

**Influence of digital marketing on the growth of Small and Medium enterprises: A Case
of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa.**

BY

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DECLARATION

I, Charlyn Vorster Stubbs Muleya hereby declare that this dissertation entitled: “ The impact of digital marketing on the growth of small and medium enterprises: A case of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality” for the degree of Master of Commerce in Business Management, hereby submitted by me, has not previously been submitted for a degree at this or any other institution, and that this is my work in design and execution and that all reference material contained therein have been duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Digital marketing refers to marketing conducted on digital channels such as email, social media, websites, and mobile applications. It has become an important strategy for businesses to connect with consumers and expand their markets. The goal of this study was to explore the influence of digital marketing on the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa. The study employed a qualitative research design utilizing interviews and the theory of consumer engagement to explore relationships between SMEs and customers online. Digital marketing channels including email, social media, search engine optimization and online advertising were examined in relation to SME growth measured by sales and market share. Fourteen participants from seven SMEs were interviewed, including CEOs, marketing managers and mid-level employees. Data was analysed using qualitative content analysis software. Initial familiarization identified key themes which were coded and analyzed to produce the findings. Trustworthiness was ensured through measures like triangulation, member checks and an audit trail. Ethical protocols of informed consent, anonymity and approvals were followed. The study's findings provide insight for SMEs, policymakers, and scholars. Digital marketing was found to improve brand awareness, customer engagement and sales leads. Tools like social media, blogs, and influencer marketing enhanced connectivity while search engine optimization boosted organic traffic. However, fast-changing digital trends, limited skills and resources posed challenges for some SMEs. Therefore, digital marketing positively influences SME growth in Tshwane by boosting exposure and interactions at lower costs than traditional methods. However, ongoing skills development and flexible strategies are required to capitalize on opportunities while navigating an environment of rapid technological change and scarce resources.

Keywords: *Digital marketing; SMEs; Internet; Digital marketing channels; firm growth*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

Businesses across all sectors and all sizes have been rapidly adopting digital technologies in recent years (Abdullah, Hilman, Ramanchandram, Gorondutse, & Yunus, 2019). Since the emergence of the internet in the 1960s, numerous companies have networked via multiple computers, reaching out to each other for expansion and growth purposes. Small and medium-enterprise (SMEs) businesses use the internet to provide employees and managers with constant access to information and training opportunities.

The necessities set limits on the effectiveness and essence of digital marketing. This shift away from analogue methods of doing business at the turn of the century in favour of digital ones had a significant impact on companies of all sizes as they sought to establish a stronger foothold in the marketplace and project their brands in the hopes of growing their customer base (Barney, 2018). SMEs can better compete with their larger counterparts by adopting digital technologies into their business processes (Basil, Diaz-Meneses, & Basil, 2019). In specifically relating to the presentation of business activities through the most popular marketing technique of the present day, digital marketing strategies (Belbeze, 2018), connections with customers are a secondary objective to making sales, which is the primary goal. For a more fruitful return on investment (ROI), SMEs need to venture into the digital sphere via long-term digital marketing strategies that open doors to a wider audience and facilitate two-way contact (Cacciolatti and Lee, 2016).

Research on SMEs and entrepreneurship has grown rapidly over the past decade, and some studies may have shifted their focus dramatically to cover economies all over the world. SMEs have a great chance to grow their brand through digital channels (Castells, 2010). The vast

majority of companies compete in various regions throughout the world as SMEs, despite the fact that their performance levels vary. This is the case of SMEs' performance levels varying, despite the difficulty of sustained performance over the long term. When the economy as a whole does well, so do small and medium-sized businesses (Ates, Ceylan, and Ozcan, 2013).

Establishing and promoting a brand in the digital sphere necessitates the adoption of digital marketing strategies by SMEs, which means that traditional marketing methods should be abandoned. SMEs need to adopt new and innovative approaches to enhance and adapt to quick transformative growth by using social networks, online advertising campaigns, and diverse virtual techniques (Charlesworth, 2018).

1.1 Background to the study

The Internet and other digital technology, including personal computers, mobile phones, and other digital media and platforms, are utilised in digital marketing. With the use of digital technology, businesses can more effectively connect with, communicate with, and convert potential buyers into paying consumers (Soni, 2016). The significance of digital marketing to modern firms has grown alongside the development of related technologies. Digital marketing has become increasingly popular as a tool for businesses to use in promoting themselves and expanding their customer base. There is a correlation between the success of a business and its use of digital marketing platforms, and the success of a firm is often expected to result in higher profit margins (Anon, 2021). When it comes to expanding a company's customer base, online marketing has superseded more traditional techniques. Social media, content marketing, email marketing, SEO, PPC, and mobile marketing are all examples of digital marketing strategies (Alexander, 2019).

The term "digital transformation" describes the current state of affairs for most businesses today. These are the innovative uses of digital technology that businesses are adopting to boost their operational and financial efficacy (Hachimi, Lhassan, Irhiane & Firouzi, 2020). Adopting digital marketing techniques is one way to combat. The opportunities and threats presented by digital marketing must be understood by businesses if they are to make full use of the channels for expanding their operations and enhancing their effectiveness (Hachimi & Lhassan, 2020). If businesses want to reap the benefits of digital marketing, they need to start putting in more time and money into their marketing efforts. Many businesses, however, have been sluggish to

implement DM owing to a lack of understanding of what it entails, how to get started, and how long it would take to see any advantage.

The role of SMEs in the South African economy is crucial, yet these businesses confront a number of challenges that prevent them from growing and achieving their full potential (Soni, 2016). Because of the rapid pace of change, it is essential for businesses to have a thorough understanding of digital marketing. They need to use internet promotion strategies. Content marketing, email marketing, search engine optimisation, and social media marketing are all examples of digital marketing methods (Charlesworth, 2018). As a result of embracing digital marketing strategies, most companies have seen a rise in productivity, sales, and consumer recognition of their brand (Belbeze, 2018). Companies that fail to adopt digital marketing tactics will find their expansion prospects severely constrained. Online marketing strategies that are very successful are typically run by companies that have identified and fully exploited all of the most promising avenues of digital promotion they could find, used this knowledge consistently, and not given up until they saw tangible results (Belbeze, 2018).

New digital services and initiatives are increasingly being used to create an improved customer experience, which remains the company's core priority for growing revenue. As opposed to small businesses, major corporations are more likely to have the resources and expertise necessary to successfully use digital channels (Barnes, Liao, Naudé & Alston-Millers, 2012). When compared to major organisations, SMEs' marketing strategies are more nuanced, making it more difficult for them to successfully integrate digital marketing strategies (Lipiainen & Karjalouto, 2013). There is a definite possibility that the new digital services may drive clients away if they are not marketed effectively online. The COVID-19 pandemic has made survival the primary concern for today's small and medium-sized businesses. The ability to adapt and innovate is crucial for established businesses. Even though COVID-19 has sped up the transition to digital operations in businesses throughout the world, Kijkasiwat and Phuensane (2020) reveal that the rate of adoption of digital marketing is still rather low among SMEs. The reasons for this slow adoption rate need to be examined. There is a need for SMEs to effectively implement digital marketing strategies for business growth and survival.

