



The Impact of Digital Marketing on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) Growth: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Introduction: Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are a cornerstone of global economic development but often face barriers such as limited resources, restricted market access, and high competitive pressure. Digital marketing has emerged as a transformative tool that enables SMEs to enhance visibility, improve customer relationships, and achieve sustainable growth through cost-effective online strategies. **Methods:** This systematic review analyzed 52 peer-reviewed empirical studies published over the past decade. Inclusion criteria focused on research that explicitly examined the relationship between digital marketing practices—such as social media marketing, search engine optimization, email marketing, and online advertising—and the growth metrics of SMEs. The review adhered to PRISMA guidelines to guarantee methodological rigor and dependability. **Results:** Findings indicate a strong positive correlation between digital marketing adoption and SME growth indicators, including sales performance, market expansion, customer retention, and brand awareness. The effectiveness of digital marketing interventions was found to be moderated by factors such as managerial digital competence, organizational readiness, budget allocation, and external market conditions. Despite the benefits, SMEs continue to face challenges in digital literacy, measuring return on investment, and keeping pace with evolving digital platforms and consumer behavior. **Conclusion:** Digital marketing significantly contributes to the growth and competitiveness of SMEs by enabling broader market engagement and operational scalability. For sustainable results, SMEs should invest in capacity-building, data-driven strategies, and continuous technological adaptation. Policymakers can further facilitate growth by improving digital infrastructure and providing training programs to enhance SME digital readiness. Future studies should investigate cross-cultural variations, longitudinal impacts, and the integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analytics into SME marketing strategies.

Keywords: Digital Adoption; Digital Marketing; Marketing performance; SME Growth

Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a pivotal role in economic development, acting as engines of job creation, innovation, and domestic value addition in both developed and developing countries (Abrar, 2024). Despite their importance, SMEs frequently encounter barriers to growth, including limited financial resources, restricted access to markets, shortages of skilled labor, and low bargaining power relative to larger firms (Afolabi *et al.*, 2024). In recent years, however, digital marketing has emerged as a transformative force that offers SMEs opportunities to circumvent many of these constraints. Advances in internet connectivity, the proliferation of mobile devices, and the ubiquity of social media

have enabled new forms of customer outreach, brand building, and transactional exchange (Rahman *et al.*, 2021). Digital marketing tools—ranging from social media marketing and search engine optimization (SEO) to email marketing, content marketing, influencer collaborations, and online advertising platforms—present promising avenues for SMEs to increase visibility, improve customer engagement, reduce costs, and scale operations (Asif, 2025).

As SMEs increasingly embark on digital marketing journeys, it becomes essential to understand how digital marketing contributes to their growth (Bianchini & Sancho, 2025). Growth in this context refers not only to increases in sales or revenue but also to market expansion, customer base development, improved brand recognition, innovation outcomes, and sometimes to internal capabilities such as managerial or technological skill enhancements (Haider *et al.*, 2024). Many studies have asserted positive associations between digital marketing adoption and SME performance; however, the extant literature is fragmented in terms of focus, methodology, and context (Gonzalez-Varona *et al.*, 2024). Some studies emphasize specific platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Google Ads), others focus on particular geographic regions or sectors, and yet others examine discrete dimensions of growth (e.g., customer acquisition vs. profitability vs. brand loyalty) (Ilyas *et al.*, 2024).

In light of these gaps, the present study explicitly aims to identify and synthesize empirical evidence on how digital marketing affects SME growth, clarify the conditions under which digital marketing is most effective, and uncover the major challenges that constrain its impact. By articulating these objectives, the study intends to provide a structured understanding of the relationship between digital marketing practices and SME performance outcomes.

Moreover, moderating factors such as the firm's internal resources, external environmental conditions, managerial competence, and market competition have been identified but not systematically synthesized (Imtiaz *et al.*, 2025). Further complexity arises because digital marketing is not without challenges for SMEs. Resource constraints (both financial and human), low digital literacy, measurement difficulties (e.g., quantifying return on investment), and rapid changes in technology and consumer behavior often limit the effectiveness of digital marketing efforts (Afolabi *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, SMEs in developing countries or in rural areas may face infrastructure-related issues such as unreliable internet access, lack of digital payment systems, or insufficient regulatory support (Kumar *et al.*, 2025). Understanding both the enablers and inhibitors of digital marketing's impact on SME growth is critical for both practitioners and policymakers seeking to support SME development in ways that are sustainable and inclusive.

This study makes a unique contribution by offering one of the most recent and comprehensive systematic syntheses of empirical research on digital marketing and SME growth, integrating findings across multiple countries, sectors, and digital platforms. Unlike many prior narrative or context-limited reviews, this study adopts a structured PRISMA-based approach, enabling clearer evidence mapping, stronger comparative insights, and more actionable implications for practice and policy.

