

## An Integrated Digital Marketing Framework for SMEs: A Systematic and Thematic Review-Based Conceptual Model

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### Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) adopt digital marketing (DM) tools to engage with customers in today's digital environment. But its impact on SME performance is less as online activities performed by customers on different digital channels are not integrated. To address this, the study aims to integrate various DM efforts and see its impact on firm performance. Then, it develops an integrated digital marketing (IDM) framework based on three theories; namely Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), and Network Theory. We analysed 206 articles from the Scopus database applying keyword co-occurrence using VOSviewer software. This was followed by a systematic literature review of most frequently occurring and strongly linked keywords. Bibliometric keyword co-occurrence map indicates five dominant clusters; namely digital marketing and innovation, marketing strategy, social media marketing, strategy and entrepreneurship, and sustainability. The Antecedent-Decision-Outcome (ADO) analysis illustrates the causal relationship between DM capabilities (website, SEO, social media marketing, e-commerce), strategic enablers (strategic alliances and CRM integration), and firm-level outcomes. The proposed IDM conceptual framework is supported by five propositions. It suggests that IDM capabilities directly boost SME performance; strategic alliances mediate the relationship; and CRM integration strengthens the effect of both capabilities and alliances on business outcomes. SME owners and managers can use the IDM framework to enhance performance through better customer engagement, market expansion, and sales conversion. Policymakers can support adoption through focused support programs and policies, while consultants can effectively customise the framework to solve specific SME challenges. Researchers and academicians can test the framework empirically.

**Keywords:** Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Digital Marketing, Resource-Based View (RBV), Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Social Media Marketing, Strategic Alliances.

### Introduction

Small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) are the growth engine of global economies, contributing significantly to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, employment, and innovation. According to researchers (1), World Bank, 2019 report, SMEs contribute to 90% of total businesses and more than 50% of employment worldwide. In emerging economies, formal SMEs contribute up to 40% of GDP. However, they lack resources and capabilities in finance, marketing, export, technology, infrastructure and human resource management (HRM) (2, 3). SMEs with high growth ambition, also face challenges in business models, leadership, and people (4).

SMEs practice marketing with an entrepreneurial orientation (EO) (5), often termed Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM); it is different from Traditional Marketing (TM) practised by large organisations. TM adopts a top-down approach constituting formal market research, followed by segmentation,

selecting a target market, and then positioning the product or service using mass communication tools with a high promotion budget. In contrast, SMEs use a bottom-up approach; they first target the customer segment they can serve with the limited resources, then try to get customer insights through their personal network or social media, and then communicate their product value proposition through word of mouth, social media, and influencers. SMEs use digital marketing (DM) tools to promote and sell their products. Social media is the most prevalent DM tool they use (6, 7); Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram being the most popular (8). They rarely apply search engine optimization (SEO) to optimise website performance and integrate social media platforms with websites to enhance customer engagement, market reach and sales. SMEs lack digital capabilities, so they form strategic alliances with experts, system integrators and aggregators

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(Received 14<sup>th</sup> September 2025; Accepted 18<sup>th</sup> December 2025; Published 20<sup>th</sup> January 2026)

to manage their websites, SEO and social media platforms. They engage with existing and potential customers, promote their products, and establish a unique brand position through social media channels. E-commerce aggregators and mobile technologies give a boost to cross-border trade without investment in physical infrastructure (9, 10). SMEs also use electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (11) and social networks to influence brand perception and customer experience (12). Recent research further highlights that digital orientation and digital capabilities significantly influence SME transformation and resilience (13).

Recently digital tools adoption has increased substantially, but SMEs still struggle to build integrated digital marketing strategies due to capability gap (14, 15). Past studies show a lack of functional websites and integration of SEO and social media marketing (SMM) with it (7, 16). This prompts SMEs to form strategic alliances with DM experts, technology aggregators, and system integrators (17, 18). Prior literature has explored how SMEs adopt specific digital tools and use e-commerce for domestic and cross-border trade (9, 19, 20). But less focus has been given on investigating interactions of unified DM capabilities with strategic alliances and CRM to impact SME performance and build sustainable competitive advantage.

The primary objective of this paper is to bridge this research gap by proposing an Integrated Digital Marketing (IDM) Framework for SMEs. To do this, a hybrid review approach comprising bibliometric keyword co-occurrence analysis and systematic literature review is employed on Scopus dataset. Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Review (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol is followed for data screening and the Antecedent-Decision-Outcome (ADO) analysis helps in finding causal relationships between variables.

The study attempts to answer following research questions:

**RQ1:** What key marketing themes enable SMEs to address challenges in the digital environment?

**RQ2:** What critical constructs (antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes) determine the effect of digital marketing capabilities on SME performance?

**RQ3:** How can an integrated digital marketing framework help SMEs overcome resource

constraints and strengthen competitive positioning?

This study will add immense value to practitioners (SME owners/managers), policymakers, and consultants by offering a framework to address marketing challenges effectively. Academic scholars can also test the framework empirically to establish its reliability and validity.

