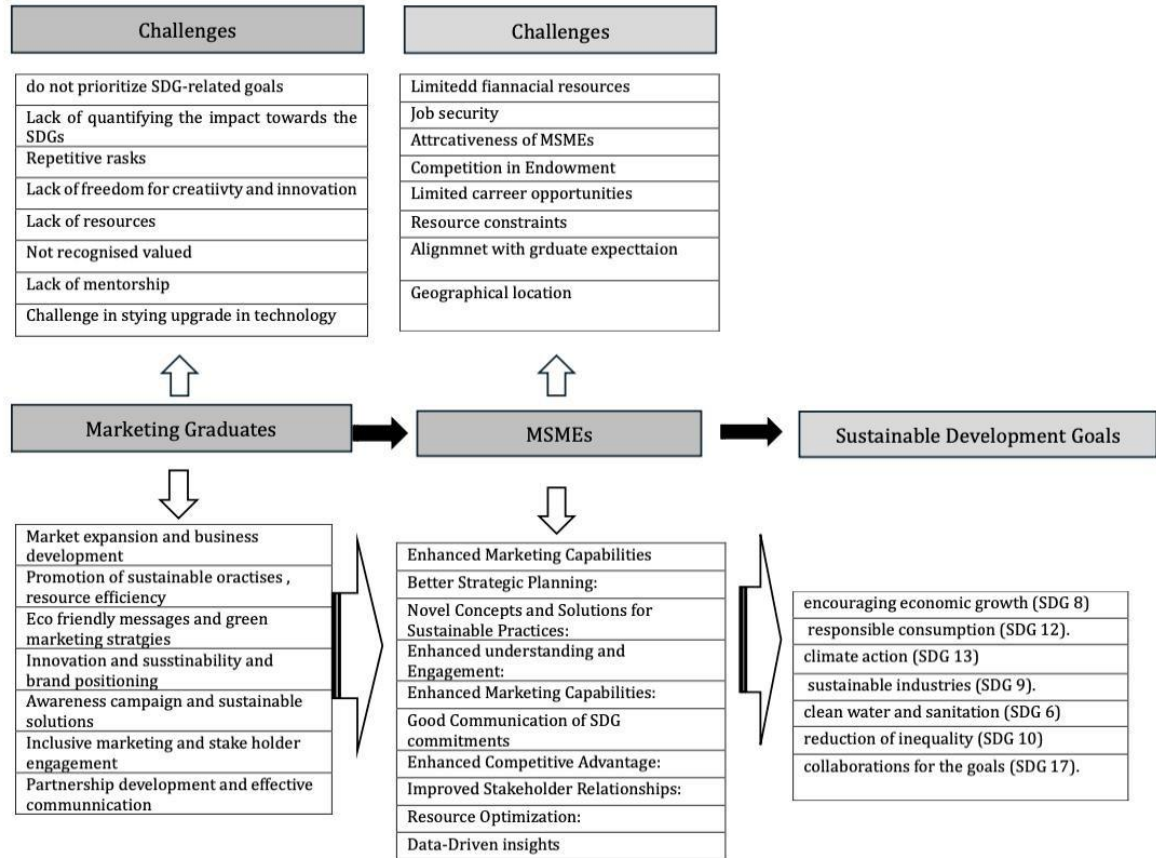


Figure 1 : Marketing graduates and MSMEs face both challenges in achieving sustainable development goals through employing marketing graduates in MSMEs

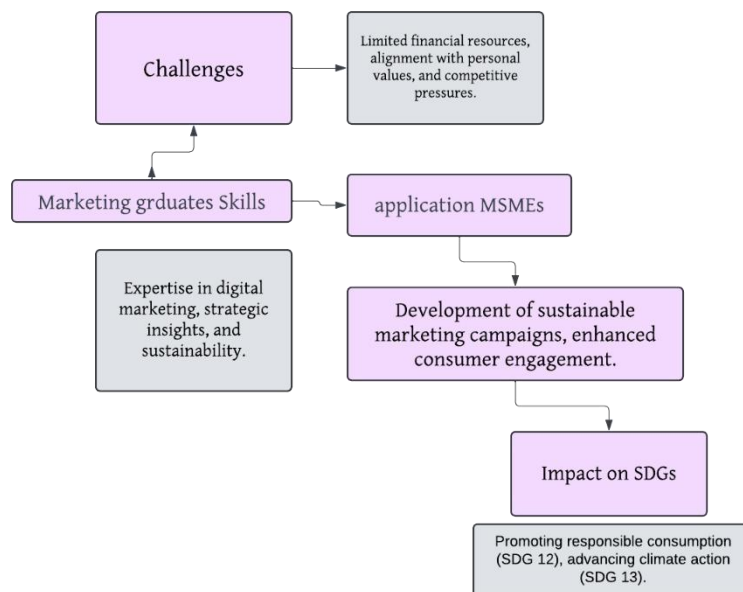


Figure 2: Flow charts of impact pathways of employing graduates in MSME