

Sustainable

A MAGAZINE ARTICLE

DIGITAL MARKETING

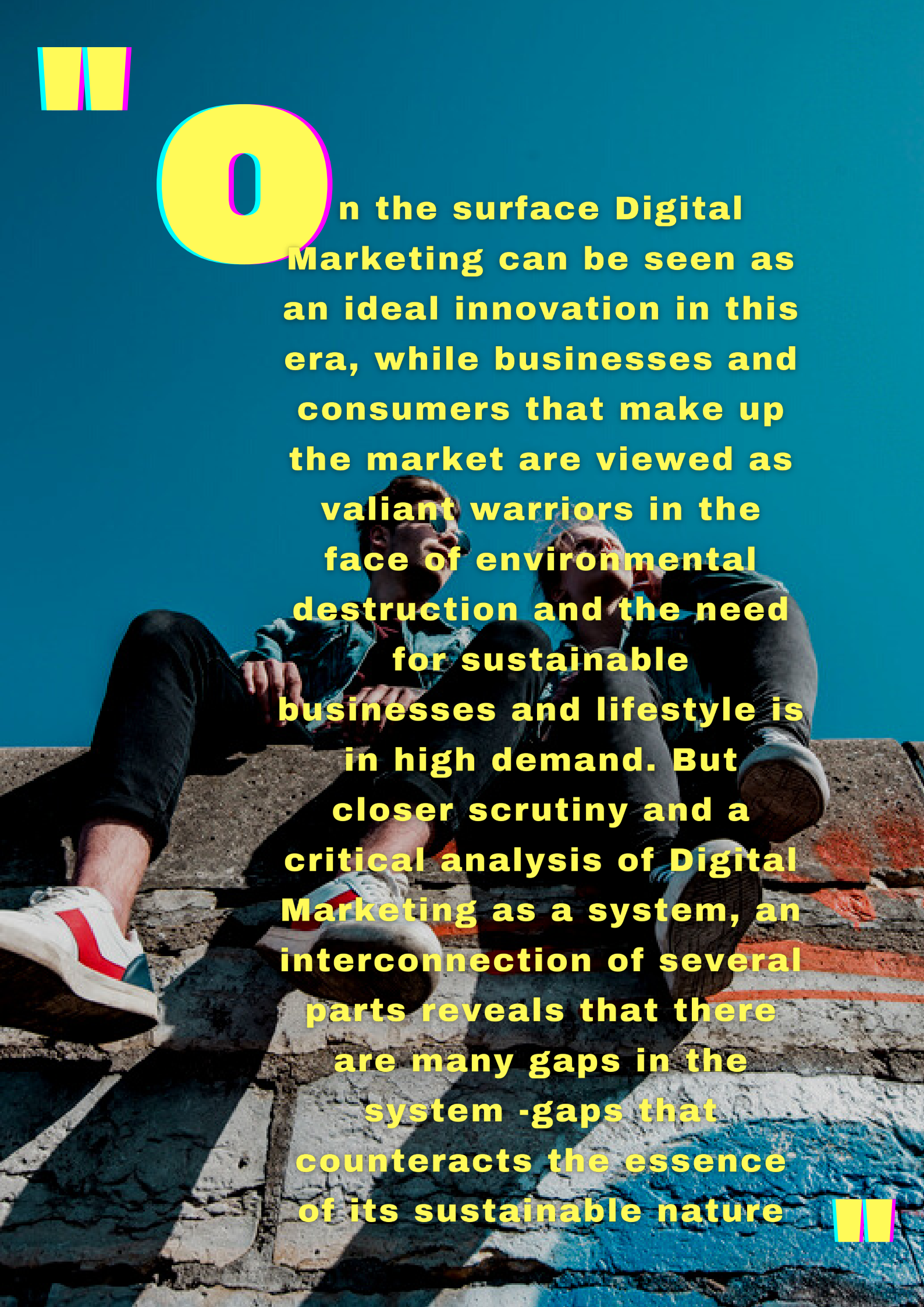
How Sustainable Is It?