## Methodology

The research follows SPAR-4-SLR protocol to perform a hybrid systematic literature review (21) which is widely used in business and management research. It provides methodological rigour and transparency leading to theoretical conceptual framework. Much older PRISMA framework suits to literature synthesis in health sciences field. As this study aims to propose a conceptual framework, using keyword co-occurrence and ADO analysis, SPAR-4-SLR is employed. It has three major stages—Assembling, Arranging, and Assessing—each comprising two sub-stages. The steps undertaken are discussed below:

### Assembling and/ Identification

The literature search was conducted in the Scopus database, concentrating on studies pertaining to marketing and digital challenges faced by SMEs. The subject filter included business management, social sciences, and economics.

### Acquisition

An advanced keyword search was performed across titles, abstracts, and keywords for the period 2010–2024 using the following search string on 29/04/2025:

*(MSME OR SME OR “micro, small and medium enterprises” OR “small and medium enterprises”) AND (challenges OR problems) AND (marketing OR “marketing strategy”).*

This initial search yielded 437 articles for further screening.

### Arranging and/ Organization

The retrieved articles were compiled in a Microsoft Excel and coded for key bibliometric attributes – article title, abstract, keywords, publication year, author(s), source title, and citation count. This database formed the basis for keyword co-occurrence analysis using VOSviewer and for the systematic literature review applying the ADO framework.

## Purification

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied. Only peer-reviewed English-language articles within the selected subject domains were retained. This filtration process reduced the dataset to 205 articles for bibliometric analysis. Subsequently, 40 highly cited studies (minimum 20 citations) were selected for in-depth causal construct synthesis through the ADO framework.

## Assessing and/ Evaluating

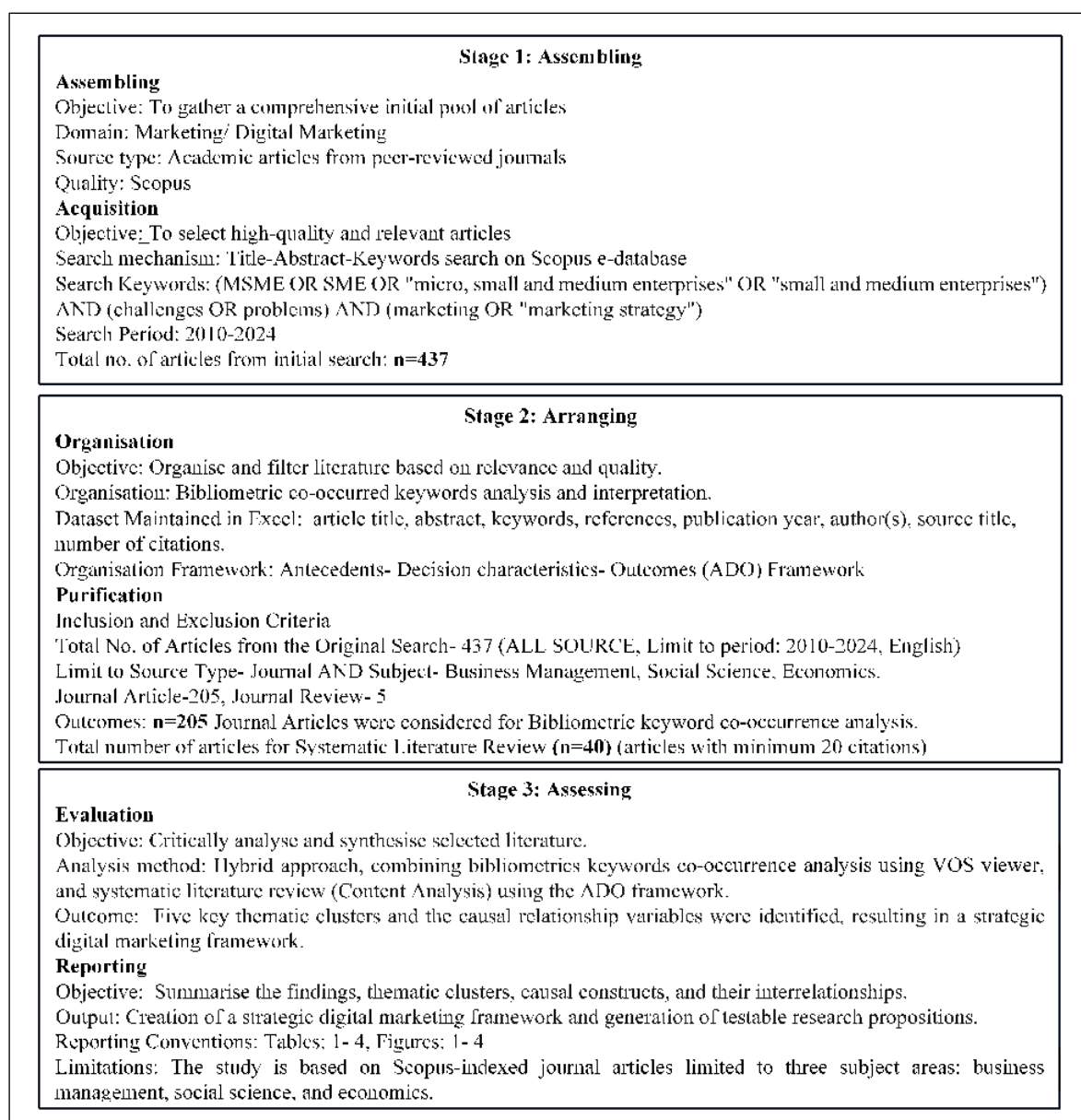
The 205 articles were analysed in VOSviewer to perform keyword co-occurrence mapping, which resulted to five thematic clusters. The 40 highly cited articles were subjected to content analysis to

identify causal constructs; antecedents, decision characteristics (mediators and moderators), and outcomes.