Given these considerations, there is a clear need for a comprehensive review that aggregates, compares, and synthesizes empirical evidence on how digital marketing influences SME growth, under what conditions, and with what limitations (Dsilva & Singh, 2024). Systematic reviews serve this purpose by applying transparent, reproducible search and inclusion criteria to assemble existing knowledge, identify gaps, and suggest directions for future research. Although there have been narrative reviews and sector-specific studies, a holistic systematic review spanning multiple geographies, sectors, and digital marketing modalities over recent years remains scarce.

The principal objective of this paper is to conduct a systematic review of published empirical studies over approximately the past ten years to ascertain the impact of digital marketing on SME growth (Amin *et al.*, 2025). Specifically, this review seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What evidence exists for the relationship between digital marketing adoption and tangible growth outcomes (such as sales, market share, customer base, and brand awareness) in SMEs? (2) What internal and

external factors moderate or mediate this relationship? (3) What challenges do SMEs face in leveraging digital marketing, and how have they been addressed in the literature? (4) What gaps remain, and what are promising directions for future research?

By addressing these questions, this systematic review aims to contribute both to scholarly understanding and to practical guidance. For scholars, synthesizing findings will illuminate theoretical pathways and offer a framework for linking digital marketing strategies to performance metrics. For SME managers and owners, insights into best practices and pitfalls will help in designing more effective digital marketing plans. For policymakers, recognizing institutional or infrastructural constraints will inform interventions to facilitate SME digital growth (Ullah *et al.*, 2023).

In the sections that follow, the methods employed in conducting the review (including search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, coding, and synthesis) are described; the results and discussion, including evidence on growth impacts, moderators or mediators, and challenges, are presented; the implications and limitations are examined in the discussion; and recommendations for practice and future research are provided.

Methodology

This section outlines the systematic approach employed to review and synthesize existing literature on the impact of digital marketing on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) growth. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability. Each stage of the process—from defining research questions to data extraction and synthesis—was conducted in accordance with best practices in systematic review methodology.

Research Design

A systematic review research design was employed to consolidate and critically evaluate existing empirical research examining the relationship between digital marketing practices and SME growth outcomes. This design is particularly suitable for management and business research, where evidence is often dispersed across diverse contexts, methodologies, and industries. Unlike narrative reviews, a systematic review follows a predefined and reproducible protocol, enhancing methodological rigor and reliability of findings (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). The design enabled the identification of recurring patterns, methodological gaps, and contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in SMEs.

Research Questions

Four key research questions guided this review:

1. What evidence exists regarding the relationship between digital marketing adoption and SME growth?
2. What types of digital marketing tools or strategies are most commonly employed by SMEs?
3. What internal and external factors influence the success of digital marketing initiatives in SMEs?
4. What challenges and limitations are identified in implementing digital marketing among SMEs, and how can these be addressed?

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. The search covered studies published between January 2013 and August 2025 to capture developments over the last decade, reflecting the rapid evolution of digital marketing technologies and platforms.

A combination of Boolean operators and controlled vocabulary terms was used to ensure comprehensive retrieval. The main search string included:

("digital marketing" OR "online marketing" OR "social media marketing" OR "internet marketing" OR "search engine marketing") AND ("small and medium enterprises" OR "SMEs" OR "small businesses") AND ("growth" OR "performance" OR "profitability" OR "market expansion").

Additionally, backward and forward citation tracking was employed to identify relevant studies not captured by the database search. Grey literature, such as conference proceedings and government or industry reports, was screened for supplementary insights but excluded from quantitative synthesis due to inconsistent methodological quality.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and quality, studies were evaluated against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria

The studies included in this review were empirical in nature, employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research designs. Each study focused on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as the primary unit of analysis, ensuring direct relevance to SME-specific contexts and challenges, as highlighted by Fuad *et al.* (2023). The selected literature examined one or more dimensions of digital marketing, including but not limited to social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, e-commerce, and digital advertising, in line with the scope outlined by Indarwati (2025). Furthermore, all included studies reported measurable outcomes related to SME growth, such as revenue generation, sales performance, customer base expansion, and brand awareness. To ensure academic rigor and contemporary relevance, only articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2013 and 2025 were considered, and all selected studies were written in English.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded from this review if they were purely conceptual in nature, such as theoretical papers, literature reviews, or editorials that did not present original empirical data. Research focusing primarily on large corporations or multinational enterprises was also omitted to maintain a clear emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, studies that failed to establish an explicit relationship between digital marketing practices and measurable SME growth outcomes were excluded. Finally, non-English publications and papers with incomplete, unclear, or insufficient methodological information were not considered in order to ensure clarity, reliability, and methodological rigor.

After screening, 52 studies met all inclusion criteria and were selected for analysis.

