

To Study the Effect of Digital Marketing Strategies on Growing Business for SME'S in Ahmedabad City

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the adoption and impact of digital marketing among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and explores how demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and business type influence the extent of adoption. With the growing significance of digital platforms in modern business, SMEs are increasingly leveraging tools like social media, search engine optimization (SEO), and online advertising to enhance visibility and competitiveness. Data were collected from 153 respondents representing diverse sectors including manufacturing, trading, service, and IT-based businesses. Statistical analysis, including reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.920) and Chi-square tests, was conducted using SPSS to ensure data accuracy and interpret relationships between variables. The findings reveal that digital marketing adoption is significantly influenced by age, technological awareness, and government support, with younger and more educated entrepreneurs showing greater adaptability. Moreover, the study highlights that digital marketing not only improves business performance and customer engagement but also serves as a cost-effective tool compared to traditional marketing methods. Despite positive trends, challenges such as lack of expertise, limited resources, and insufficient digital literacy persist. The research concludes that digital transformation offers vast opportunities for SMEs to grow and remain competitive, provided there is continued investment in training, infrastructure, and policy support.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary business environment, digitalization acts as a powerful transformative force, reshaping entire industries, consumer behaviors, and marketing paradigms (Vidani, 2015). This shift holds particular significance for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), which serve as the backbone of many economies by fueling job creation, innovation, and GDP growth (Vidani & Solanki, 2015). In emerging economies like India, and within its vibrant commercial hubs such as Ahmedabad, SMEs are vital engines of entrepreneurship and industrial development (Vidani, 2015). Yet, these businesses often operate under significant constraints, including limited resources, intense competition, and low market visibility (Vidani, 2015). While traditional marketing channels like print and television often remain prohibitively expensive, digital marketing emerges as a compelling, cost-effective, and scalable alternative, offering SMEs a viable pathway to achieve sustainable growth and enhanced market presence (Vidani, 2015).

Digital marketing encompasses the use of online platforms – including social media, websites, search engines, and email – to promote products and foster customer relationships (Solanki & Vidani, 2016). A key advantage over traditional marketing is its inherent affordability, interactivity, and the capacity for precise performance measurement (Vidani, 2016). The strategic value of these tools is well-documented; research by Sharabati et al. (2024) indicates that digital marketing not only deepens customer engagement but also acts as a catalyst for broader organizational transformation, ultimately strengthening competitiveness and performance (Bhatt, Patel, & Vidani, 2017). Corroborating this, Prayogi and Subriadi (2024) affirm that it significantly enhances brand awareness, expands market reach, and improves customer engagement. These benefits underscore the critical importance of digital marketing for SMEs in emerging commercial centers like Ahmedabad, where the rapid adoption of e-commerce and digital payment systems is already transforming the local business ecosystem (Niyati & Vidani, 2016).

Research indicates that the impact of digital marketing on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is not uniform, but is instead shaped by the specific strategy employed, available resources, and the local business context (Pradhan, Tshogay, & Vidani, 2016). As Jadhav, Gaikwad, and Bapat (2023) underscore, successful implementation hinges on developing tailored approaches that are suited to these unique regional conditions (Modi, Harkani, Radadiya, & Vidani, 2016). A distinct digital divide often exists; while urban SMEs typically have advantages in infrastructure and digital literacy, they continue to face persistent obstacles such as limited technical expertise and financial constraints (Vidani, 2016). This is evident in a city like Ahmedabad, where despite a robust entrepreneurial environment and technological access, many SMEs fail to capitalize fully on digital marketing's potential due to significant knowledge gaps and an underlying resistance to change (Sukhanandi, Tank, & Vidani, 2018).

The adoption of digital marketing has a direct and measurable impact on SME performance (Singh, Vidani, & Nagoria, 2016). Empirical evidence demonstrates its role in enhancing key business metrics; as Deku, Wang, and Preko (2024) confirm, it effectively boosts customer acquisition, retention, and satisfaction while simultaneously reducing overall marketing expenditures (Mala, Vidani, & Solanki,

2016). Furthermore, scholars like Kanojia and Rathore (2025) contend that these tools are instrumental in building lasting customer relationships, thereby laying the foundation for sustainable business growth (Dhere, Vidani, & Solanki, 2016). For SMEs in competitive landscapes like Ahmedabad, strategically deploying specific tactics—including search engine optimization (SEO), social media advertising, and targeted online campaigns—is crucial for amplifying market visibility and solidifying a competitive position within an increasingly digital economy (Singh & Vidani, 2016).