## Reporting

The outcomes of both analyses are presented in the subsequent section. Major themes, causal relationships, and framework linkages are illustrated through tables and conceptual diagrams to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Figure 1 illustrates the data retrieval process on 29/04/2025; following the SPAR-4-SLR framework (21).



**Figure 1:** Data Retrieval Process on (29/04/2025): Step-Wise Details Based on the SPAR-4-SLR Framework (21)

In this section, we analyse extant literature on digital marketing practices of SMEs; exploring themes, constructs and supporting theories. It first briefs on the three theories; namely RBV, DCT and network theory which explain how SMEs use resources and capabilities to build sustainable competitive advantage. It then categorises constructs into antecedents, mediator, moderator and outcome using ADO framework. Finally, after critical literature exploration, the study finds critical research gaps which act as motivation to develop an IDM framework. Finally, after critical literature exploration, research gaps are identified. This gap act as motivation to form integrated digital marketing framework leading to advancement in theory.

### Theoretical Background

This section deliberates briefly the three complementary theories: RBV, DCT and Network Theory to explain the role of DM in enhancing SME performance.

**Resource-Based View (RBV):** The RBV sees organization as a collection of productive resources which propels growth (22). To attain sustainable competitive advantage, firm builds and deploy valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources and capabilities which rivals don't have and can't copy (23). Competitive advantage arises when firms generate more economic value than their rivals (24), and sustain it over time (25).

When SMEs combine various digital marketing tools together to serve a niche market, it gains VRIN attributes (9, 16). SEO enhances visibility, SMM drives engagement and lead generation, and e-commerce facilitates reach and sales conversion. But many SMEs lacks inhouse digital capabilities, which encourage them to form strategic alliances with technology partners or marketing experts (17).

**Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT):** Business environment keeps on changing, so firm need to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources accordingly. If not done, whoever moves fast have competitive edge; this theory was introduced by some researchers (26). SMEs with limited resources can use low-cost digital tools like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, e-commerce, etc.

### Network Theory

Network Theory complements RBV and DCT to form inter-firm partnerships. This type of strategic

alliance complements their skill and resource gap through knowledge, technology, and resource sharing. As a discipline, firm must clarify objectives, roles, benefits, and performance metrics before entering alliances to ensure alignment (27).

SMEs have strategic alliances with technology providers, digital agencies, and CRM platform providers to access their assets that would otherwise be inaccessible (17, 28). This helps in gaining customer insights and reach domestic and global customers (18).

Together, these theories provide a holistic basis for the IDM framework.

### ADO-Based Synthesis of Digital Marketing

**Constructs:** This research systematically reviews the literature, map causal relationships and identify research gap following ADO framework (29). ADO enables structured understanding of (i) antecedents influencing DM adoption, (ii) strategic decisions regarding tools and strategies, and (iii) outcomes achieved by SMEs.

#### Antecedents - Internal Drivers and Enabling Conditions

Antecedents are factors which enables SMEs readiness to adopt DM. Primary antecedents are digital resources and capabilities possessed by firm to have their digital identity. A good quality and interactive website act as focal digital touchpoint (16). For engaging with their prospects and build community, SMEs uses social media platforms which offers low-cost and higher reach (8, 30). SMEs also use SMM for export promotion and branding (31, 32). E-commerce platforms aids in reach across local and global markets (10, 20). Through SEO, SMEs can be discovered by their prospects but adoption and awareness is very less (15). Collectively, these tools act as digital antecedents initiating value creation within the SME ecosystem.

#### Decisions - Digital Tools and Strategic Choices:

Once equipped with digital capabilities and assessing the skill gap, SMEs decides strategic alliances with IT providers, logistics partners, and content creators. It acts as mediator and enhances SME performance by providing assets which they don't possess (9, 17). CRM integration helps SMEs in personalization and running customised loyalty programs and act as moderator (18). SMEs possess Entrepreneurial (EO), Innovation (IO), and Market Orientation (MO) which helps them make

customer-centric decisions (33–35). SMEs adopt influencer marketing, e-WOM, and mobile commerce to strengthen customer engagement and brand credibility (7, 36). These decisions reflect SMEs to install digital tools that are affordable, relationship-driven, and aligned with their resource profile and customer segments.

**Outcomes - Performance, Visibility, and Customer-Centric Gains:** IDM capabilities on standalone and when mediated and moderated by strategic alliances and CRM enhances firm outcomes, like visibility, engagement, and revenue (8, 10, 20). Strategic alliances mediate IDM and performance outcomes by enhancing digital campaign effectiveness and customer reach. CRM moderate and boosts customer experience by personalized activities (37, 38). Research shows that social media-enabled interactions improve exports and brand advocacy, particularly among youth segments (12, 37). Resilience, competitiveness, and trust, are dynamic capabilities in action (13, 28). AI enabled mobile applications and social influencers strengthens engagement and repeat purchase intentions (36, 39). To summarize, decisions taken on IDM adoption and strategic alliances propels growth and sharpen market positioning. Table 1 summarizes representative studies aligned with each ADO dimension.