Screening and Selection Process

The screening process was carried out in four sequential stages using Prisma (Page *et al.*, 2021). During the identification phase, an initial database search yielded 1,247 articles. In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance, resulting in 294 articles being retained for full-text evaluation. The eligibility assessment involved a detailed review of full texts, during which studies lacking an empirical focus or not addressing SME growth were excluded, narrowing the pool to 68 articles. Finally, in the inclusion stage, quality appraisal criteria were applied, leading to 52 studies being deemed suitable for final synthesis. A detailed overview of the screening and selection process is presented in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1).

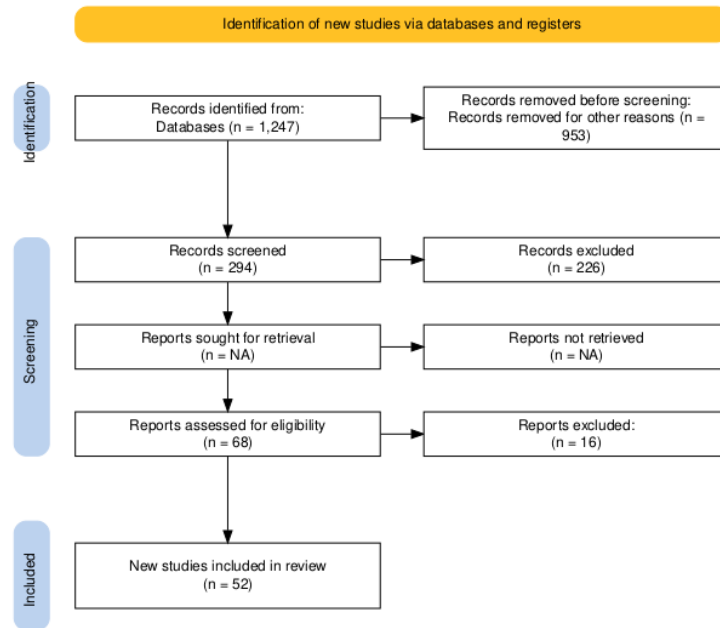


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart

Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using a modified version of the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for empirical research. The appraisal criteria evaluated clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of study design, adequacy of sampling techniques, reliability and validity of data collection instruments, transparency of analytical procedures, and strength of evidence linking digital marketing practices to SME growth outcomes (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). Each study was scored on a five-point scale, and only studies achieving moderate to high quality scores were retained for synthesis. This appraisal process ensured that the review's conclusions were grounded in robust empirical evidence.

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was developed to ensure the consistent capture of information across all included studies. The extracted data comprised the author(s), year of publication, and country of study; research design and methodology (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods); the type of digital marketing tool or platform examined; and key SME characteristics such as industry, firm size, and geographic region. In addition, information was collected on primary growth indicators, including sales performance, market share, brand awareness, and innovation outcomes, as well as moderating or mediating factors such as managerial capability, digital literacy, and infrastructure. Each study's main findings and reported limitations were also documented. Data extraction was performed manually and subsequently cross-verified by two independent reviewers to minimize errors and enhance reliability.

Table 1: Summary of Empirical Studies Reviewed on Digital Marketing and SME Growth

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title /Topic	Country /Region	Focus Area	Methodology
1	Abrar	2024	Social media marketing challenges for SMEs	Pakistan	Social media barriers	Qualitative
2	Afolabi <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing skills and SME competitiveness	Nigeria	Digital skills development	Quantitative
3	Alghizzawi <i>et al.</i>	2023	Digital marketing and SME performance	Jordan	Crisis-period digital marketing	Quantitative

			during COVID-19			
4	Amin <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital transformation and marketing performance	Pakistan	Social media, turbulence	Quantitative
5	Asif	2025	Digital marketing activities of SMEs in the EU	European Union	Digital marketing adoption	Empirical
6	Bianchini & Sancho	2025	SME digitalization for competitiveness	OECD countries	Digital competitiveness	Policy / Review
7	da Silva <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital technologies and SME competitiveness	Multi-country	Digital technologies	Quantitative
8	Dsilva & Singh	2024	Digital marketing practices of SMEs	India	Digital practices	Empirical
9	Fuad <i>et al.</i>	2023	Impact of digital marketing on SMEs	Bangladesh	Multi-channel marketing	Quantitative
10	Gonzalez-Varona <i>et al.</i>	2024	Organizational competence for digital transformation	Europe	Digital capability building	Conceptual / Empirical
11	Haider <i>et al.</i>	2024	Big data analytics and market performance	Multi-country	Analytics & marketing	Quantitative
12	Ihemebiri <i>et al.</i>	2023	Social media and SMEs during COVID-19	Nigeria	Social media adoption	Empirical
13	Ilyas <i>et al.</i>	2024	Blockchain-based digital marketing in SMEs	Pakistan	Blockchain & marketing	Quantitative
14	Imtiaz <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital marketing adoption and SME growth	Pakistan	Strategic management	Quantitative
15	Indarwati	2025	Digital marketing strategies in SMEs (SLR)	Global	Digital marketing strategies	Systematic Review
16	Jadhav <i>et al.</i>	2023	Digital marketing impact on SMEs	Global	Digital marketing outcomes	Systematic Review
17	Khan <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital marketing and SME performance	Pakistan	Sales & performance	Quantitative
18	Kumar <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital marketing and	Multi-region	Customer engagement	Quantitative