In this investigation, we sought to understand how SME growth in Tshwane City is influenced by digital marketing. There have been a number of studies done on the topic of digital marketing and its effects on businesses. The term "digital marketing" refers to the practice of using various forms of digital media to promote products and services (Alexander, 2019). The

strategy involves more than just buying the correct software; it also involves changing the company's culture in order to better adapt to the digital age. COVID-19, like many other problems, really only accelerated pre-existing patterns. As the use of digital technologies in business continued to develop, responsibilities for driving expansion were increasingly given up to small and medium-sized enterprises.

1.2 Problem statement

Although larger organisations gain significantly from implementing a digital marketing strategy, SME adoption remains extremely low (Chaffey, 2020). Baird and Parasni (2011), in Jagongo and Kinnyua, 2013) support the assumption that the heart of customer activity is increasingly becoming virtual, located within a social media or social networking platform. The emergence of new digital technologies that push SMEs to execute digital marketing remains a global issue that concerns every company management in SMEs in the new global economy.

However, existing research in the SME and digital marketing domains has predominantly focused on the general prospects and features of digital technology in business, often relying on experimental data that may not fully capture the complexities of digital transformation in SMEs (Khan, 2017; Kemp, 2019; Chaffey, 2020; Kijkasiwat & Phuensane, 2020). This creates a significant gap in understanding the specific impact of digital marketing on the growth of South African SMEs, which remains underexplored. So far, there is a dearth of data on how and to what degree digital marketing initiatives affect South African SMEs. As a result, this suggests the necessity for additional research to obtain the necessary evidence.

1.3 Research objectives

1.3.1 Primary research objective

The primary research objective of the study was to investigate the influence of digital marketing on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa.

1.3.2 Secondary research objectives

In order to achieve the main objective of the study, the following secondary objectives were pursued:

- To identify the digital marketing tools employed by SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.
- To evaluate the influence of digital marketing on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.
- To determine the challenges of SMEs growth in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

1.4 Research questions

1.4.1 Primary research question

The primary research question of the study was: What are the impacts of digital marketing on the business growth of SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality?

1.4.2 Secondary research objectives

In order to achieve the main objective of the study, the following secondary questions were explored:

- What are the digital marketing tools employed by SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality?
- How does digital marketing influence the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality?
- Which are the challenges affecting SMEs growth in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality?

1.5 Rationale and significance of the study

The proposed research is significant due to the lack of studies on the impact of digital marketing on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in South Africa. Existing literature on this topic is primarily focused on Europe, making this research crucial as it could establish a foundation for future investigations in the region. This study aims to address a lack of information by providing first hand empirical evidence on a subject that has not been well studied in South Africa: the impact of digital marketing on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

The findings of this study will offer business owners and executives a firm foundation for promoting growth and enhancing competitiveness. To address the challenges encountered by SMEs, it is essential to first have a comprehensive understanding of how digital marketing impacts their expansion and competitive capabilities. As a result of this problem, individuals are interested in the details of digital marketing and its impact on businesses. Consequently,

there would be an increase in the level of comprehension regarding the digital marketing revolution, which has caused significant changes in traditional commercial marketing.

The findings will also aid existing and future students in gaining a deeper comprehension of how digital marketing can enhance business operations. Moreover, it will enhance the existing knowledge on the subject being studied. This research can be advantageous for companies that use both conventional and digital marketing tactics to convert clients. The study is also relevant for policymakers. The research findings can provide guidance for the creation of support initiatives and frameworks aimed at assisting SMEs in maximising the effectiveness of their digital marketing efforts. For instance, information on skills gaps could be used to develop specific training programmes, while limitations in resources indicate the need for financial assistance.

Moreover, the research makes a valuable contribution to the field of academics. It enhances collective knowledge about digital developments in particular communities and industries. The study also addresses the need for a combination of qualitative and quantitative research to examine the effects of digital technology on economies and sectors. In general, the research is useful for making strategic decisions in various areas, including policy, practice, and theory.

The Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality therefore provides depth in the exploration of a critical economic region in South Africa-that which is varied and dynamic in its SME sector. This kind of geographical focus provides an apt microcosm of broader challenges and opportunities facing SMEs across the country. In that light, the insights emerging from this study are bound to assist SMEs not only in Tshwane but also in various similar urban and semi-urban settings across South Africa. While the context of the research is specific, the findings generalize beyond the area of Tshwane to constitute an important lesson for other metropolitan cities within the country and even throughout developing economies with a similar economic landscape. By highlighting the local dimension of digital marketing, this research could contribute to more extended strategies for SME growth and enhancement of their competitiveness both nationally and internationally.

1.6 Research Methodology

In the analysis of how effective digital marketing is in influencing the growth and competitiveness of SMEs within the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, a qualitative research approach has been adopted in this study. Research design has been used because it

provides an in-depth understanding of experiences and perceptions of SME owners and managers. Thus, purposive and snowball sampling techniques under the non-probability sampling approach were utilized to get a final sample of potential participants who possess appropriate knowledge and experience on the nature of characteristic digital marketing practices. This ensured that all research topics involved in the investigative process are expounded on from people that can provide detailed information and sophisticated data on each topic under scrutiny. Data was collected by the use of semi-structured interviews, so an exploration of views from the participants could be elicited yet objectivity to that of the research. Thematic analysis was done for the analysis of data, thus a pile of themes and patterns so that finally one can identify themes. This way, there is an understanding of how digital marketing aids in growth and competitive capabilities of SME in this selected regional area.

1.7 Delimitations of the study

Hutchinson (2013) defined delimitations as the choices that the researcher makes. These choices define the restrictions that the researcher has set for the study. This research focuses on the influence of digital marketing on the growth of SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. Time and financial constraints impeded the capturing of a wide population given the expansiveness of the small and medium enterprises in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. This challenge is solved by incorporating both purposive and snowball sampling under non-probability sampling strategy to ensure the capturing of a true representative of the target population using limited resources. Theoretically, the study was limited to the theory of consumer engagement.