Recently interest in digital marketing among SMEs has increased considerably. They use standalone digital tools like SMM (Instagram, Facebook,

WhatsApp, etc.), have website and host their products on e-commerce platform. But they struggle to integrate these fragmented DM tools and are deprived of combined enhanced impact on performance (9, 16, 20).

Past empirical research has explored digital tool specific adoption and impact on SME performance. But lacks studies on mediation and moderation impact of decision on strategic alliances, CRM integration, influencer marketing, etc. on firm performance (8, 18).

From theoretical convergence perspective, RBV, DCT and Network Theory have been applied individually, unified approach lacks which provides room for theory advancement.

From methodology perspective, very few work pertains to ADO and thematic analysis together with aim to develop an IDM framework for SMEs.

To address these gaps, this paper aims to:

- Systematically analyse the existing literature and categorise the constructs using a structured ADO approach.
- Find causal relationships between basic digital capabilities, decision on strategic enablers and strategic enablers, and performance outcomes.
- Craft an IDM Framework based on established theories and current digital marketing practices of SMEs.

The next section presents the findings of the hybrid literature review and the development of the proposed IDM framework.

**Table 1:** ADO Constructs

ADO Dimension	Constructs / Themes	Representative Studies
Antecedents	Digital Capabilities (Website, SEO, SMM, E-commerce)	(16), (20), (10), (40)
Antecedents	Government Support & Infrastructure	(14), (31)
Antecedents	Strategic Alliances & Network Capabilities	(17), (28), (39)
Decisions	CRM Integration & Strategic Partnerships	(18) (9)
Decisions	Entrepreneurial, Innovation, Market Orientation	(41), (33), (42)
Decisions	Influencer Marketing, Aggregators, Social Platforms	(36), (43), (7)
Outcomes	Customer Engagement & Satisfaction	(12), (37), (38)
Outcomes	Market Reach, Sales Conversion, Export Potential	(43) (10), (20)
Outcomes	Brand Visibility, Loyalty, Resilience, Trust	(13), (39), (36)

## Results and Discussion

In this section, we discuss: (i) Findings of keyword co-occurrence, (ii) the ADO analysis of causal constructs, (iii) the integrated digital marketing (IDM) framework, and (iv) research propositions. Together, these explain how SMEs combine digital capabilities and interactive enablers to improve firm performance.

### Keyword Co-occurrence: Dominant Themes

Keyword co-occurrence analysis (Figure 2) establishes linkages between keywords, which helps understand causal relationships between them. It further helps in determining themes and future research directions. A keyword co-occurrence analysis using VOSviewer (44); on 205 Scopus articles generated an initial 838 keywords. On applying a minimum occurrence threshold of 5, produced 27 keywords and a network with 129 links (total link strength 212). Keyword “Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)” have maximum occurrences (n=115) and link strength of 139. Different authors put various terminologies depending on the country of study; in cluster one, SMEs and small and medium enterprises arose 37 and 8 times, respectively. In Cluster 2, MSMEs came 16 times; in Cluster 3, small and medium-sized enterprises occurred 17 times; in Cluster 5, SMEs came 32 times. In this article, we will be using SME to maintain consistency. The analysis further revealed strong interlinkages between SME-related terms and keywords such as marketing (n=27), social media marketing (SMM), digital marketing (n=31), entrepreneurial marketing (EM)/ entrepreneurial orientation (EO) (n=25), and business performance (n=16), signifying their thematic interrelation. These are classified into five thematic clusters (Table 1). Keyword co-occurrence analysis was chosen over other bibliometric analysis tools (e.g., co-citation, bibliographic coupling) because it aligns with RQ1, identifying dominant marketing themes and conceptual linkages for SMEs (44, 45). Other techniques, such as co-citation or bibliographic coupling, fall outside the thematic scope; it is better suited for analysing author influence or

historical citation pathways. Table 2 enlisted all the thematic clusters of SME digital marketing literature.

**Cluster Interpretations:** The five thematic clusters are:

Cluster 1- Digital Marketing, Entrepreneurial Orientation, and Innovation: Cluster one (represented in red in the network map) consists of 9 items- SME, digital marketing (DM), entrepreneurial marketing (EM)/orientation, market orientation (MO), innovation, business performance and competitive advantage are linked to each other. It signifies how SMEs leverage DM capabilities combined with an entrepreneurial orientation (EO)/ market orientation (MO) to innovate and compete effectively in resource-constrained environment (8, 46).