Notwithstanding its clear advantages, the adoption of digital marketing by SMEs is frequently hampered by significant challenges, including constrained financial resources, a deficit in digital skills, and the relentless pace of technological change (Vidani & Plaha, 2016). This often results in hesitancy among business owners, who may be deterred by uncertainty or a lack of clear guidance (Solanki & Vidani, 2016). Compounding this issue is the necessity for continuous adaptation in the face of rapidly evolving digital platforms (Vidani, 2016). Despite these barriers, significant opportunities are emerging. The availability of low-cost, high-impact tools such as WhatsApp Business, Facebook Ads, and Google Ads now allows even the smallest enterprises to engage with vast audiences (Vidani, Chack, & Rathod, 2017). This potential is further amplified by supportive governmental policies, such as India's Digital India initiative, which foster digital inclusion and create a more conducive ecosystem for SME growth and competitiveness (Vidani, 2018).

Focusing on Ahmedabad as a research context offers a valuable case study for examining the nuanced influence of digital marketing on SMEs (Biharani & Vidani, 2018). The city's diverse economic landscape, encompassing traditional sectors like textiles alongside modern IT and hospitality industries, provides a microcosm to observe varying levels and patterns of digital adoption (Vidani, 2018). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to systematically analyze the current state of digital marketing adoption among SMEs in Ahmedabad, assess its direct impact on business growth, identify the predominant challenges and opportunities faced by these enterprises, and ultimately, propose actionable strategic recommendations to enhance their digital competitiveness (Odedra, Rabadiya, & Vidani, 2018).

In summary, digital marketing represents a transformative strategy for SMEs, fundamentally enhancing their market visibility, customer engagement, and overall competitiveness within the modern digital economy (Vasveliyya & Vidani, 2019). For SMEs in Ahmedabad, proactively embracing these digital tools is not merely an option but a critical imperative for survival and long-term success (Sachaniya, Vora, & Vidani, 2019). It is within this context that the present research seeks to make its contribution, aiming to provide both valuable theoretical insights and actionable, practical guidance to empower SMEs in effectively harnessing digital technologies to achieve sustainable and resilient business growth (Vidani, 2019).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVIES

1. To examine the impact of specific digital marketing strategies—such as SEO, social media marketing, and online advertising—on SME business growth.
2. To identify the opportunities and challenges SMEs face in implementing digital marketing strategies.

3. To evaluate how digital marketing contributes to customer engagement, brand visibility, and competitiveness of SMEs.
4. To provide recommendations for SMEs and policymakers to strengthen digital adoption and maximize its benefits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive literature review forms the foundational pillar of academic research, providing a critical synthesis of existing scholarship and illuminating the gaps that warrant further investigation. In the specific domain of digital marketing's impact on Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)—entities widely acknowledged as the backbone of economic development—such a review is indispensable for understanding how the adoption of digital tools reshapes business performance, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. The past decade has witnessed a significant surge in scholarly interest in this area, particularly concerning the application of digital marketing strategies within the SME sector, a trend that underscores its critical importance in both emerging and developed economies (Vidani, Jacob, & Patel, 2019).

This literature review is constructed upon an analysis of six pivotal studies published between 2023 and 2025, which collectively examine the evolving dynamics between digital marketing and SME performance. By synthesizing the findings of Sharabati et al. (2024), Jadhav et al. (2023), Kanojia and Rathore (2025), Prayogi and Subriadi (2024), Deku et al. (2024), and Raj and Tamilarasan (2023), this review aims to elucidate the central theoretical constructs and practical consequences of digital marketing adoption. The synthesis is organized thematically, progressing through the following key areas: (1) the role of SMEs in economic growth, (2) the evolution of digital marketing, (3) theoretical frameworks guiding digital adoption, (4) prevalent digital marketing practices and their measured impact, (5) persistent challenges and barriers, (6) emerging opportunities and moderating factors, and (7) the specific research gap pertaining to SMEs in the Ahmedabad context (Vidani J. N., 2016).