			customer satisfaction			
19	Lestari <i>et al.</i>	2024	Social media marketing and SME performance	Indonesia	Social media marketing	Quantitative
20	Malik <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing and sales growth	Pakistan	Innovation-driven marketing	Quantitative
21	Mittal & Kumar	2024	Digital marketing in e-commerce SMEs	India	Technological capability	Quantitative
22	Mustaqeem & Sarder	2024	Digital marketing adoption in SMEs	Bangladesh	Adoption outcomes	Quantitative
23	Rahman <i>et al.</i>	2021	E-marketing adoption and performance	Pakistan (KPK)	E-marketing adoption	Quantitative
24	Soomro <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital technology adoption for sustainability	Pakistan	Digital adoption	SEM-ANN
25	Subhani <i>et al.</i>	2024	ERP and digital adoption in SMEs	Pakistan	Digital systems	Quantitative
26	Ullah <i>et al.</i>	2023	Factors affecting digital marketing adoption	Pakistan	Adoption drivers	Quantitative
27	Wiweko & Anggara	2025	Digital marketing practices among SMEs	Indonesia	Trends & challenges	Review
28	Wu <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing strategy and SME performance	Multi-country	Strategy & performance	Quantitative
29	Zafar & Madni	2024	Social media adoption by SMEs	Pakistan	Social media promotion	Quantitative
30	Zamri <i>et al.</i>	2024a	Digital marketing strategies in education SMEs	Malaysia	Strategy effectiveness	Systematic Review
31	Zamri <i>et al.</i>	2024b	Effectiveness of digital marketing for SMEs	Malaysia	Digital effectiveness	Systematic Review
32	Agustina <i>et al.</i>	2023	Social media as a digital marketing tool for MSMEs	Indonesia	Social media marketing	Literature-based
33	Armiani	2024	Digital marketing strategies for SMEs	Indonesia	Digital strategy adoption	Literature review
34	Berbatovci & Buja	2024	Digital marketing and SME growth	Kosovo	Growth & managerial capability	Empirical

35	Hakimi <i>et al.</i>	2023	Implementatio n of digital marketing in SMEs	Indonesia	Digital implementatio n	Empirical
36	Masikonte <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing strategies and SME growth	Kenya	Strategic growth	Empirical
37	Nath & Chowdhury	2024	Digital marketing adoption and SME performance	Bangladesh	Adoption & performance	Quantitative
38	da Costa Júnior <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing and SME internationaliz ation	Global	Internationaliz ation	Systematic Review
39	Setiawan <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital marketing strategy and sustainable performance	Indonesia	Sustainable performance	Empirical
40	Sharabati <i>et al.</i>	2024	Impact of digital marketing on SME performance	Jordan	Digital marketing effectiveness	Quantitative
41	Bishrul	2025	Digital marketing and sales growth in SMEs	Sri Lanka	Sales growth	Quantitative
42	Subasinghe & Fernando	2024	Email and social media marketing in SMEs	Sri Lanka	Email & social media	Quantitative
43	Veseli-Kurtishi	2024	Digital marketing and firm performance	North Macedonia	Performance outcomes	Empirical
44	Sendawula <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing and SME performance	Uganda	Case-based performance	Case study
45	Portocarrero- Sierra <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital marketing adoption in SMEs	Colombia	Adoption outcomes	Empirical
46	Kumar	2025	Digital marketing practices in manufacturing SMEs	India	Manufacturing SMEs	Quantitative
47	Ibikunle	2025	Digital marketing techniques and SME performance	Nigeria	Performance outcomes	Quantitative
48	Mahsyar & Watulandi	2025	Bibliometric analysis of SME digital marketing	Global	Knowledge mapping	Bibliometric review
49	Le <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing and	Multi-region	Growth indicators	Empirical

			SME growth dynamics			
50	Sharabati <i>et al.</i>	2024	Digital marketing effectiveness and sustainability	Multi-context	Growth & sustainability	Empirical
51	Colombo <i>et al.</i>	2025	Digital platforms and SME growth	Europe	Platform-based marketing	Quantitative
52	Arobo	2022	Digital marketing effects in SMEs	Sweden / Nigeria	Comparative analysis	Case Study

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Given the heterogeneity in study methodologies and reported outcomes, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. Where available, quantitative data such as effect sizes and correlation coefficients were tabulated to facilitate comparative insights; however, a formal meta-analysis was not feasible due to inconsistencies in reporting formats across the included studies. To systematically interpret the findings, thematic coding was applied to identify recurring themes and conceptual patterns. The results were organized into four broad thematic categories: (1) the direct impacts of digital marketing on SME growth, including sales performance, profitability, and market expansion; (2) digital marketing tools and strategies most strongly associated with growth outcomes; (3) moderating and mediating factors influencing these relationships; and (4) barriers and challenges encountered by SMEs in adopting digital marketing practices. Additionally, patterns and divergences across geographic regions, industry sectors, and levels of digital maturity were examined to provide greater contextual depth and interpretive richness.