1.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter 1 introduced the background and importance of the research. It established that digital technologies have significantly impacted business operations, requiring SMEs to embrace digital strategies to compete effectively. While digital marketing opens growth avenues, SME adoption remains low in South Africa warranting further empirical investigation. The problem statement highlighted gaps in knowledge regarding digital marketing's impacts on South African SMEs specifically. Accordingly, the study aims to identify digital marketing tools used by Tshwane SMEs, evaluate influence on growth and competitiveness, and determine challenges. Through a qualitative methodology guided by social exchange theory, this research seeks to provide useful insights for SMEs, policymakers,

and future scholars on enhancing SME competitiveness through strategic digital transformation.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses previous research on the influence of digital marketing on the growth of small and medium enterprises in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. The relevant literature pertaining to the influence of digital marketing on the growth of small and medium enterprises is organised into conceptual subjects and, in turn, evaluated in detail in line with the research objectives. Various authors' views and arguments, as well as international and regional studies pertaining to this area of study, will be identified, and evaluated. The reviewed literature in this study consisted of books, journal and newspaper articles, research reports, legislation, regulations, policies, theses, and dissertations. Much attention is given to those aspects that answer the research questions and aid in achieving the research objectives of this particular study.

The quick development of digital technology has changed how companies run, communicate, and interact with their clients. In today's dynamic economy, digital marketing has become an essential tool for companies, especially SMEs, to stay competitive and promote development (Kumar, Dixit, Javalgi, and Dass, 2019). In this research, the development of SMEs in South Africa's Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality is examined in relation to the impact of digital marketing. It seeks to look at the digital marketing strategies used by SMEs in the area, assess the effects of digital marketing on SME competitiveness and growth, and analyse the potential and difficulties for SME expansion in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality (Phan, Brouthers, and Dung, 2020).

The significance of this study rests in its ability to provide useful information to Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality stakeholders, including SMEs, policymakers, and other interested parties. This information will help these parties make educated choices and create policies that will encourage SME development via digital marketing (Alalwan, 2020). Stakeholders can

collaborate to create an environment that supports the sustainable development of SMEs in the area by understanding the factors that affect SME growth and competitiveness, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by digital marketing (Holliman and Rowley, 2020).

2.2 Definitions and meanings

There is a significant body of literature that gives various definitions of the key terms used in this research. The terms have different meanings in different socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. However, definitions are important in so much they force us to think about the scope and meaning of the term. This research will domicile itself within the following definitions:

2.2.1 Digital marketing

Digital marketing is the promotion of goods or services using digital technology, mostly the Internet, but also mobile phones, display advertising, and any other digital media (Wymbs, 2020). Digital marketing comprises any marketing strategies that use electronic devices or the internet. In order to communicate with present and potential consumers, businesses use digital channels such as search engines, social media, email, and other websites. Digital marketing is characterised by the use of several digital channels and strategies to interact with consumers where they spend the majority of their time online (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2020).

2.2.2 Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises

According to government rules, small and medium companies are privately held firms whose capital, labour, and assets fall below a specified threshold (SME Annual Report, 2019). Small and medium-sized firms, or SMEs, are defined differently around the globe. The nation in which a business operates determines the precise dimensions of a SME. Depending on the jurisdiction, the classification of a business as a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) may be based on a variety of factors. In South Africa, SMEs are required to employ between 10 and 50 workers (SME Annual Report, 2019).

2.3 Theoretical framework: theory of consumer engagement

According to Sashi (2018), consumer engagement is the behavioural connection of a customer with a certain brand or business that increases client association and loyalty throughout the purchasing transaction. Managers and consultants in business and industry all around the world rely heavily on the theory of customer participation (Sashi, 2018). Creating customer

engagement occurs when a company effectively implements a new strategy in order to create meaningful relationships with its clientele over time (Sashi, 2018).

Prioritising client participation is essential for growing brand loyalty, especially in comparison to the competition (Rogers, 2019). When a business successfully meets the needs and wants of its clientele, not only do those clients remain invested, but the business also benefits from increased value and equity. Today's businesses cannot afford to ignore the importance of online client participation in social media. Though the term "engagement" is ill-defined and can be used in a variety of contexts, business owners have paid the most attention to the idea of client participation. Digital media's wide appeal and importance to businesses stem from its two-way communication and ability to saturate all demographics (Rogers, 2019).

Consumers are able to engage with one another more easily because of networking technologies, including discussion forums, bulletin boards in control rooms, emails, and social media networks (Raeisi & Lingjie, 2017). Further, repeat customers may play an integral role in the design of new products and services, as well as the co-creation of experience and value. If brands are closely associated with media outlets, consumers may take notice, argues Rogers (2019). Digital media are ideal for SMEs because of their low cost and minimal technical requirements, allowing them to consistently build their brand. Owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may take full advantage of the benefits of internet marketing since it allows them to reach customers in other parts of the world without having to set up permanent offices there (Rogers, 2019).