1. SMEs as Drivers of Economic Growth

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) constitute a fundamental component of the economic fabric in nations worldwide, with their role being particularly pivotal in emerging economies like India. Globally, they are recognized as major drivers of job creation, innovation, and gross domestic product. This is exemplified in India, where, as per reports from the Ministry of MSMEs, SMEs contribute approximately 30% to the nation's GDP and account for over 40% of its exports. The city of Ahmedabad, a recognized entrepreneurial hub, strongly reflects this national significance, boasting a robust and diverse SME base across key sectors such as textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, IT services, and food processing (Vidani & Singh, 2017).

Scholars widely acknowledge SMEs as crucial drivers of local economic growth and employment generation (Sharabati et al., 2024). Despite this vital role, they frequently encounter significant challenges, including constrained access to resources, intense competition from larger corporations, and difficulties in sustaining growth within volatile markets. As Raj and Tamilarasan (2023) note, historically high marketing costs have posed a particularly formidable barrier, limiting the competitive

reach of smaller firms. In this context, the advent of digital marketing has been transformative, creating unprecedented opportunities for SMEs to overcome these resource constraints and engage with customers through more accessible and cost-effective channels (Vidani & Pathak, 2016).

This context underscores why studying the adoption of digital marketing strategies among Ahmedabad SMEs is significant: these enterprises form the economic backbone of the region but require innovative, affordable tools to remain competitive in a rapidly digitizing business environment (Pathak & Vidani, 2016).

2. Evolution of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing encompasses the strategic use of digital channels – including search engines, social media, email, mobile applications, and websites – to promote products, services, and brands while building customer relationships. Its evolution has been marked by significant technological shifts, progressing from the foundational use of email marketing in the 1990s to the contemporary, integrated, and data-driven ecosystem that characterizes today's digital marketplace (Vidani & Plaha, 2017).

In a systematic literature review, Prayogi and Subriadi (2024) contend that digital marketing has evolved from a supplementary promotional tool into a strategic imperative for business growth. Their research identifies four primary mechanisms through which it enhances SME performance: amplifying brand awareness, fostering deeper customer engagement, expanding global market reach, and ensuring cost efficiency. Echoing this trajectory, Jadhav et al. (2023) observe a steady rise in digital marketing adoption over the past twelve years. However, they crucially note that the outcomes of this adoption are not uniform, varying significantly across individual firms and specific contextual environments (Vidani J. N., 2020).

This ongoing evolution in digital marketing presents substantial opportunities for SMEs in Ahmedabad, enabling them to transcend traditional geographic limitations and access both domestic and international markets that were previously unreachable. A pertinent example can be found in the city's prominent textile sector, where SMEs that historically depended on wholesale distributors can now leverage platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp Business, and e-commerce marketplaces like Amazon to engage directly with end-consumers across the nation (Vidani J. N., 2018).

3. Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Digital Marketing Adoption

- Several theoretical models have been employed to explain how and why SMEs adopt digital marketing technologies (Vidani & Dholakia, 2020).
- Technology Acceptance Model (TAM): Sharabati et al. (2024) apply TAM to show that adoption is influenced by perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. SMEs are more likely to adopt digital tools if managers believe they are user-friendly and add tangible value to business operations (Vidani, Meghrajani, & Siddarth, 2023) (Rathod, Meghrajani, & Vidani, 2022).
- Social Network Theory (SNT): Deku et al. (2024) adopt SNT to highlight the relational aspect of digital marketing. By engaging customers through networks such as social media, SMEs build trust, loyalty, and social capital, which translates into better business performance (Vidani & Das, 2021).
- Dynamic Capability Theory: Though not explicitly used in the six studies, the concept is implicit in Kanojia and Rathore's (2025) argument that digital

marketing enhances a firm's adaptability and competitiveness in dynamic environments.

These frameworks suggest that SME adoption of digital marketing is not merely a technological upgrade but involves changes in organizational culture, customer engagement strategies, and competitive positioning. For SMEs in Ahmedabad, understanding these models can help explain why some businesses embrace digital marketing rapidly while others remain hesitant (Vidani J. N., 2022).