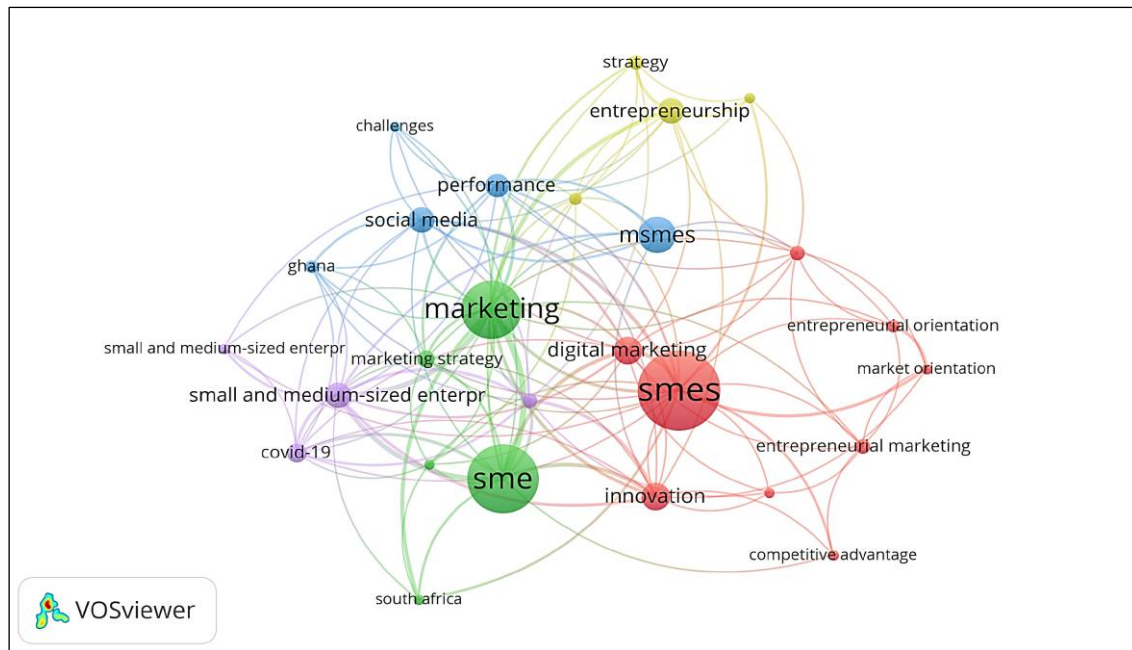
Cluster 2- Marketing/ Marketing Strategy: Keywords featured in a green cluster are marketing and marketing strategy, with 27 occurrences, and a link strength of 53. It is foundational strategy, associated with diverse marketing domains like marketing strategy, DM, social media, EM, and sustainability.

Cluster 3- Social Media Marketing (SMM): The blue cluster focusses on the role of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) in addressing SMEs resource limitation challenges by providing a low-cost avenue to reach, engage and sell to target customers, thereby boosting SMEs performance (7, 30).

Cluster 4- Strategy & Entrepreneurship: The yellow cluster indicates to the vital role of alliances, partnerships, and entrepreneurial competencies in digital transformation (9, 17).

Cluster 5- Sustainability: The purple cluster connects sustainability with COVID-19, strategy, and innovation, signalling the increased relevance of sustainable digital practices for post-pandemic resilience in SMEs.

Clusters jointly indicate that SMEs adopt DM to address resource deficiencies through entrepreneurial action, strategic partnerships, and technology adoption, with performance effects augmented when tools are combined and supported by networks.



**Figure 2:** Keyword Co-Occurrence Map (VOSviewer Output)

**Table 2:** Thematic Clusters of SME Digital Marketing Literature

Cluster No.	Cluster Theme	Representative Keywords	Thematic Interpretation
1	Digital Marketing, Entrepreneurial Orientation, and Innovation	Digital marketing, entrepreneurial marketing, market orientation, innovation, competitive advantage, business performance	Emphasizes the role of DM, EO, and Innovation in boosting SMEs business performance by creating a competitive advantage.
2	Marketing	Marketing, marketing strategy	Marketing resources and capabilities help SMEs perform better than rivals.
3	Social Media Marketing	SMM, Challenges, Performance	Highlights how SMEs leverage SMM to address resource constraints.
4	Strategy & Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship, strategic management, strategy, e-commerce	Strategic alliances with E-Commerce aggregators and EO enhance SMEs performance.
5	Sustainability	Sustainability, Covid-19	Sustainability Marketing has a positive and significant impact on SMEs performance.

### ADO-Based Synthesis of Digital Marketing Constructs

In this section, attempt is made to find causal relationships between constructs through content analysis of 40 high-impact peer-reviewed articles using ADO approach. This is connected to literature review done in section 3.2. The ADO structure examines decision on digital tools to be used and alliance formation which impacts SME performance.

**Antecedents- Readiness and Enablers:** SMEs DM readiness is impacted both by internal digital capabilities and external enablers. Common antecedents are:

Digital capabilities: Website quality, SEO, SMM, and e-commerce combine to form a resource bundle (10, 16, 20).

Strategic enablers: Alliances and network capability expand access to expertise, platforms, and infrastructure (17, 28).

Digital Orientations: EO/IO/MO shape stronger digital orientation (33, 42).



**Decisions- Digital Tools and Strategic Choices:**

In this phase SMEs takes decisions on deployment of digital tools on the basis of available resources.

The analysis shows several strategic decisions:

Low-cost, scalable digital tools (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, local e-commerce platforms) fit SMEs resource limitations and market expansion (36, 43).

CRM integration enables in personalization, segmentation and tailor-made digital campaign (18).