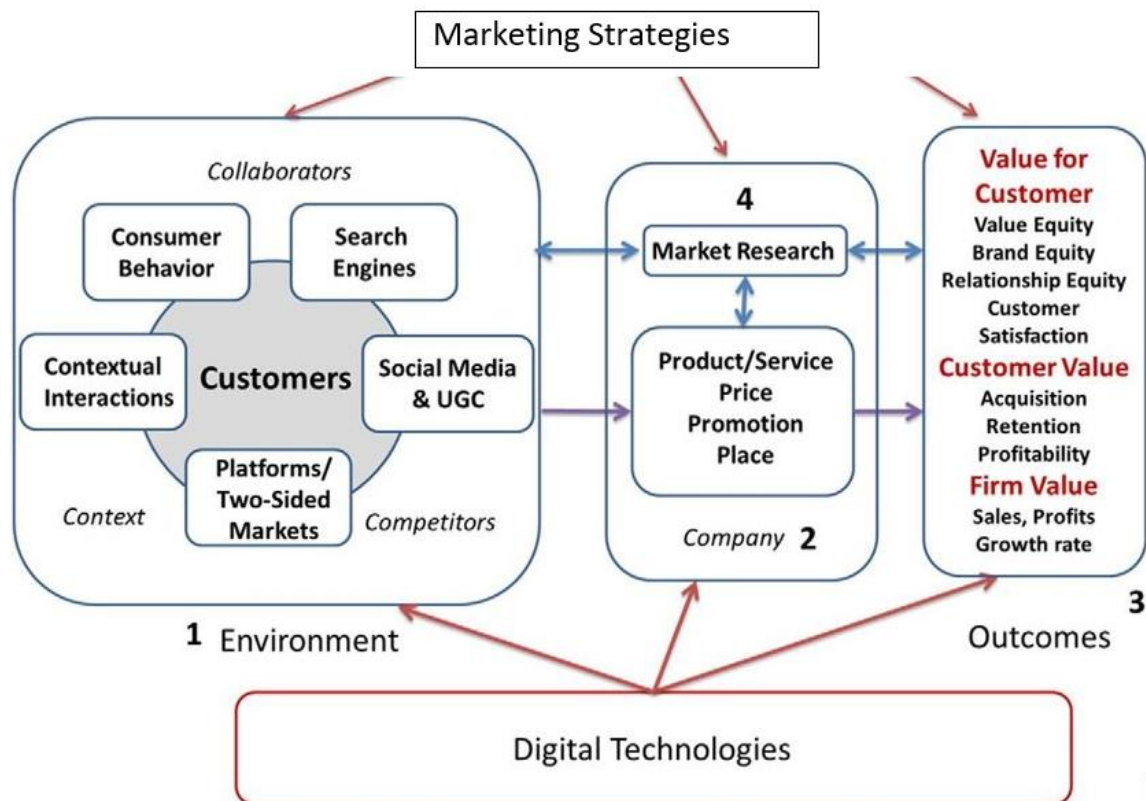
2.4 An overview of Digital marketing

Digital marketing is the promotion of goods or services using digital technology, mostly the Internet but also mobile phones, display advertising, and any other digital media (Smit and Watkins, 2021). Philip Kotler, the "Father of Modern Marketing" and author of more than 60 marketing books, gives us valuable insights that may be applied to our digital approach. The introduction of digital marketing may be dated back to the 1980s (Martin, 2019). At this time, new improvements were occurring that made the computer system sophisticated enough to retain client information. IBM released the first personal computer in 1981, and by 1989, the PCs' storage capacity had expanded to 100 MB (Martin, 2019). Before digital marketing, there was traditional marketing, which is a conventional mode of marketing that helps to reach a semi-targeted audience through a variety of offline advertising and promotional techniques that may have evolved over the past few decades, but the fundamental aspects remain the same

(Okellysutton, 2020). Digital marketing was born from traditional marketing. Digital marketing comprises any marketing strategies that use electronic devices or the internet. In order to communicate with present and potential consumers, businesses use digital channels such as search engines, social media, email, and other websites (Stokes, 2020). Digital marketing is characterised by the use of several digital channels and strategies to interact with consumers where they spend the majority of their time online (Okellysutton, 2020).

The idea of promoting products and services using digital channels has given rise to the term digital marketing (Duffy, 2018). According to the author, it may be described as the practice of introducing digital technology into business operations with the aim of attracting and retaining customers, fostering the growth of a company's brand, and substantially increasing revenues (Duffy, 2018). So, it may be seen as a flexible, technology-driven framework that facilitates partnerships between businesses and their customers and other stakeholders in order to develop, manufacture, and preserve the value of a brand's goods and services.

To guarantee the marketing mix, digital technology can potentially outperform traditional media channels and marketing communications. The use of digital media in advertising has spawned a slew of new digital marketing techniques, including e-mail marketing, mobile marketing, share of experience (SOE), pay per click (PPC), and viral marketing (Enehasse & Saglam, 2020). Technology improves the way in which customers and service providers communicate. Brand awareness and consumer participation in business are on the rise (Enehasse & Saglam, 2020).



The framework for research in digital marketing

Figure 1:Marketing Strategies Source: Kannan and Li, 2017.

New and improved digital technologies continue to impact the structure and method of conducting commercial activities, as outlined in the preceding framework. It involves not just certain components, but also various configurations of those components (Enehasse & Saglam, 2020). The system also underlined the importance of explaining the role of digital media, which can have an impact on both the interior and exterior of an organisation because they are designed to increase client growth and the perception of the firm's value. Utilizing digital media platforms in marketing expedites and enables a greater level of interaction with customers to obtain feedback that may be valuable in making projections for the expansion of the target market. This study provides a greater understanding of the many digital marketing strategies that may be employed for maximum brand performance.

2.5 Digital Marketing Tools for SMEs

2.5.1 Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

For SMEs to boost their online presence and draw in prospective clients, SEO and SEM are essential digital marketing techniques (Rutz, Baltes & Smith, 2020). In order to increase a website's organic search ranks, SEO works on optimising its content, structure, and technological elements. Contrarily, SEM refers to paid advertising efforts on search engines like Google and Bing that make sure SMEs' advertisements are prominently shown on search results pages (Patruti-Baltes, 2020).

2.5.2 Social Media Marketing

For SMEs to interact with their customers, advertise goods and services, and build brand recognition, social media platforms have become essential (Phan et al., 2020). SMEs may use social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn to engage with clients, exchange information, and learn important details about their tastes, trends, and feedback (Alalwan, 2020).

2.5.3 Content Marketing

According to Holliman and Rowley (2020), content marketing entails producing and disseminating relevant, interesting, and useful material that speaks to the needs and interests of the target audience. Through blog posts, videos, podcasts, infographics, and other forms of content, SMEs can use content marketing to position themselves as subject matter experts in their fields, develop trust and credibility, and increase customer engagement (Kannan, 2020).

2.5.4 Email Marketing

In order to build lasting connections and increase customer loyalty, SMEs may engage directly with their clients and prospects via email marketing (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). SMEs may segment their audience, develop tailored email campaigns, and measure crucial performance indicators like open rates, click-through rates, and conversions by employing automated email marketing systems (Patruti-Baltes, 2020).

2.5.5 Mobile Marketing

Mobile marketing has become an essential tool for SMEs to contact their customers on the move as a result of the rising use of smartphones and other mobile devices (Kumar et al., 2019). SMS campaigns, mobile applications, mobile-responsive websites, and location-based

advertising are a few examples of mobile marketing methods that allow SMEs to send tailored information and offers directly to the devices of their clients (Phan et al., 2020).

2.5.6 Online Advertising and Display Marketing

Online advertising and display marketing are strategies for promoting the goods and services of SMEs via the use of visual ads on websites, social media platforms, and other digital channels (Kannan, 2020). Display advertising may be targeted based on demographic data, surfing habits, and interests and come in a variety of forms, such as banner ads, video ads, and native ads (Rutz et al., 2020). Platforms for programmatic advertising may assist SMEs in making the most of their advertising budgets and reaching the most relevant target markets (Patruti-Baltes, 2020).

2.5.7 Analytics and Performance Measurement

By offering insights into consumer behaviour, campaign success, and return on investment (ROI), digital analytics solutions help SMEs to evaluate, analyse, and optimise their digital marketing activities (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). SMEs may analyse key performance indicators (KPIs), such as website traffic, user engagement, conversions, and more, by utilising tools like Google Analytics. This enables them to make data-driven choices and improve their marketing strategy (Alalwan, 2020).

2.6 The Impact of Digital Marketing on SME Growth and Competitiveness

2.6.1 Empirical Evidence from Various Countries and Regions

The effect of digital marketing on the development and competitiveness of SMEs has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners worldwide. Numerous studies conducted in various countries and regions provide empirical evidence of the positive impact of digital marketing on the performance of SMEs.