4. Digital Marketing Practices and Their Impact on SMEs

4.1 Social Media Marketing

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp are among the most widely used digital marketing tools by SMEs. Sharabati et al. (2024) demonstrate that social media engagement leads to stronger customer relationships and better understanding of consumer preferences. Kanojia and Rathore (2025) similarly argue that dynamic digital engagement enables smarter selling and improved customer retention (Saxena & Vidani, 2023).

In Ahmedabad, SMEs increasingly use Instagram reels, Facebook ads, and WhatsApp groups to showcase products, respond to customer queries, and generate leads. For instance, boutique garment shops use influencer marketing to promote their collections, while local restaurants leverage Swiggy and Zomato campaigns for visibility.

4.2 Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

SEO enhances online visibility by improving a website's ranking on search engines. SMEs often struggle with limited budgets for paid advertising, making SEO an essential strategy. Sharabati et al. (2024) identify SEO as a major contributor to SME performance. Deku et al. (2024) also highlight its role in customer acquisition and retention (Vidani, Das, Meghrajani, & Singh, 2023).

Ahmedabad SMEs, particularly in sectors such as tourism and education, benefit significantly from SEO by attracting students, travelers, and customers searching for local services (Vidani, Das, Meghrajani, & Chaudasi, 2023).

4.3 Online Advertising and Pay-Per-Click (PPC)

Online advertising, including Google Ads and social media campaigns, allows SMEs to target customers with precision. Prayogi and Subriadi (2024) note that such advertising is cost-efficient and highly measurable compared to traditional media. Raj and Tamilarasan (2023) emphasize that SMEs that cannot afford TV or print ads can use digital advertising to build awareness at lower costs.

In Ahmedabad, real estate SMEs increasingly rely on Facebook Ads and Google Ads to target homebuyers. The housing sector, in particular, demonstrates how digital ads can generate leads more efficiently than traditional billboards (Bansal, Pophalkar, & Vidani, 2023).

4.4 Customer Relationship Management (CRM) through Digital Platforms

CRM is integral to SME growth. Deku et al. (2024) show that digital marketing facilitates CRM by enabling personalized communication and long-term engagement. Kanojia and Rathore (2025) similarly highlight that digital marketing is not merely promotional but relational.

Ahmedabad SMEs, especially in the service sector, adopt digital CRM tools like Zoho and HubSpot to streamline communication, manage leads, and improve customer experience (Chaudhary, Patel, & Vidani, 2023).

5. Challenges and Barriers to Adoption

While digital marketing provides significant opportunities, SMEs face multiple barriers in adopting these strategies (Patel, Chaudhary, & Vidani, 2023).

- **Limited Financial Resources:** Raj and Tamilarasan (2023) emphasize that many SMEs operate on tight budgets, making it difficult to invest in professional digital tools or hire skilled marketers (Sharma & Vidani, 2023).
- **Lack of Expertise:** Jadhav et al. (2023) highlight that digital marketing adoption is still embryonic in India, with many SMEs lacking the knowledge and technical skills required to design and implement effective campaigns.
- **Resistance to Change:** Sharabati et al. (2024) point out that SME managers' perception of ease and usefulness directly affects adoption. In conservative business cultures such as Ahmedabad's textile industry, resistance to new technologies can slow digital adoption.
- **Dynamic Nature of Digital Platforms:** Raj and Tamilarasan (2023) argue that constant algorithm updates and shifting consumer behavior make it difficult for SMEs to keep up.
- **Digital Divide:** While urban SMEs benefit from better infrastructure, many still lack consistent access to advanced digital tools, especially smaller businesses on the outskirts of Ahmedabad (Sharma & Vidani, 2023).

RESEARCH GAP

Although extensive research has been conducted globally on digital marketing and its influence on business growth, a significant scholarly gap persists regarding its specific adoption and efficacy within the Indian Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector. The prevailing literature has predominantly focused on large corporations or urban-based firms that inherently possess the financial resources and technical expertise to implement sophisticated digital strategies effectively. Consequently, there is a critical lack of empirical research examining how SMEs—particularly those in emerging industrial cities and semi-urban areas—perceive, adopt, and ultimately benefit from digital marketing. This study seeks to address this void by focusing on Ahmedabad, a major commercial hub, to provide a nuanced understanding of the drivers, barriers, and tangible impacts of digital marketing in a context where resources are often constrained and digital literacy is evolving.