DM Experts and integrators bridge in-house skill gaps (7, 9). Influencers, e-WOM, and content strategies extend reach and credibility;

**Outcomes- Business, Brand, and Customer Gains:** The outcomes constitute of both tangible and intangible benefits linked to digital marketing adoption and application in SMEs.

Tangible outcome metrics are sales growth, market expansion, export readiness (10, 20).

Intangible performance metrics are brand visibility, engagement, loyalty, trust (12, 37, 38).

Agility and digital adoption in crisis situation instil resilience (13, 28).

**Takeaway from ADO Analysis (Table 3)**

Antecedents (capabilities, enablers, orientations) prompts to take decisions (tool mix, alliances, CRM), which influences SME performance

outcomes. Performance gets enhanced when capabilities combine together strategic alliances/CRM integration.

**Integrated Digital Marketing Framework and Research Propositions**

In this section, we propose an integrated digital marketing framework (Figure 3) to help SMEs overcome resource constraints and boost performance, addressing RQ3.

Grounded in RBV-DCT-Network Theory, the IDM framework (Figure 3) suggests that performance improvements occur when SMEs:

Bundle digital capabilities (website, SEO, SMM, e-commerce) to form VRIN resource.

Adapt and reconfigure these capabilities to business environment (DCT), and

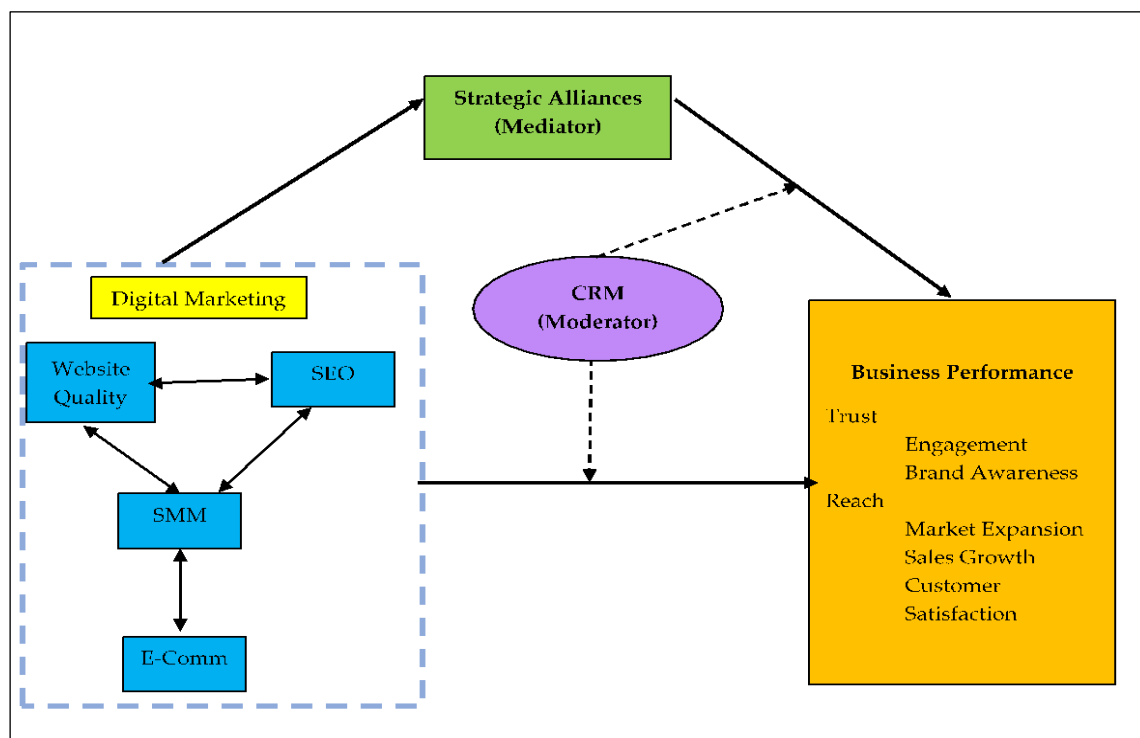
Develop partnerships (agencies, platform providers, integrators) to take advantage from partners digital systems and platforms (Network Theory).

**Mechanisms**

Mediation via strategic alliances: Partners helps sharpen SMEs digital capabilities and provide IT infrastructure support.

Moderation via CRM integration: Data-driven personalization strengthens customer experience.

Feedback loops: Positive outcomes (sales, loyalty) encourage investments in digital imperatives.