Patruti-Baltes (2020) investigated the role of digital marketing in the development of SMEs in Europe and found that businesses that employ digital marketing strategies effectively experience higher levels of consumer engagement, brand awareness, and market share. Similarly, Tiago and Verssimo (2020) analysed the impact of digital marketing on Portuguese

SMBs and discovered that integrating digital marketing efforts improves customer acquisition, customer retention, and overall business performance.

In Asia, Phan et al., (2020) analysed the relationship between digital marketing and Vietnamese SME performance. The findings demonstrated that digital marketing considerably contributes to the development and competitiveness of SMEs, particularly through social media marketing and content marketing. In addition, Alalwan (2020) investigated the impact of digital marketing on SMEs in Jordan and found that digital marketing positively affects sales performance, customer satisfaction, and market penetration.

Rutz et al. (2020) examined the impact of digital marketing on SME growth in Nigeria, concluding that the adoption of digital marketing strategies increases consumer reach, brand visibility, and market competition. Kannan (2020) also investigated the role of digital marketing in Kenyan SME's and found that digital marketing initiatives contribute to business growth, particularly through search engine optimisation and online advertising.

2.6.2 The Role of Digital Marketing in SMEs' Market Expansion

SMEs may benefit from digital marketing since it helps them reach more customers, expand into untapped niches of the market, and go worldwide. By using digital channels and platforms, SMEs may expand their customer base, increase their visibility, and break into new markets without breaking the bank (Kumar et al., 2019). One crucial part of digital marketing that helps small businesses expand their customer bases is the use of search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM). According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2020), these methods aid companies in boosting their internet profile and drawing customers from a wider geographic area. SMEs may enhance their organic traffic, brand recognition, and client base by optimising their websites and content for search engines (Rutz et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the role of social media platforms in the market expansion efforts of SMEs cannot be overstated. SMEs may benefit from social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn by connecting with consumers in different regions, sharing information, and learning about customer preferences and trends (Phan et al., 2020). When used properly, social media marketing may help SMEs find and break into previously untapped market niches based on consumer demographics, interests, and behaviours (Alalwan, 2020).

One other crucial part of digital marketing that helps small businesses grow is content marketing. SMEs may establish credibility as thought leaders in their field and win the loyalty of their customers by producing and sharing high-quality, interesting content (Holliman & Rowley, 2020). In addition to bringing in new customers, high-quality content also inspires existing ones to spread the word and bring in even more business for the SME (Kannan, 2020).

Small and medium-sized businesses may use digital marketing strategies like web advertising and display advertising to create and implement targeted advertising campaigns. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) may increase conversion rates and broaden their customer base by using these tactics (Tiago & Verssimo, 2020). Finally, digital analytics tools allow SMEs to track the success of their digital marketing campaigns, revealing information that can be used to improve future efforts (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). SMEs may strengthen their market development plans and long-term growth by assessing data on consumer behaviour, campaign performance, and return on investment (ROI) (Patruti-Baltes, 2020).

2.6.3 Digital Marketing and SMEs' Competitive Advantage

SMBs rely heavily on digital marketing in today's fast-paced industry. Digital channels, platforms, and technologies help SMEs stand out from the crowd, build solid brand equity, and formulate a compelling value proposition that resonates with their customers (Kumar et al., 2019). SMEs may get an edge in the market with the help of digital marketing by establishing a strong online presence. SMEs may boost their online presence and credibility with the help of search engine optimisation (SEO) and the creation of compelling, high-quality content (Patruti-Baltes, 2020). A strong competitive position is achieved by SMEs via enhanced visibility, which aids in the acquisition of new clients and the retention of current ones (Rutz et al., 2020).

One further critical feature of digital marketing that provides SMEs an advantage is the capacity to send tailored, targeted messages and offers to their audience. SMEs may tailor their marketing campaigns to the needs and interests of different demographic subsets by using digital channels such as email and social media (Phan et al., 2020). Increased customer involvement, stronger bonds, and positive brand associations are all benefits of this strategy (Alalwan, 2020).

In addition, with digital marketing, small and medium-sized businesses may harness the energy of data and analytics to make educated and smart business choices. SMEs may benefit greatly from using digital analytics solutions to track customer behaviour, preferences, and campaign success (Holliman and Rowley, 2020). In order to maintain a competitive edge, SMEs may benefit from this data-driven strategy by keeping up with industry trends, anticipating client needs, and reacting promptly to emerging possibilities (Kannan, 2020).

Furthermore, SMEs can now implement cost-effective marketing strategies on a par with their larger, more established competitors thanks to digital marketing. By utilising digital platforms and channels, SMEs can develop brand awareness and reach a large audience without incurring the high costs of traditional marketing channels such as print, radio, and television advertising (Tiago and Verssimo, 2020). This cost-effective approach to marketing enables small and medium-sized enterprises to allocate resources more efficiently and invest in other areas of their business, thereby enhancing their competitive advantage (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

2.7 Challenges of SME growth in the digital era

SMEs have encountered several obstacles in their attempts to survive and expand. Only four out of ten SMEs were able to address the growth-related problems with success (Wymbs, 2020). Research undertaken in developing nations identifies the five most important barriers to the expansion of SME: access to capital, tax rate, competition, energy, and political considerations (Salikin, Wahab and Muhammad, 2018). Rahman, Yaacob, and Radzi (2017) highlighted four significant factors that slowed the expansion of SMEs in Asia: lack of capital, lack of comprehensive databases, poor R&D spending, and inadequate use of information technology. Similarly, South Africa's SMEs face obstacles such as the lack of appropriate and timely financial help, the lack of acceptable technology, inefficient marketing owing to limited resources, and the lack of trained labour (Okellysutton, 2020). Similar to other developing nations, South Africa SMEs have four primary development obstacles: limited access to financial resources, difficulties in discovering and growing their market, inability to recruit and retain exceptional personnel, and inability to embrace new technology (Hu, 2017). In addition to these four key obstacles, there are other challenges were SMEs' reluctance to leave their comfort zones (Martin, 2019). These obstacles will be addressed in the following sections.

a. Financial Constraints

Financial limitation or lack of financial resources has been one of the most significant factors contributing to the failure of SMEs (Ailure, 2019). In the present business climate, competition among SMEs has been intense (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2020). To achieve a competitive edge in the marketplace, SMEs must engage in research and development to match customer demands. Therefore, more financial investments are required to fund these endeavours. Nonetheless, Malaysian SMEs are discovered to have financial deficiencies that restrict their development. According to research by Stokes (2020), capital inadequacy, non-systematic accounting records and poor financial performance, challenges in getting credit facilities, high operating costs, and debt collection issues are the primary causes of SMEs' financial deficiencies. These problems continue to be a worry for SME and constitute a substantial threat to company success. Financial limitation, which resulted from the difficulty of acquiring credit facilities, has remained the most-discussed issue in previous work. According to Smit and Watkins (2021) lack of access to funds or credit is one of the most significant obstacles encountered by SMEs. It is vital for the growth and development of SMEs to address these issues.

b. Human Resources Issues

SME in South Africa have long struggled to find qualified staff at a reasonable cost (Zainun, & Smith 2019). In 2015, just 28 percent of the overall workforce, or 3.86 million people, were skilled employees, which is one of the primary obstacles to the expansion of SMEs. By 2020, the government intends to expand the number of skilled employees to 5.38 million, or 35 percent of the overall labour force (Hu, 2017). Due to a restricted number of workers, a lack of money, and a high turnover rate, SMEs were unable to enhance the skills of their employees. It is customary for SMEs to recruit a minimum number of people, and to allocate each worker various jobs to save operating costs (Wang 2019). SME profit margins are poor; thus, the expense of training will be a hardship for them. The high turnover rate of SME employees also discourages SME investment in training.