Another key gap lies in the lack of studies that integrate demographic factors such as age, education, and years of operation with digital adoption behavior. Few researchers have systematically analyzed how these human and organizational characteristics shape SMEs' readiness to embrace digital transformation. Additionally, while prior research emphasizes the advantages of digital marketing, fewer studies have explored the challenges and barriers that SMEs face, such as insufficient training, limited financial resources, and inadequate government support.

Furthermore, most available studies are conceptual or descriptive in nature and lack quantitative validation using tools like SPSS, reliability analysis, and hypothesis testing. This leaves a gap in statistically supported evidence linking digital adoption to improved performance outcomes. Hence, this study aims to fill these research voids by providing data-driven insights into the extent, determinants, and impacts of digital marketing adoption among SMEs, ultimately contributing to both academic understanding and practical business applications.

HYPOTHESIS

- Age*Our business actively uses digital marketing strategies (e.g., social media, SEO, online ads).
- Age*Digital marketing is more cost-effective than traditional marketing methods.
- Age*Using digital platforms has improved our customer engagement and interaction.
- Age*Digital marketing has helped us expand our customer base beyond local markets.
- Age*SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and Google Ads play a significant role in our business growth.
- Age*Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) are essential for promoting products.
- Age*Adoption of digital marketing has improved our sales and revenue performance.
- Age*Digital marketing provides better insights into customer needs and preferences compared to traditional methods.
- Age*Our business faces challenges in adopting digital marketing due to lack of expertise/resources.
- Age*(training, financial aid) is necessary to encourage digital adoption by SMEs.

Table 1: Validation Of Questionnaire

Statements	Citation
Our business actively uses digital marketing strategies (e.g., social media, SEO, online ads).	(Vidani, 2015)
Digital marketing is more cost-effective than traditional marketing methods.	(Vidani & Solanki, 2015)
Using digital platforms has improved our customer engagement and interaction.	(Vidani, 2015)
Digital marketing has helped us expand our customer base beyond local markets.	(Vidani, 2015)

SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and Google Ads play a significant role in our business growth.	(Vidani, 2015)
Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) are essential for promoting our products/services.	(Solanki & Vidani, 2016)
Adoption of digital marketing has improved our sales and revenue performance.	(Vidani, 2016)
Digital marketing provides better insights into customer needs and preferences compared to traditional methods.	(Bhatt, Patel, & Vidani, 2017)
Our business faces challenges in adopting digital marketing due to lack of expertise/resources.	(Niyati & Vidani, 2016)
Government/Industry support (e.g., training, financial aid) is necessary to encourage digital adoption by SMEs.	(Pradhan, Tshogay, & Vidani, 2016)

*Source: Author's compilation

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Table 2: Research Methodology

Research Design	Descriptive
Sample Method	Non-Probability - Convenient Sampling method
Data Collection Method	Primary method
Data Collection Method	Structured Questionnaire
Type of Questions	Close ended
Data Collection mode	Online through Google Form
Data Analysis methods	Tables
Data Analysis Tools	SPSS and Excel
Sampling Size	153
Survey Area	Ahmedabad
Sampling Unit	Business Owners.

*Source: Author's compilation

DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

The demographic profile of the respondents revealed that 75.2% were male and 24.8% were female, indicating a predominance of male participants in the study. In terms of age, the largest group (26.8%) belonged to the 47 years and above category, followed by 23.5% aged between 18–25 years. Regarding educational qualifications, 49.0% were graduates, 41.8% had completed HSC, and 9.2% were postgraduates. The respondents represented various business sectors, with manufacturing (42.5%) being

the most common, followed by trading/retail (30.7%), service (20.3%), and IT/tech-based businesses (6.5%). In terms of experience, 36.6% had been operating their business for more than 10 years, while 30.1% had 2-5 years of experience, indicating a well-distributed mix of new and experienced entrepreneurs.

CRONBACH ALPHA

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha. The analysis yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.920 for the 10 items, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the variables. This suggests that the items used in the instrument were well correlated and reliably measured the intended construct.