**Figure 3:** Integrated Digital Marketing Framework



**Table 3:** Causal Constructs in SMEs Digital Marketing Literature (ADO Approach)

Antecedents	Mediators/ Moderators	Outcomes	Theme	Key References
Website Quality	Strategic Alliances	Trust, Engagement, Firm Performance	Integrated DM Capabilities	(16)
SEO	SMM Integration	Brand Visibility, Organic Reach	Integrated DM Capabilities	(15) (38)
SMM	Marketing Function (Mediator)	Brand Awareness, Customer Engagement	Integrated DM Capabilities	(8), (30)
Traditional Marketing	DM Shift (Mediator)	Firm Performance	Integrated DM Capabilities	(47)
E-Commerce	System Integrator	Market Expansion, Sales Growth	Strategic Partnerships	(10), (20)
DM Capabilities	CRM Integration (Moderator)	Competitiveness, Business Performance	CRM Personalization	(18)
Innovation Orientation (IO)	Digital Orientation (MO + EO + LO) (Mediator)	Innovation Success, Digital Transformation	Entrepreneurial Orientation & Innovation	(33), (34)
Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO)	Strategic Partnerships / Networking Capability (Mediator)	International Market Entry, Growth, Performance	EO & Innovation	(17), (28)
Product Innovation	Technology Adoption (e.g., IoT) (Moderator)	Business Growth, Budget Efficiency	Entrepreneurial Orientation & Innovation	(48), (38)
EO + Market Orientation (MO)	Innovation	Firm Performance	Entrepreneurial Orientation & Innovation	(33)
Entrepreneurial Marketing Skills	Capability Building & Education (Mediator)	Sustainable Growth, Internationalization	Entrepreneurial Orientation & Innovation	(41), (20)

## Research Propositions

This paper recommends that unified digital marketing resources and capabilities combined with strategic alliances and CRM integration impacts firm performance. This bundled proposition forms a VRIN attribute leading to sustainable competitive advantage. Accordingly, the following propositions are presented:

**P1 (Direct effect):** Integrated digital marketing capabilities (website quality, SEO, SMM and e-commerce) positively influence SME performance. A quality website enhances credibility, SEO improves discoverability, SMM boosts awareness and engagement, while e-commerce platforms enable market reach and sales. Together, these digital tools strengthen an SME's ability to compete, innovate, and respond to dynamic market conditions. This directly improve performance outcomes such as sales growth, market reach and customer satisfaction.

**P2 (Alliance formation):** Integrated digital marketing capabilities positively influence the formation of strategic alliances, signalling readiness and attracting partners.

Digital imperatives act as a catalyst for alliance formation, enabling collaboration with technology providers, marketing agencies, or platform partners (9, 38). These partnerships create value creation both for SMEs and partners by either sharing digital platforms of partners or sharpening their own.

**P3(Mediation):** Strategic alliances mediate the relationship between integrated digital marketing capabilities and SME performance by providing expertise, tools, and reach.

SMEs lack the in-house expertise to fully leverage their DM capabilities. Firms can personalise communication, improve targeting, and optimise campaigns by forming strategic alliances with

digital agencies or consultants. These externally enabled capabilities enhance the customer experience, influencing trust and engagement.

**P4 (Moderation):** CRM integration moderates the relationship between integrated digital marketing capabilities and SMEs performance.

CRM integration strengthens IDM capabilities for SME performance by enabling data-driven personalisation, customer segmentation, and feedback (18).

CRM adoption lacks among SMEs due to its complexity in execution and cost.

**P5(Moderation):** CRM integration moderates the relationship between strategic alliances and business performance.

CRM integration helps capture, analyse, and act on data generated through alliance activities. It results into making efforts more customer-focused and impacts sales, loyalty and satisfaction (37).

## Contributions and Implications

**Theoretical Contributions:** This research provides a unified and theory-rich perspective on how integrated digital marketing strategies influence SME performance. It makes three primary theoretical contributions.

First, by integrating RBV, DCT and Network Theory, the proposed Integrated Digital Marketing Framework explains how SMEs combine internal digital marketing resources & capabilities, strategic alliances, and CRM to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Second, the hybrid-method of combining keyword co-occurrence analysis with causal relationship (using ADO) enhances the methodological rigour and transparency

Third, the paper proposes an integrated digital marketing framework based on established theories and empirical evidence of past studies. Five research propositions (P1–P5) emerge, showing how IDM capabilities influence SME performance through strategic alliances and CRM integration. This advances theory in the DM domain by formation of conceptual framework.

In summary, this study consolidates fragmented DM research into a cohesive, theory-driven framework, advancing the academic dissertation on digital marketing strategy for SMEs.

**Managerial Implications:** In addition to theoretical insights, this research provides few important recommendations for SME managers and owners.

First, SMEs must treat website, SEO, SMM, and e-commerce as a system, not standalone tools to ensure credibility, discoverability, awareness and sales.

Second, SMEs must leverage alliances (agencies, platforms, integrators) to overcome skill/infrastructure gaps. SMEs also set clear roles and governance mechanism for alliances.

Third, CRM adoption enables SMEs in acquiring and retaining customers by constant engagement. They are equipped to run data-driven campaigns with on-going customer insights.

Finally, SMEs owners and managers must promote digital and responsive culture driven by entrepreneurial, market, and innovation orientations. This makes SMEs future ready to scale-up their business in domestic and global market.

Thus, SME owners and managers must drive digital transformation at top priority and build digital capability.

**Policy Implications:** Although there is rapid surge in digital platforms, most SMEs require government and institutional support for effective adoption of IDM practices. So, policies and government support programs play a crucial role.

First, policymakers should design schemes aimed to promote digital capabilities of micro and small enterprises. This can be in the form of training SMEs on website building, SEO optimisation, CRM integration and SMM.

Secondly, for SMEs access to affordable digital infrastructure and advisory support is important. Public-private partnerships can help SMEs form strategic alliances with digital consultants, IT service providers, and e-commerce platforms, thereby overcoming internal resource constraints. Third, monetary incentives such as performance-linked incentives (PLIs) and fundings for digitalization to early-stage SMEs encourage digital strategies adoption. These support programs should have measurable performance metrics, like online presence and engagement.