The high rate of employee turnover in SME has a detrimental impact on their growth. In general, a high turnover rate is expensive for SMEs because they must spend money on recruiting, hiring, paying a high cost for training employee replacements and additional overtime costs, and dealing with decreased productivity, longer customer wait times, and lost sales and business opportunities (Yoshino & Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2020). Due to the additional

hours of labour, the pressure placed on current workers may result in increased attrition (Wymbs, 2020). The majority of SME employees will quit their positions in less than a year (Salikin, Wahab & Muhammad. 2018). Lack of remuneration, lack of training and development, dissatisfaction with the line manager, lack of promoting chances, and less suitable working settings are among their reasons for leaving (Rahman, Yaacob & Radzi, 2017).

c. Lack of Creativity and Innovation

The definition of creativity is the production of ideas that increase the efficiency and effectiveness of a system (Yao & Wang, 2019). Entrepreneurs innovate when they translate possibilities into commercial concepts (Yoshino and Taghizadeh-Hesary 2020). Creativity and invention are the most important aspects of company activity, and entrepreneurs have a special instrument for fostering these qualities (Okellysutton, 2020). Lack of innovation among small and medium-sized enterprises not only impedes development, but also affects long-term earnings and results in a lack of competitiveness. High R&D expenses, a lack of finance, a lack of desire to spend in upskilling, training, and human resource development, a lack of expertise, and the high cost of getting patents are among the causes of innovation failure (Martin, 2019). A company that lacks creativity and innovation cannot compete in the market because it lacks a competitive edge.

d. Poor Marketing Strategy

In the early years of their existence, small businesses faced several obstacles, one of which was a lack of a marketing plan (Ailure, 2019). Marketing is fundamental to the success of a business. Without a solid marketing plan, there will be no demand for the company's products or services, and hence no need for other functional areas. Thus, while designing a product's marketing strategy, the corporation must first monitor and assess the possibilities and dangers offered by external forces (Zainun & Smith, 2019). This has been the obstacle for SMBs, since some of them lack the necessary knowledge and abilities. Others depend extensively on traditional forms of advertising, such as distributing printed brochures and templates to prospective customers in the hope that this would promote their business. In the struggle for client attention, a business that employs traditional advertising methods is slipping more behind. This is due to consumers' lack of interest in the product's presentation, which is less engaging, and the inadequacy of this medium to reach prospective customers. Thus, the apathy of consumers towards conventional marketing techniques compels the organisation to seek out

new possibilities to convey marketing messages that are compelling enough to not only attract customers' attention but also begin their active participation with the company (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2020).

According to research, the latest advancements in digital marketing have helped many businesses enhance their client relationships and have contributed directly to brand growth. Specifically, for SMEs to stay relevant to customers, their marketing medium must adapt to the changing technology environment by using the notion of digital marketing (Stokes, 2020). Unfortunately, so many South African SME owners neglected the benefits of digital marketing for their businesses that they fell far behind their rivals (Smit & Watkins, 2021). Due to limited resources and a deficiency of expertise, a number of SMEs struggle to adapt to new technology (Hu, 2017). There is a need for SMEs and other institutions engaged in the operation of SMEs to study this crucial area so that SMEs may use the technology to boost their marketing strategy and promotional efforts.

e. Problem with the Supplier

In addition to the obstacles experienced by the majority of SME in the nation, finding the suitable suppliers for their goods and services is another obstacle. Due to a scarcity of suppliers, numerous small and medium-sized enterprises were unable to offer on-time delivery of their goods to the consumer (Wymbs, 2020). Thus, the majority of SME in the country lack the capability of a certified supplier to assist them in locating the necessary resources for the manufacturing of their goods. Indeed, suppliers play a key role in company, since they might increase industry competition and diminish the buyer's potential profit (Wilkinson, 2013). In addition, suppliers may influence the pricing, quantity, and quality of a product accessible for purchase by their consumers (Rahman, Yaacob & Radzi, 2017). Therefore, for SMEs to continue effectively satisfying their customers' needs, they must have complete access to their supplier in order to conduct commercial operations and expand. Failure to do so would result in the regression of SME growth, which might limit their expansion.

f. Economic and Infrastructural Challenges

Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality SMEs are not immune to the economic issues that beset the South African economy as a whole. High unemployment rates, income inequality, and

general slow economic development are among these difficulties (Rogerson, 2020). The volatile economic climate makes it difficult for SMEs to grow and develop.

Furthermore, infrastructural challenges are significant impediments to SME growth in the region. Inadequate and unpredictable transportation networks, inconsistent power supply, and insufficient water and sanitation facilities may all have an influence on SMEs' capacity to function efficiently and provide goods and services to their consumers (Chimucheka & Mandipaka, 2020). Inadequate internet infrastructure also prevents SMEs from properly capitalising on digital marketing and online business prospects, restricting their development and competitiveness potential (Fatoki, 2020).

g. Digital Marketing Skill Gaps and Knowledge Deficiencies

For SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, the fast growth of digital marketing brings both potential and problems. While digital marketing allows SMEs to reach new customers and expand their market presence at a low cost, it also necessitates specialised skills and knowledge to implement effectively (Mafini & Omoruyi, 2020). As a result of restricted access to training and resources, many SMEs in the area lack the requisite digital marketing skills and competence (Chimucheka & Mandipaka, 2020). This talent gap may make it difficult for SMEs to establish and implement successful digital marketing strategies, resulting in lost chances for development and competitiveness (Fatoki, 2020).

h. Technological Challenges and Cybersecurity Risks

The growing prevalence of cybersecurity threats poses a significant risk for SMEs that rely on digital technologies and platforms for operations and marketing (Fatoki, 2020). SMEs sometimes lack the resources and skills needed to adopt comprehensive cybersecurity measures, leaving them more exposed to cyberattacks, data breaches, and other security events (Rogerson, 2020). These dangers may erode SMEs' competitiveness and harm their development potential.