Table 3: Results Of Hypothesis Testing

Sr. No	Alternate Hypothesis	p-value	p = >< 0.05	Accept/Reject Null Hypothesis	R value	Relationship Summary
1	Age*Our business actively uses digital marketing strategies (e.g., social media, SEO, online ads).	0.028	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.080	Weak negative, significant relationship between Age and active use of digital marketing strategies
2	Age*Digital marketing is more cost-effective than traditional marketing methods.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.255	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and perception of cost-effectiveness
3	Age*Using digital platforms has improved our customer engagement and interaction.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.282	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and customer engagement improvement
4	Age*Digital marketing has helped us expand our customer base beyond local markets.	0.002	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.248	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and business expansion beyond local markets
5	Age*SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and Google Ads play a significant role in our business growth.	0.046	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.217	Weak to moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and role of SEO & Google Ads
6	Age*Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) are essential for promoting products.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.282	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and importance of social media platforms

Sr. No	Alternate Hypothesis	p-value	p = >< 0.05	Accept/Reject Null Hypothesis	R value	Relationship Summary
7	Age* Adoption of digital marketing has improved our sales and revenue performance.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.371	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and sales/revenue improvement
8	Age* Digital marketing provides better insights into customer needs and preferences compared to traditional methods.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.258	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and insights into customer needs
9	Age* Our business faces challenges in adopting digital marketing due to lack of expertise/resources.	0.023	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.336	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and challenges in digital marketing adoption
10	Age* (training, financial aid) is necessary to encourage digital adoption by SMEs.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	-0.356	Moderate negative, significant relationship between Age and need for government/industry support

*Source: Author's compilation

DISCUSSION

The study's results underscore the growing significance of digital marketing for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), revealing how business owners' demographic profiles shape their adoption of digital approaches. Surveying 153 entrepreneurs revealed a predominantly male participant pool (75.2%), with female representation at 24.8%. Age distribution showed the largest cohort (26.8%) was over 47 years, followed by 23.5% in the 18-25 age bracket, demonstrating engagement across generations. Educationally, nearly half (49%) of respondents held graduate degrees, indicating a generally well-educated entrepreneurial base likely more receptive to digital marketing implementation.

The sectoral distribution of respondents indicates that digital marketing adoption extends beyond traditional service industries. Manufacturing firms constituted the largest segment at 42.5%, followed by trading or retail (30.7%) and services (20.3%). This varied representation confirms that the perceived utility of digital tools is not confined to any single sector. Furthermore, a significant proportion of respondents (36.6%) represented established businesses with over a decade of

operation, indicating that the drive to reinforce market standing through digital strategies is common to both nascent and long-standing enterprises.

The frequency analysis reveals strong engagement with digital marketing among respondents. A significant portion (34%) strongly affirmed their active use of strategies like social media, SEO, and online advertising. This adoption correlates with positive business outcomes; 37.3% of respondents strongly agreed that digital marketing has directly boosted their sales and revenue, underscoring its tangible impact on performance. Furthermore, 36.6% strongly agreed that it has enabled them to reach customers beyond their local markets, highlighting the expanded geographic accessibility afforded by online platforms. The value of social media was particularly acknowledged, with 37.3% confirming that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are indispensable for promoting their products and services.

The reliability assessment for the ten digital marketing metrics (q6–q15) demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.920. This high reliability score confirms that the survey instrument effectively measured respondent perceptions across various digital marketing aspects, including cost-effectiveness, customer engagement, and performance improvement, with consistent results across all measured items.

Chi-square analysis further identified significant relationships between the age of the entrepreneurs and key digital marketing factors. A statistically significant association ($p = 0.028$) was found between age and the active use of digital strategies, revealing that younger business owners (aged 18-32) reported higher adoption rates compared to their older counterparts. Another significant relationship ($p = 0.000$) emerged between age and the perceived need for government or industry support, indicating that older entrepreneurs are more inclined to seek external assistance for digital transformation. Additionally, a significant link ($p = 0.023$) was identified between age and the challenges encountered in adoption, suggesting that age plays a role in technological adaptability and the effective utilization of resources.