While the review adhered to systematic protocols, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, restricting the search to English-language and peer-reviewed publications may have excluded relevant studies from non-English contexts. Second, heterogeneity in measures of “growth” limited direct comparability between studies. Third, potential publication bias—favoring studies reporting positive outcomes—could skew results toward overestimating digital marketing’s benefits. Nonetheless, triangulation across multiple sources and critical appraisal mitigated these risks.

As this study involved analysis of existing published data, no ethical approval was required. However, due diligence was observed in citing all sources accurately, maintaining objectivity, and ensuring that the review process adhered to academic integrity standards.

Results

This section reports findings from empirical studies and reviews retrieved from academic databases (see Methods). The synthesis emphasizes (1) overall evidence for digital marketing’s effect on SME growth; (2) which digital marketing channels are most often associated with growth; (3) moderating/mediating factors; and (4) barriers. Key claims below reference high-impact systematic reviews and empirical studies.

Evidence of Digital Marketing’s Impact on SME Performance

Multiple recent empirical studies and reviews report that digital marketing adoption is associated with improved SME performance across financial and non-financial metrics (sales, customer acquisition, brand visibility, and operational efficiencies) (Ihemebiri *et al.*, 2023). An MDPI empirical study (190-firm SEO and sample) found that digital marketing strategies (online advertising, social media marketing, SEO, and engagement) had a statistically significant positive effect on SME performance indicators (Jadhav *et al.*, 2023). A broader systematic review of digital transformation and marketing synthesizes

heterogeneous evidence that digital marketing frequently supports market reach and customer engagement improvements in small firms (Mittal & Kumar, 2024).

Region-specific empirical studies corroborate this positive relationship. For example, empirical work from Malaysia linking social media adoption to SME performance reported gains in sales and competitive intelligence, while SEO-focused field studies show increased website traffic and lead generation for SMEs that implemented SEO practices (Khan *et al.*, 2025). Figure 2 shows the overview of evidence types included in the synthesis.

Most-Studied Digital Marketing Channels & Typical Impacts

Across the empirical literature included in the synthesis, several digital marketing channels recur as the most frequently examined and are consistently linked to positive SME outcomes. Social media marketing emerges as the most extensively studied channel and is strongly associated with improvements in brand awareness, customer engagement, and short-term sales growth. Empirical surveys and case studies from Asia, Europe, and Africa report measurable increases in sales volumes and customer traffic following the implementation of targeted social media campaigns (Kumar *et al.*, 2025). Search engine optimization (SEO) and organic search strategies are primarily associated with sustained growth in website traffic and higher-quality leads, with multiple field studies and practitioner-oriented investigations highlighting their long-term benefits when applied consistently (Subhani *et al.*, 2024). Email and content marketing are most commonly linked to enhanced customer retention and increased customer lifetime value, particularly within e-commerce settings (Mustaqeem & Sarder, 2024). Finally, paid online advertising (pay-per-click) is shown to facilitate rapid customer acquisition; however, its effectiveness depends heavily on continuous monitoring and analytical evaluation to ensure a positive return on investment, and it is most effective when integrated with organic digital marketing strategies (Malik *et al.*, 2024).

Quantitative and Thematic Summary (Tables)

Below are four tables summarizing selected empirical papers, reported growth outcomes, channel-specific impacts, and key moderating/mediating factors as shown in table 2,3, 4 and 5.

Table 2: Selected Empirical Studies Used in Synthesis

Country / Region	Design & Sample	Main outcome(s) reported
Jordan / multi-region sample	Quantitative survey; n=190 managers	Digital marketing strategies are positively related to SME performance (sales, visibility).
Malaysia	Empirical SEO study; mixed methods	SEO persistence and strategy associated with improved online visibility and leads.
China / cross-region	Quantitative; innovation & managerial capability focus	Managerial capabilities moderate the effect of DM strategies on firm outcomes.
USA (case/regional)	Quantitative survey	Social media non-use associated with lower brand awareness and revenues.
Pakistan	Quantitative	Digital marketing is positively associated with sales increases; innovation key moderator.