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Sustainable Digital Marketing



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n the surface Digital Marketing can be seen as an ideal innovation in this era, while businesses and consumers that make up the market are viewed as valiant warriors in the face of environmental destruction and the need for sustainable businesses and lifestyle is in high demand. But closer scrutiny and a critical analysis of Digital Marketing as a system, an interconnection of several parts reveals that there are many gaps in the system -gaps that counteracts the essence of its sustainable nature



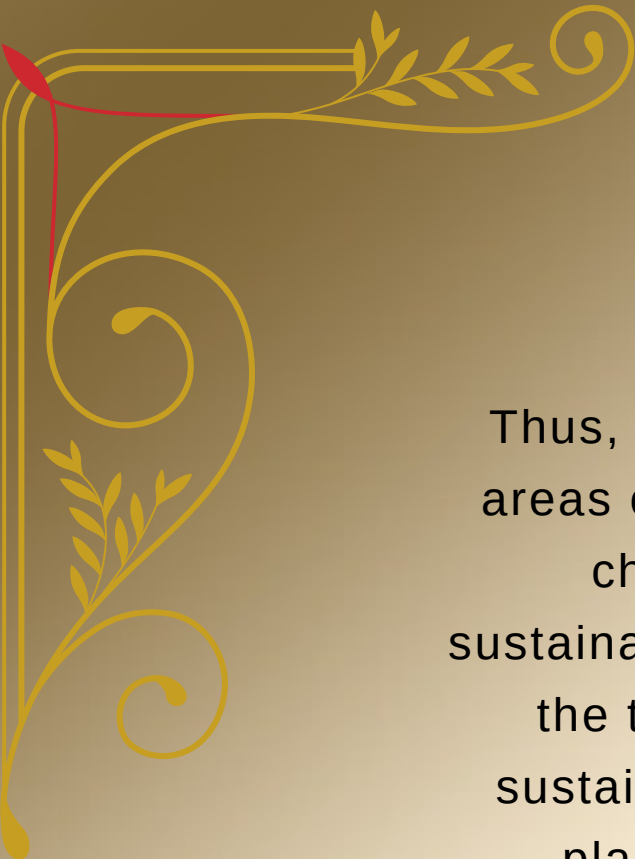
Sustainable Challenges of Digital Marketing

Sustainability is based on the concept of preserving the quality of a thing, (be it a natural resource, culture, the economy or the environment) that will allow future generations to benefit from it in ways the generations before it did. In 1987 the Brundtland commission report described sustainability as the ability to “meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Julie Drolet, 2015 and Majah-Leah V. Ravago et al, 2015). (1) In another light, UNESCO defines it as a balance between environmental, societal and economical considerations that will lead to improved quality of life. (2)

The background of the slide is a light blue gradient with a collage of various icons. These include a yellow circle with a brown dollar sign, a green silhouette of a person, a pink circle with a white house icon, a yellow circle with a brown star, a green shopping cart, a green envelope, and a yellow speech bubble. The text is arranged in two columns, with the first column on the left and the second column on the right.

Digital marketing which is a very broad topic is considered to be a type of marketing, used to promote products and services to consumers using a variety of digital channels. But it must be noted that digital marketing in itself is a business model and or portfolio. It allows consumers to access information about a product or service at anytime, anywhere. The essence of this marketing style is that digital technologies deploy information to consumers via digital avenues, these advertisements and information circulate digitally from several sources inclusive of friends and peers, in all the different digital platforms making promotion more widespread.(3)

In comparison to other types of marketing methods and the global challenges arising from climate change, digital marketing have the ability to reduce the number of direct and indirect negative impacts on the environment, society, and economy, and thus could be viewed as the better alternative. Nonetheless, sustainability is a complex phenomenon that demands that each aspect of the system is in collaboration with the other for it to have maximum impacts. Therefore, any limitations generated from digital marketing that could impact either the environment, society or the economy can eventually lead to sustainable challenges.



Thus, this article will highlight several areas of Digital Marketing that present challenges that could limit its sustainability and analyze the impacts on the three interconnected pillars of sustainability, with respect to people, place, and profit. Specific focus surrounds, high energy consumption, overconsumption, environmental pollution, increase levels of unemployment, and increase competitiveness among brands and optimization.

Moreover, digital marketing is being promoted as having the ability to play a significant role in reducing a number of unsustainable business practices, for present and future generations -Subsequently, contributing to the reduction in challenges of Climate Change. Digital marketing a paperless way of marketing products and services carries the advantage of reducing the carbon prints of individuals and businesses. It has the advantage of reducing the greenhouse gases carbon dioxide and methane (two of the major contributors to global warming), directly leading to a reduction in environmental pollution and energy usage by businesses. (5) With digital marketing, the need for printed advertisement is eliminated and thus the need for deforestation- along with the different stages that involve the manufacturing of paper from these trees that would have required the input of energy that leads to an increased level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.