2.8 Opportunities and Strategies for Enhancing SME Growth through Digital Marketing

While SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality face a number of obstacles, there are numerous opportunities and techniques for accelerating SME growth through digital marketing. This section examines the function of public-private partnerships and government

assistance, capacity building, the development of digital skills, and using new technologies and emerging trends.

2.8.1 Government Support and Public-Private Partnerships

In order to promote SME development and competitiveness via digital marketing, government backing, and public-private partnerships might be very important (Mafini & Omoruyi, 2020). The performance of SMEs in using digital marketing techniques may be strongly influenced by government policies and activities aimed at developing digital literacy, offering financial assistance, and allowing access to digital infrastructure (Chimucheka & Mandipaka, 2020).

In terms of access to resources, knowledge, and technology, public-private partnerships may also aid in bridging the gap between SMEs and bigger businesses (Fatoki, 2020). Governments may foster an environment that promotes SMEs to use digital marketing and other digital technologies by collaborating with businesses in the private sector (Rogerson, 2020). This will increase their growth and competitiveness.

2.8.2 Capacity Building and Digital Skills Development

For SMEs to successfully adopt and execute digital marketing strategies, capacity building and the development of digital skills are crucial (Phan et al., 2020). Aiming to improve SME managers' and owners' knowledge of digital marketing platforms, tools, and best practises, these training programmes, workshops, and seminars may help accomplish this (Alalwan, 2020).

The creation of digital marketing curriculum and the provision of chances for ongoing professional development for SMEs may also be greatly aided by educational institutions and industry groups (Holliman & Rowley, 2020). SMEs may improve their ability to use digital marketing for growth and competitiveness by investing in capacity building and the development of digital skills (Kannan, 2020).

2.8.3 Leveraging Technology Innovations and Emerging Trends

To improve their digital marketing initiatives and spur development, SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality should make use of technological advancements and new trends (Tiago & Verssimo, 2020). By personalising client experiences, automating tedious operations,

and optimising content, SMEs may, for example, explore the possibilities of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to enhance their digital marketing strategies (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Additionally, SMEs can use data analytics tools to gain insightful knowledge into the behaviour and preferences of their customers, enabling them to make data-driven decisions and adjust their digital marketing strategies in line with those decisions (Patruti-Baltes, 2020). SMEs may make sure that their digital marketing activities remain relevant, successful, and in line with the changing demands of their target audience by keeping up with technology advancements and new trends.

2.9 The effects of digital marketing on SMEs

All of the aforementioned benefits of the various digital marketing channels and techniques demonstrate the importance of digital marketing as a whole. Digital marketing is replacing traditional media as a means of contacting consumers (Kingsnorth, 2018). Digital marketing is evolving, yet it is still novel in some developing regions (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Changing client needs, aspirations, and expectations are raising digital marketing's strategic significance. Modern technologies such as the Internet, social media, and mobile devices that provide more connectivity, unlimited access, and improved communication speed have given customers more control (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Therefore, marketers were compelled to adapt their customer engagement techniques and enter the digital marketing era. The following sections highlight the significance of this new marketing tool.

2.9.1 Growth of company

Very optimistic expansion prospects exist for SMEs that use digital marketing (Mazzarol 2015). SMEs can gain a foothold in the market and stay there with the help of digital marketing strategies that accurately reflect and promote their brand goods and services using appropriate online media (Chaffey, 2021). Haven has become the most efficient method of expanding their customer base by displaying their brand's products and services in an appealing manner. The growth of SMEs depends on digital marketing, which offers a realistic way to save expenses without compromising product visibility (Mazzarol, 2015).

By developing an eye for strategy and using proven digital marketing practises, SMEs can increase their chances of succeeding in a highly competitive market and realising a high return on investment (Makrides et al, 2020). The company should pay close attention to the frequency

of its interactions with its customers. As a result, business owners rely on digital marketing solutions to achieve a high conversion rate, which is crucial for evaluating the efficacy of their marketing campaigns (Makrides et al,2020). Developing a digital marketing plan helps businesses expand their reach, get new consumers, and boost their bottom line (Makrides et al, 2020)

2.9.2 Brand awareness

Brands are independent of labels and symbols. They express client feelings and expectations regarding the brand's products and services. Therefore, the brand endures in the minds of consumers (Mingione & Abratt, 2020). Consequently, a good and profitable brand has a high market dependability, indicating that consumers have a relatively large impact on the brand (Mingione & Abratt, 2020). Brand recognition depends on the strength of product links. Extremely important is a memory trail that demonstrates a customer's ability to recall and recognise a brand in a range of settings. The most important marketing aim is to raise brand awareness (Mingione & Abratt, 2020).

The importance of digital marketing for brand recognition cannot be overstated. Digital marketing enabled by digital technology increases awareness via innovation, customer experience, and consumer interactions. (Raeisi & Lingjie, 2017). Connecting a company's network and marketing activities validates the need of building a strong online presence. (Teixeira et al., 2018). Digital marketing is famous for its revolutionary impact on businesses and, as a result, its deep impact on brand customers. It is imperative that organisations always facilitate customer connections (Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016). Digital marketing tools like social media help SMEs to increase brand value through networking, contacts, and community growth Ndubisi and Natarajan, 2016). According to this theory, brand names may have a significant impact on consumers (Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016). Branding activities must be accompanied by the development and execution of a framework for technology and digital brand presence. SMEs may use digital marketing to create relationships with present consumers, therefore influencing their perceptions of the brand through communication with potential customers. (Ndubisi and Natarajan, 2016)

2.9.3 Reaching wide markets at low cost

Businesses may increase profits, provide value, reduce costs, raise brand awareness, and strengthen relationships with customers all thanks to digital marketing (Lewis, 2018). Digital marketing is what makes this feasible by expanding the reach of online platforms. Businesses

may avoid geographical restrictions and gain entry to massive markets via the use of digital media (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). The Internet has both a broadened and focused effect on marketing. As an added bonus, firms may save a tonne of money thanks to online price comparisons, auctions, and broader market access made possible by digital marketing.

2.9.4 Improves firm-customer interactions

As a result of digital marketing, customers are at the centre of all that a company does, inspiring new engagements, interactions, and product developments (Neely, 2017). As long as they are supported by a solid plan, digital channels may significantly increase customer loyalty (Njanike, 2019). Marketers now have additional channels open to them to contact and communicate with customers as a result of the two-way nature of digital marketing operations (Chen and Lin, 2019). Although it is conceivable for marketers to lose control, Nuseir and Aljumah (2020) stressed that this is not an inevitable outcome. Digital media serves as the backbone of digital marketing since it improves two-way communication between a company and its customers. The establishment of order, shipping, product availability, and other service-related facts is dependent on this line of communication. Furthermore, the marketing environment is shifting, calling for increased interaction with customers (Nuseir & Aljumah, 2020).