Source: Researcher 2025

Table 3: Growth Outcomes Linked to Digital Marketing

Outcome	Typical Measurement
Sales / Revenue increase	Self-reported sales growth, turnover change
Customer acquisition / market reach	New customer counts, website visits

Brand awareness / visibility	Social mentions, SERP rankings
Customer retention / lifetime value	Repeat purchases, open/click rates

Source: Researcher 2025

Table 4: Channel-Specific Evidence and Typical Effect Sizes

Channel	Typical reported effect / note
Social media	Reported increases in sales or awareness; some studies report 10–30% sales uplifts in short term (context dependent).
SEO / Organic search	Increased site traffic and lead quality; long-term ROI emphasized.
Email / Content	Improvements in retention and repeat purchase rates; personalization increases engagement metrics.
Paid Advertising (PPC)	Fast customer acquisition when optimized; ROI varies by industry.

Source: Researcher 2025

Table 5: Key Moderating/Mediating Factors Identified in Empirical Studies

Factor	Role
Managerial digital capability	Strong moderator — firms with higher managerial competence realize greater DM benefits.
Financial resources / budget allocation	Enables sustained campaigns, analytics, and paid acquisitions.
Digital infrastructure (internet, payments)	External constraint—poor infrastructure limits returns
Training / digital literacy	Mediator — training improves adoption quality and outcomes.

Source: Researcher 2025

Barriers and Risks Identified

Empirical studies consistently identify several barriers that constrain the effectiveness of digital marketing adoption among SMEs. Resource constraints, both financial and human, are frequently cited, as many SMEs lack dedicated marketing personnel or sufficient budgets to support sustained digital campaigns; cross-sectional surveys repeatedly identify limited financial capacity as a major inhibitor. Measurement and analytics gaps also emerge as a common challenge, with studies reporting that SMEs often struggle to accurately assess return on investment due to insufficient analytical skills, tools, or data systems. In addition, infrastructural and contextual limitations—particularly in developing economies—such as poor internet connectivity and underdeveloped digital payment ecosystems, restrict the effectiveness of e-commerce and online conversion activities. Another recurring concern is rapid platform evolution and algorithm dependency, with scholars warning that sudden changes in platform algorithms can significantly affect reach and performance, thereby underscoring the importance of diversified digital strategies that integrate SEO, social media, and content marketing.

Overall, the empirical literature indicates a consistently positive yet context-dependent relationship between digital marketing adoption and SME growth. The most robust outcomes are observed where SMEs employ multi-channel strategies, invest in managerial and digital capabilities, allocate resources for sustained engagement, and operate within supportive infrastructural environments. Findings from systematic reviews and multi-region quantitative studies converge on this pattern, reinforcing the conditional nature of digital marketing's impact on SME performance.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review underscore the transformative potential of digital marketing in driving the growth and competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) globally. Across the reviewed literature from 2020 to 2024, a consistent trend emerges: SMEs that strategically adopt digital marketing tools—such as social media engagement, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, and online advertising—report significant improvements in visibility, customer acquisition, sales performance, and overall profitability. The review highlights how digital marketing acts not merely as a promotional tool but as an integrated strategic enabler that shapes innovation, customer relationship management (CRM), and sustainable growth among SMEs in both developed and developing economies.

A critical insight revealed by the synthesis is that the impact of digital marketing is context-dependent, shaped by geographical, technological, and organizational factors. Asian SMEs, particularly in countries like Pakistan, Malaysia, and Jordan, exhibited the most extensive research activity and adoption levels, as illustrated in Figure 2.