Finally, service provide should provide a digital marketing platform to SMEs for engaging and selling to customers. Incubators connect SMEs with mentors, content creators, and marketing agencies. Policymakers should move from tool-specific adoption to digital ecosystem ensuring continuous growth.

By aligning public policies with the IDM framework proposed in this research, governments can foster more resilient, customer-centric, and digitally enabled SMEs that contribute meaningfully to inclusive economic growth.

## Conclusion

In an era of digital disruption and cut throat competition, its need for hour for SMEs to shift from fragmented digital imperatives to a unified digital strategy. This research addresses this challenge by proposing as Integrated Digital Marketing Framework that is both theoretically grounded and practically relevant.

In response to **RQ1**, a bibliometric keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to discover dominant DM themes. The study revealed five key thematic clusters: digital marketing, entrepreneurial orientation and innovation, marketing strategy, social media marketing, strategy and entrepreneurship, and sustainability, which collectively highlight the evolving strategic priorities of SMEs in the digital landscape.

For **RQ2**, a systematic literature review using the ADO framework mapped the causal relationships between digital marketing capabilities and SME performance. The review identified critical constructs such as website quality, SEO, social media marketing, and e-commerce as antecedents; strategic alliances as mediators; CRM integration as a moderator; and various performance metrics (e.g., customer engagement, brand visibility, and sales growth) as outcomes.

To address **RQ3**, the study integrates insights from the ADO analysis and theoretical lens (RBV- DCT- Network Theory) to develop an IDM Framework from SMEs perspective. The framework provides a conceptual model demonstrating how coordinated deployment of digital tools, enabled by partnerships and CRM integration, can help SMEs overcome resource constraints and have competitive edge.

Keyword co-occurrence analysis yields five thematic clusters and ADO approach provides causal relationships with constructs. By combining them, this research moves from scattered DM perspective to an integrated view of DM conceptual framework for SMEs. The five research propositions emerging from the framework serve as a roadmap for future empirical validation, offering actionable insights for researchers, SME

managers, and policymakers. As digital technologies are continuously evolving, SMEs need to build basic digital infrastructure for growth and competitiveness. For “must to have” missing digital capabilities, they need collaborate with experts, aggregators and partners. Following robust research methods; SPAR-4-SLR protocol, ADO and keyword co-occurrence analysis this research proposes an Integrated Digital Marketing (IDM) Framework for SMEs. The constructs are based on established theories namely RBV-DCT-Network theory, offering a practical and theoretical blueprint for SME digital evolution and sustainable growth.

## Future Research Directions

While this research offers meaningful theoretical contributions and a conceptual framework, it has several limitations and valuable avenues for future research.

**First**, the framework remains conceptual. Future research should empirically validate the proposed relationships using quantitative techniques such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) or qualitative methods like multiple case studies. Developing and testing measurement models for constructs such as digital marketing foundations and strategic enablers within SMEs will strengthen generalisability and practical relevance.

**Second**, although this paper performs detailed literature review, there is room for further exploration sector-wise or region-wise. For example, comparison can be made to understand digital challenges faced by SMEs in manufacturing Vs. services or developed vs. emerging economies. Accordingly, framework can be modified across different contexts.

**Third**, with very fast disruptions in digital technologies, future studies should incorporate emerging tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), blockchain, etc. Understanding how SMEs adopt, integrate, and derive value from these technologies, particularly in resource-constrained situations, remains a largely unexplored area.

**Fourth**, this paper deliberates on strategic alliances and CRM as key enablers but does not explore their governance mechanisms. Future work can investigate how different types of partnerships (e.g., equity vs. non-equity, local vs. international) and relationship governance structures influence SMEs digital outcomes.

**Finally**, a cross-sectional analysis offers only a snapshot of digital transformation. Longitudinal studies capturing the SME digital capabilities trend over longer period would provide more valuable insights for theory advancement.

In summary, future research should aim to empirically test, adapt, and extend this framework across contexts, technologies, and timeframes, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive theory in SME digital marketing adoption and performance enhancement.

### Abbreviations

ADO: Antecedent-Decision-Outcomes, AI: artificial intelligence, CRM: Customer Relationship Management, IDM: integrated digital marketing, IO: Innovation orientation, ML: machine learning, SMM: Social Media Marketing, VOSviewer: Visualization of Similarities Viewer, VRIN: valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable.

### Acknowledgement

None.

### Author Contributions

Anjani Kumar: Conceptualization, methodology, writing the original draft, review, editing, Ashish Ranjan Sinha: supervision, provide suggestions, Prabhat Kumar: supervision, provide suggestions.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors confirm that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used for literature search, idea generation, development of the conceptual framework, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or writing of this manuscript. All scholarly content, arguments, and theoretical contributions are the original work of the authors.

### Ethics Approval

Not Applicable.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

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**How to Cite:** Kumar A, Sinha AR, Kumar P. An Integrated Digital Marketing Framework for SMEs: A Systematic and Thematic Review-Based Conceptual Model. *Int Res J Multidiscip Scope*. 2026; 7(1): 713-726. DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i01.09190