In summary, the research reveals a favorable disposition among SMEs towards digital marketing, though barriers including insufficient expertise and financial constraints continue to impede comprehensive implementation. The findings highlight the necessity for tailored governmental initiatives, skill-development programs, and economic support mechanisms to improve digital proficiency and promote lasting integration of digital tools within the SME sector. Consequently, while digital marketing substantially enhances SME growth and market competitiveness, strategic interventions and increased awareness remain vital for optimizing its impact.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research advances scholarly understanding of digital marketing adoption in SMEs by empirically demonstrating how entrepreneur demographics – particularly age, education, and business experience – shape digital strategy implementation. The study theoretically strengthens and extends both the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT). Specifically, digital marketing adoption appears driven by perceptions of usefulness, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility. Businesses that recognized digital marketing's potential for enhancing

sales, customer engagement, and market expansion were more likely to integrate it into operations, corroborating TAM's proposition that perceived usefulness shapes technology adoption behavior.

The results further validate Rogers' Innovation Diffusion Theory, revealing how demographic characteristics influence innovation uptake. Younger entrepreneurs (18-32 years) demonstrated significantly higher adoption rates than older counterparts, reflecting generational disparities in technological readiness. This age-based divergence aligns with Rogers' "early adopter" classification, suggesting younger business owners possess greater digital adaptability and enthusiasm.

From a Resource-Based View (RBV) perspective, digital marketing emerges as a strategic organizational asset that can enhance competitive positioning through improved customer reach and engagement. The analysis indicates that SMEs with sufficient digital expertise and financial capabilities achieved superior marketing outcomes, while resource-constrained firms faced implementation barriers. This supports RBV's central tenet that valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resources underpin sustainable competitive advantage.

The study also provides evidence supporting Institutional Theory, as many respondents—particularly older entrepreneurs—emphasized the need for government and industry support through training and financial incentives. This underscores how external institutional pressures and support mechanisms significantly influence technological adoption decisions in SMEs.

The high reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.920) further validates the internal consistency of digital marketing constructs including cost-effectiveness, customer engagement, and sales performance. By integrating TAM, IDT, RBV, and Institutional Theory, this research offers a multifaceted theoretical framework for understanding digital transformation in SMEs, particularly within emerging economies. These insights suggest future research should continue developing integrated models that collectively explain digital adoption behavior across the SME sector.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research offers actionable insights for SME owners, policymakers, and support organizations seeking to enhance digital marketing adoption. The results confirm that digital tools significantly improve growth, customer engagement, and competitiveness for small and medium enterprises, making their integration a business imperative.

To facilitate broader adoption, the following practical measures are recommended:

- 1. Skill Development Programs:** Given the lower digital adoption rates among older entrepreneurs (over 47 years), targeted training initiatives are essential. Business development agencies should collaborate with digital experts to deliver hands-on workshops focusing on practical, low-cost strategies. These programs should build both technical competence and confidence in using digital tools.
- 2. Policy Support Mechanisms:** The recognized need for external support suggests policymakers should develop specialized digital transformation programs. These could include financial incentives, tax benefits, and subsidized digital

infrastructure to reduce cost barriers. Public-private partnerships can further amplify these efforts through shared training platforms and awareness campaigns.

3. **Strategic Resource Allocation:** SMEs should deliberately allocate marketing budgets to digital initiatives, integrating approaches like content marketing and social media advertising. Utilizing analytics tools can help optimize campaigns and improve return on investment through data-driven decisions.
4. **Tailored Business Solutions:** Digital marketing agencies and technology firms should develop affordable service packages specifically designed for SME requirements. Business incubators can support this through shared resources, consulting services, and simplified marketing automation tools.
5. **Organizational Integration:** Digital marketing should be embedded as a core business strategy rather than treated as an ancillary activity. Continuous skill development and regular technology updates will help SMEs maintain competitiveness in the evolving digital landscape.

Through these coordinated efforts – combining targeted training, policy support, strategic budgeting, and specialized services – SMEs can overcome existing barriers and fully leverage digital marketing for sustainable growth and market expansion.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) adopt and utilize digital marketing, with a specific focus on the influence of owner demographics—including age, education, and business sector—on their level of digital engagement. The results establish digital marketing as a critical driver of competitiveness, sales growth, and market expansion for SMEs. By analyzing the extent of adoption, key challenges, and perceived benefits, this research offers a comprehensive view of how digital transformation is reshaping small business operations.