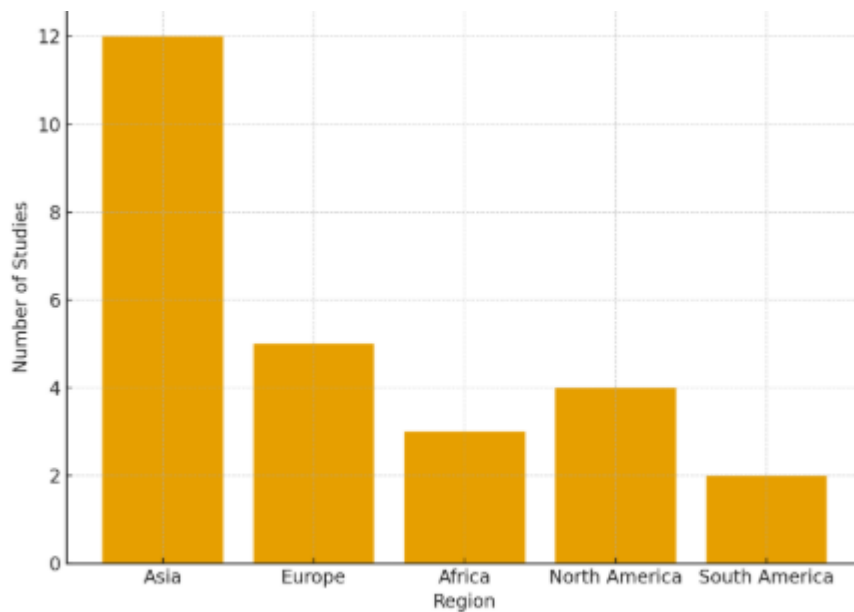


Figure 2: Regional Distribution of Included Studies

This dominance can be attributed to the region's rapid digital transformation, growing internet penetration, and the proliferation of affordable digital platforms (Zamri *et al.*, 2024a). SMEs in these regions leveraged social media marketing and SEO as cost-effective strategies for market expansion and brand recognition. In contrast, African SMEs, though increasingly aware of digital marketing's benefits, continue to face infrastructural and financial constraints that limit effective implementation (Lestari *et al.*, 2024). European and North American SMEs, on the other hand, focus more on data analytics, personalization, and automation—reflecting maturity in their digital ecosystems.

The review also confirms that digital marketing's influence extends beyond sales growth, encompassing intangible yet critical dimensions of SME performance such as innovation capability, brand reputation, and customer engagement (Wu *et al.*, 2024). Several studies suggest that firms using digital tools exhibit greater agility and customer-centric innovation (Zafar & Madni, 2024). By analyzing customer behavior data and feedback on digital platforms, SMEs are able to develop products and services more closely aligned with consumer needs. Moreover, digital marketing channels facilitate the collection of valuable market intelligence, enabling SMEs to make data-driven decisions that enhance long-term competitiveness (Zamri *et al.*, 2024b). This aligns with resource-based and dynamic capability theories,

which posit that technological and marketing capabilities can serve as strategic assets that generate sustainable advantages.

Nevertheless, the benefits of digital marketing are not evenly distributed across all firms. One recurrent theme in the reviewed studies is the disparity between SMEs with strong managerial digital literacy and those lacking it. Firms led by technologically adept managers demonstrated significantly higher adoption rates and returns from digital marketing investments. This suggests that human capital, specifically managerial support, employee IT skills, and openness to innovation, is a decisive factor in digital transformation (Wiweko & Anggara, 2025). Furthermore, financial capacity and organizational readiness were identified as key mediating variables that determine whether SMEs can integrate digital tools effectively into their operations. This implies that while digital marketing provides opportunities for growth, structural and capability-related barriers must be addressed to fully harness its benefits (Soomro *et al.*, 2024).

The results presented in Figure 3 further indicate that not all digital marketing channels yield uniform outcomes.

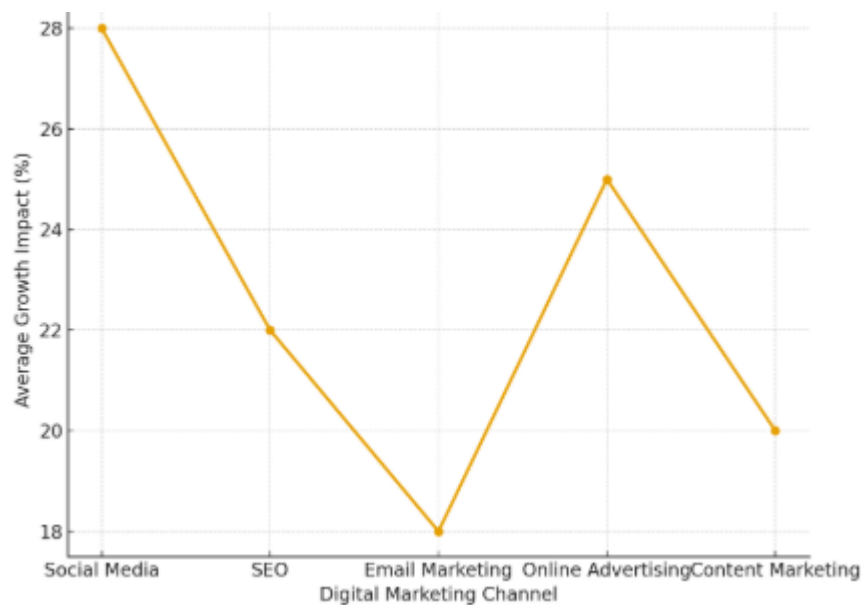


Figure 3: Average Reported Growth Impact

Social media marketing and online advertising demonstrate the strongest positive associations with SME growth, with average reported increases in performance ranging from 25–30%. This increase can be attributed to the relatively low cost and high accessibility of social platforms, which allow direct engagement with target audiences and enable viral brand exposure. Conversely, channels such as email marketing and content marketing, while valuable for customer retention and relationship building, appear to have slower or less measurable effects on short-term growth metrics (da Silva *et al.*, 2025). These findings reinforce the argument that SMEs should adopt a balanced and data-informed approach to channel selection, prioritizing those that align with their target market behavior and available resources.