"Just about 74% of paper was recycled in the UK"

As a result of consuming less energy, digital marketing can be a more cost-effective strategy for businesses.(6) Although, the paper industry remains one of the more sustainable businesses, there continue to be a lot of misconceptions around the sustainability of the paper industry (RISI Technology Channel, 2021), the paper industry has a high recycling rate. In 2020 just about 74% of paper was recycled in the UK. But limited knowledge of the sustainable methods of the paper industry has propelled the advent of digital marketing, a paperless approach to conducting business seems more sustainable at the onset. With the dire need to curb or better yet halt environmental destruction. Many businesses have embraced this profitable approach, some without fully considering if this would shift the equilibrium in ways that may affect the three pillars of sustainability.

For instance, large amount of energy is consumed daily to power advertising boards and servers (inclusive of the environment that must be maintained at optimal condition for the effective function of the system) from the need to constantly run advertisements and to share other necessary information, this could counteract the aforementioned positive impacts in one area, with unsustainable practices in another area of the system. Similarly, the extraction of rare earth metals to build computer terminals and other digital devices consumes an ample amount of energy, while producing waste as a byproduct. The need to power these terminals and devices must not be overlooked, as they lead to an increase in the carbon print of individuals, businesses, and nations. This can be reduced by using clean energy such as solar power, but a significant amount of the energy consumed is derived from burning fossil fuels. In research done in the Netherlands, it was concluded that running animated advertisements on advertising boards consumed energy that could have powered 2000 homes in one year. (R.J.G Simons and Aiko Pras 2020)



Furthermore, according to Barry Ardley et al, (put in a year) in his paper 'facing the challenges of overconsumption and the market', (7) portrayed overconsumption as an imminent problem for digital marketing. The increased need for video and web streaming creates incessant demands for digital devices. This leads to other demands. For instance, there is a very high demand for rare metals such as platinum, cobalt, mercury, and chromium, some of which are listed by the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) (8) as hazardous metals, to make computer terminals and the digital devices that consumers use to access the digital market. These metals and elements in question are non-renewable thus the current market demand and consumption rate are exceeding the capacity of the earth reservoir system is able to sustain. This issue, further pilots the widening gap of inequality, poverty and financial anguish for person with limited resources. (7) As the rich exploit the poor to acquire these metals, creating social instability and to an extent economic barriers. Such widening gaps put financially stricken individuals and countries at a disadvantage. These unfortunate circumstances restrict societal and economic sustainability

Businesses or nations with the financial power that exploit the natural resources of undeveloped countries, while under paying workers simultaneously hampers social and economical sustainability for those individuals and nations. Businesses owe it to worker to provide or implement efforts to improve and maintain social sustainability (UN Global Compact), as it is a condition on which operation licenses are granted

Although some businesses recycle and reuse working parts of these devices, an extremely high quantity becomes obsolete yearly with damaged parts that cannot be reused. To put this into perspective in 2019, the world generated "53.6 million metric tons of e-waste of which only 17.4% was recycled. The estimates revenue lost was 47 billion dollars in valuable material such as copper, cobalt and other conflict metals" (UN Global, 2020)



Emerging from overconsumption and high energy consumption are a number of negative environmental impacts. Firstly, the high level of light that is consistently omitted from advertising boards, running advertisements leads to light pollution. Light pollution accounts for a number of environmental challenges from ecological disruption, to adverse health effects in humans and wastage of energy.(9) Light pollution tends to negatively affect the physiology of plants and animals, especially nocturnal wildlife. Patterns in species migration and altered relationships among the tropic level and cause an imbalance, as a high level of light disrupts the diurnal patterns of darkness and light. Also, the absorption of too much light and specific colors of light affect the biological processes in the human body that can lead to sleeping disorders and increase the risk of certain types of cancers(9). While the high consumption of energy accounts for increase in air pollution by driving up carbon print.