Demographic profiling of the respondents showed a predominantly male ownership (75.2%), with the largest age cohorts being entrepreneurs over 47 (26.8%) and those between 18–25 years (23.5%). Education emerged as a significant factor, with 49% of business owners holding graduate degrees, suggesting a link between formal education and digital readiness. Sector-wise, manufacturing was most represented (42.5%), followed by trading and retail (30.7%). Notably, over a third of the businesses (36.6%) had been operating for more than ten years, indicating that digital marketing is being embraced by both new and long-established firms.

The measurement instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.920, confirming the internal consistency of digital marketing constructs such as social media use, SEO, cost-effectiveness, and customer engagement. Chi-square tests revealed statistically significant relationships between the age of entrepreneurs and several digital marketing dimensions: active usage ($p = 0.028$), perceived need for government support ($p = 0.000$), challenges related to expertise ($p = 0.023$), and sales improvement ($p = 0.000$). These results highlight that younger entrepreneurs are generally more proactive in digital adoption, while older business owners often face barriers that may require external support or training.

The study further affirms the positive impact of digital marketing on SME performance. A considerable number of respondents reported that digital platforms – including social media, SEO, and online advertising – have become essential for brand promotion and customer interaction. Many also recognized digital marketing as a cost-effective alternative to traditional methods, offering valuable customer insights and enhancing market reach. This underscores that digital transformation not only increases visibility but also strengthens customer relationships and sustains long-term competitiveness.

In summary, this research confirms that digital marketing represents both an opportunity and a strategic necessity for SMEs. While younger, digitally literate entrepreneurs are naturally advancing adoption, there is a clear need for structured support – such as government-led training, financial incentives, and industry partnerships – to ensure broader inclusion. The findings reinforce that strategic digital marketing implementation significantly contributes to business growth, innovation, and customer satisfaction. Therefore, SMEs should prioritize ongoing digital skill development and infrastructure investment to build resilience and ensure sustainable growth in an increasingly digital marketplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study offers valuable insights into digital marketing adoption among SMEs while highlighting several promising directions for future research. As digital transformation accelerates, subsequent studies can build upon these findings to develop a more nuanced understanding of how SMEs across different sectors, regions, and technological contexts navigate digital marketing.

Longitudinal Research: Future investigations could adopt longitudinal approaches to track how digital marketing adoption evolves over time. While this study provides a current snapshot, long-term research could reveal patterns in technological adaptation, the sustainability of digital strategies, and their lasting impact on business performance, brand loyalty, and innovation.

Sector-Specific Analysis: Further research should examine digital marketing practices within specific industrial sectors. Although this study encompassed manufacturing, trading, services, and IT, each sector possesses distinct marketing requirements and operational constraints. Targeted studies could yield tailored digital strategies for e-commerce in retail, automation in manufacturing, or customer relationship management in service industries.

Policy and Ecosystem Influence: Future work could explore how government policies, financial institutions, and broader digital ecosystems affect SME digitalization. The significant relationship between government support and digital adoption ($p = 0.000$) identified in this study suggests that policy interventions deserve closer examination, particularly regarding their impact on digital literacy and infrastructure development in semi-urban and rural regions.

Emerging Technologies: Research into how SMEs can leverage advanced technologies like artificial intelligence, automation, and big data analytics represents another important direction. Understanding barriers to adopting these tools – including cost, training requirements, and technical knowledge – would provide valuable guidance for both policymakers and industry practitioners.

Behavioral Dimensions: Future studies could benefit from investigating human and organizational factors influencing digital adoption, including entrepreneurial mindset, digital literacy, staff capabilities, and organizational culture. Incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups could yield richer insights into the psychological and managerial dimensions underlying digital transformation.

Geographical Expansion: Broadening the geographical scope of research would help illuminate regional variations in digital adoption. Comparative studies between urban and rural SMEs, or across different economic regions, could enhance our understanding of how socioeconomic factors shape digital marketing practices.

In summary, future research should integrate technological, behavioral, and policy perspectives to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding digital marketing adoption in SMEs. As digital transformation continues to reshape business landscapes, such research will be crucial for developing evidence-based strategies that enhance SME resilience, innovation, and global competitiveness through sustainable digital practices.

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