Another important observation concerns the evolving role of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems in amplifying the effectiveness of digital marketing. Integrating digital marketing strategies with CRM tools significantly enhances customer loyalty and lifetime value in Malaysian F&B SMEs (Oumaima & Lamari, 2024). This reflects a broader shift from transactional to relationship-based marketing paradigms, where success is determined not only by customer acquisition but also by retention and satisfaction. As SMEs increasingly compete in saturated digital marketplaces, the ability to maintain long-term relationships through personalized communication and consistent engagement has become a critical determinant of success.

However, challenges persist. Several studies reported issues such as limited budget allocation, lack of digital skills, cybersecurity concerns, and resistance to technological change as barriers to digital marketing adoption. SMEs in emerging economies, in particular, face infrastructural constraints like unreliable internet connectivity and limited access to digital analytics tools. Moreover, the absence of clear return-on-investment (ROI) metrics and the fast-evolving nature of digital platforms create uncertainty among SME owners regarding where and how much to invest. These barriers underscore the need for policy interventions, capacity-building programs, and public–private partnerships to create an enabling digital ecosystem that supports SMEs' digitalization efforts (Rampaul, 2025).

Comparing these findings with prior reviews, it is evident that the relationship between digital marketing and SME growth is multifaceted and mediated by a combination of technological, organizational, and environmental factors. The results confirm that digital marketing adoption enhances firm performance primarily when integrated into a coherent strategic framework that aligns with business objectives. The current review adds to the literature by synthesizing recent empirical evidence and showing that the period post-2020, marked by accelerated digitalization due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has intensified the role of digital marketing as a survival and growth mechanism for SMEs.

The synthesis of the reviewed studies demonstrates that the impact of digital marketing on SME growth is multidimensional and shaped by technological readiness, managerial capability, and environmental conditions (Hokmabadi *et al.*, 2024). Rather than functioning as an isolated promotional tool, digital marketing operates as part of a broader strategic ecosystem that supports competitiveness, innovation, and customer relationship enhancement. However, its effectiveness ultimately depends on how well SMEs align digital initiatives with organizational strategies, develop internal competencies, and respond to evolving market dynamics. These insights reinforce the need to view digital marketing as an ongoing strategic process rather than a one-time adoption effort, highlighting both the opportunities it presents and the structural challenges that must be addressed.

Limitations

This systematic review provides comprehensive insights into the relationship between digital marketing and SME growth; however, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the majority of the included studies were cross-sectional in nature, limiting the ability to infer causal relationships between digital marketing adoption and performance outcomes. Second, variations in measurement scales and indicators of “growth” across studies may affect the comparability and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, most studies were concentrated in specific geographic or economic regions, primarily in developing or emerging markets, which may not fully capture the global heterogeneity of SME contexts. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to better understand the long-term impact of digital marketing on SME sustainability. There is also a need to explore the mediating and moderating roles of technological innovation, organizational culture, and leadership competence in shaping digital marketing effectiveness. Furthermore, future studies should investigate how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data analytics, and automation can be integrated into SME marketing strategies to optimize decision-making and customer engagement. Cross-cultural and industry-specific comparisons will also be valuable in refining digital marketing models suited to diverse business ecosystems.

Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that digital marketing plays a pivotal role in driving the growth, competitiveness, and sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) across diverse economic contexts. Evidence from recent empirical studies demonstrates that the strategic use of digital tools—particularly social media, SEO, and online advertising—significantly enhances brand visibility, customer engagement, and sales performance. However, the extent of these benefits is largely determined by organizational readiness, managerial digital literacy, and infrastructural support. SMEs that integrate digital marketing within a coherent strategic framework and align it with innovation, data analytics, and customer relationship management are better positioned to achieve sustained growth. Conversely, challenges such as limited financial resources, inadequate technical expertise, and uncertainty regarding ROI remain critical barriers to adoption. Therefore, enabling policies, targeted training

programs, and technological support systems are essential to help SMEs fully leverage digital marketing as a driver of long-term business success in the digital economy.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this review, several actionable policy directions are proposed to strengthen digital transformation among SMEs. Governments should prioritize investment in robust digital infrastructure, particularly in developing and rural regions, to ensure reliable internet connectivity and equitable access to digital platforms. National and regional authorities should also establish SME-focused digital literacy and capacity-building programs aimed at equipping entrepreneurs and managers with essential competencies in online marketing, data analytics, cybersecurity, and e-commerce management. To address financial barriers, targeted support mechanisms, such as grants, tax incentives, and subsidized technology adoption schemes, should be introduced to reduce the cost burden associated with digital transformation initiatives. In addition, policymakers should actively promote public–private partnerships to develop innovation hubs, mentorship networks, and technology-sharing platforms that facilitate SME access to advanced digital tools and expertise. Finally, the development and enforcement of clear regulatory frameworks that enhance trust, protect data privacy, and ensure secure digital transactions are essential for fostering confidence among both SMEs and consumers in the digital marketplace.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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