Akin, there is the issue of waste disposal of digital devices that becomes obsolete or damaged beyond repair. The scope of this problem broadens when one takes into consideration the harmfulness of these durable substances (rare metals, plastic, and glass) that releases toxic chemicals in the environment upon disposal that are used in the production of these devices. This starts a series of chain reactions that impacts marine ecosystems as a result of leaching from improper disposal of e-waste, even the health of persons living in nearby communities are negatively affected (Avakian, 2014)

In addition, the production of digital devices to carry out their function in the digital market uses extremely large amount of water, mainly in the extraction processes and for cooling of the servers systems which tend to generate enormous amount of heat energy (Ran Liu, 2019). Unfortunately, these unsustainable practices and gaps within this marketing strategy amplify the already grand challenges of climate changes



Nonetheless, initiatives can be put in place to reduce the impacts of these challenges. For instance, in 2015, using an e-waste recycling app, China was able to collect 152.74 million pieces of waste (UNDP, 2016). A similar effort was done using a power-saving chip, that allows the device to harvest, store and use light energy, powering its operation, when in sleep mode it consumes significantly less energy this helps to extend the lifespan of the the device, the battery (reducing the need for regular replacement), and also a reduction in energy consumed and wasted (Charissa Luci-Atienza, 2021)

Subsequently, digital market is a highly technical one, which requires fewer employees yet it demands trained skills personnel for effective and efficient functioning of the system. If managed sustainably, the unemployed with shifted focus and relative skill will be able to be repositioned. As the digital market expands as more and more business and organization incorporate it into their operation, it gives way to job creation by creating new job sectors. The overall impacts on unemployment would rely heavily on the growth demand (OECD, 2016)



Furthermore, the problem of digital illiteracy both for consumers and businesses (more specifically less financial constraint ones), is a pertinent one. (Anna Colibri, 2017), describes digital marketing illiteracy as not being "familiar with context and tropes of the medium or being familiar with the specific toolsets". As such consumers are easily taken advantage of by marketers because they fail to realize when they are being exploited. For example, many marketers in the effort to collect information, have conducted surveys where they would make it possible for participants to become winners of specified (mostly monetary) prizes. In comparison, the prize is a minute portion to the profit the information collected will be used to generate.



Also, the inability to spot personal profiles used by cooperating businesses on social media and deliberate viral content is also an area of illiteracy that marketers use to manipulate potential consumers. With respect to grass-root businesses, they are often left behind because of a lack of financial capacity to employ the necessary technical skills and or to keep up with the advancing rate of technological innovations.

"marketers exploits..."



Another problem that challenges the sustainability of the digital marketing industry is competitiveness among brands and the need to optimize the flow of information to consumers. The genesis of digital marketing has increased accessibility on a global scale. In light of the ease at which information can be accessed, the competitiveness of business has increased. As they all battle to be counted as the top brand. Many customers develop loyalty to selected brands and thus will determine in a major way, from which company a specific product or service will be purchased. As the influx of information increase with the growth in the digital industry, and the constant advance in technological designing of devices, businesses are challenged to present relevant information that can be accessed easily by consumers and potential consumers. Thus, digital businesses must force on delivering a customer-centric market that is up to date with engaging content, which can be accessed using a variety of digital devices (Rochelle, 2021).

The challenges of a customer-centric market have led major cooperates to delve into the concept of neuromarketing, (Eben Harrell, 2019) neuromarketing measures, physiological and neural signals to gain insight on what triggers decision-making, to improve marketing strategies. This increases the chances of coalition and abuse of personal information to manipulate the marketing patterns of customers (Yuval Harari, 2018). Thus, the consumer-centric industry creates high competitiveness among businesses, both large and small in this globalized market. The inequality arising from the size and financial power of the business can have crippling effects on business, but at the same time, it creates opportunities for smaller to thrive, cutting out the need for the middle man that would otherwise drive up the cost of product or services.



Important to note is the plethora of advantages digital marketing creates for businesses and opportunities to mitigate global challenges. The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic have amplified the usefulness of digital marketing in recent time. Many small businesses, more notably businesses in the Cultural and Creative Industry, creative entrepreneurs have had to learn to market themselves and they artform (business) to remain relevant. As a business, it allows for a measurable, cost-effective way to target its audience via a global reach



In summation, on the surface, Digital Marketing can be seen as an ideal innovation in this era, while businesses and consumers that make up the market are viewed as valiant warriors in the face of environmental destruction and the need for sustainable businesses and lifestyle is in high demand. But closer scrutiny and a critical analysis of Digital Marketing as a system, an interconnection of several parts reveals that there are many gaps in the system -gaps that counteract the essence of its sustainable nature. As demonstrated, the concentrated focus on a paperless economy via digitalization is challenged with issues such as high energy consumption, overconsumption, and pollution. Even with mitigating practices to combat these challenges, the inefficiencies and ineffective practices of Digital Marketing direct and indirectly impacts negatively, the three pillars of sustainability-People, Place, and Profit.



Thus, the question remains, how sustainable is Digital Marketing????????



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