2.9.5 Access to reach global markets with limited resources

Businesses may expand their reach to international customers with minimal outlay of capital thanks to digital marketing platforms (Seo & Park, 2018). Fewer resources than usual are needed to enter international marketplaces. For small enterprises, which sometimes have capacity limits, the internet and other forms of communication technology reduce the barriers to entry into global markets. Global markets are necessary to offset the effects of dwindling home ones and rising local competition (Shalton, 2018). Increased visibility in international markets is one of the many benefits of digital marketing (Shalton, 2018). Customers may easily peruse the site for what they need, place orders, and pay for their purchases. Consequence: less barriers to worldwide expansion for small and medium-sized enterprises (Sheth, 2020). The rapid globalisation of digital marketing provides more opportunities to engage with non-native audiences.

2.10 Digital marketing utilization and problems in SMES

In his research, Teece (2018) found that there are large differences in how SMEs embrace and benefit from digital marketing. As Bala and Verma (2018) found, SMEs randomly embrace

digital marketing and comprehend the difficulties of digital marketing poorly. Many factors prevent the full potential of digital marketing to achieve business goals, but lack of resources (time, people, and skills) is cited most frequently by Bala and Verma (2018). The huge gaps between potential and actuality are a direct result of the lack of professional websites and trustworthy performance monitoring systems, both of which may be traced back to a general lack of expertise. In addition, the lack of available talent severely hampered the effectiveness of SME website improvements (Bala & Verma, 2018). Most SMEs are not making as much of an impact with their digital marketing as their larger counterparts (Bala & Verma, 2018). Data shows that most SMEs do not have websites, despite Bala and Verma (2018) showing that websites, SEO, and social media are the most frequently used digital platforms.

Blackburn (2016) claims that many different aspects of digital marketing may go wrong, including consumer acquisition, product choice, and payment and delivery. The list is endless, but it does explain some of the issues that arise with digital marketing. Bad digital marketing is the consequence of imprecise objectives, a lack of strategy, or careless implementation (Blackburn, 2016). According to Brown (2019), the most significant factors limiting the digital market performance of SMEs are technological, skill, financial, resource, business, and legal. Customers may be adjusting to the digital age, but most companies still have a hard time keeping up with the pace of change (Brown, 2019). The evolution of both technology and the business world necessitates a different skill set (Brown, 2019). The current company culture has to develop, and this development needs to take place in real time. Customers these days want responsive, mobile-friendly, highly customizable websites that can be accessed from any device (Brown, 2019). In the sections that follow, will discuss some of the main roadblocks that small and medium-sized businesses face when trying to implement digital marketing strategies.

2.11 Conclusion

The literature evaluation has provided a comprehensive comprehension of the various aspects of digital marketing and its impact on SME growth and competitiveness in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality of South Africa. It has emphasised the significance of digital marketing tools, including SEO, social media marketing, content marketing, email marketing, mobile marketing, online advertising, and performance measurement (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). In addition, the review examined the effect of digital marketing on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs using empirical evidence from a variety of countries and regions (Tiago & Verssimo, 2020). In addition, the literature review investigated the challenges

faced by SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, such as economic and infrastructural challenges, limited access to financial resources, digital marketing skill gaps and knowledge deficiencies, technological challenges, and cybersecurity risks (Rogerson, 2020). Furthermore, the next chapter focuses on the research design and methodology.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

A strong empirical investigation's methodological rigour and design are its cornerstones. The methodical methodology used in this research to investigate the impact of digital marketing on the expansion of SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa, is outlined in Chapter 3. The research design's complexities are explained, beginning with the research paradigm that served as the theoretical foundation for the study and continuing with the research methodology, design, population, sampling tactics, and techniques used to gather and

analyse data. In order to guarantee the integrity and reliability of the study, ethical issues that are essential to the research process are also discussed. As a result, this chapter acts as a methodological road map that outlines the steps taken to go from the original research questions to the empirical investigation and data analysis, guaranteeing that the study's conclusions are valid, trustworthy, and capable of making a substantial contribution to our understanding of how digital marketing helps SMEs grow.

3.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm generally includes the philosophical foundations that influence an academic inquiry's methodological approach (Kuhn, 2012). It provides a framework for understanding the nature of the "world" (ontology), the nature of "knowing" (epistemology), and the procedures used to know (methodology) (Crotty, 1998). As a result, a paradigm determines how research is perceived and knowledge is formed. The research used the interpretivism paradigm, which maintains that there is no such thing as an objective, external reality but rather that reality is a social production and is given meaning by individual and communal interpretations (Schwandt, 2000). The foundation of interpretivism is the belief that knowledge can only be really obtained by looking at the world through the eyes of those who have experienced it first-hand (Klein & Myers, 1999). This is especially important in the context of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, where the complex and subjective experiences of SME owners and customers with digital marketing practises are critical to evaluating its impact on company growth.

3.2.3 The Fit of Interpretivism for This Study

The interpretivist paradigm is a good fit for this research because it offers deep, contextual insights on the perceptions and implementations of digital marketing strategies among SMEs in Tshwane. An interpretivist approach is excellent since the goal of this investigation is to comprehend the intricacies of social processes and human behaviour. According to Creswell (2013), this approach enables a study design that is more adaptable and responsive, considering the context and the personal interpretations that participants place on their experiences. The present study's application of interpretivism is supported by its focus on the individualised interpretation of human experiences in particular social circumstances (Bryman, 2012). Examining how SME owners understand and use digital marketing in their company models and plans is made much easier with this emphasis. In the end, the course and expansion of their

businesses are determined by these individualised experiences and interpretations (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991).

The use of inductive reasoning, which begins with particular observations and measurements and progresses towards more generalisations and theories, is fundamentally supported by interpretivism. This is in line with the methodology of the study, which collected data from specific SME operators using qualitative techniques like interviews before finding patterns (Thomas, 2006). Direct interaction with the subjects allowed the research to produce a thorough grasp of the participants' worldviews and ensured that knowledge was constructed through iterative, collaborative processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The foundation of interpretivist research is the use of naturalistic techniques like participant observation and open-ended interviews, which enable data to be collected in a natural setting and lead to a more comprehensive knowledge of the topic being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These methods were essential to understanding the complex ways that digital marketing affects SME growth in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality's cultural and economic context.

A transactional and subjectivist epistemology that recognises the interdependence of the researcher and the research subject and their mutual influence is the foundation of the interpretivist paradigm (Merriam, 2009). In the current study, this acknowledgement is crucial because it makes it clear that the researcher and the SME stakeholders each bring unique backgrounds, viewpoints, and interpretations to the research process. This relationship is viewed as a necessary part of comprehending the built world, not as a contamination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This epistemology's transactional character made it easier to interact dynamically and reflectively with SME operators in Tshwane, reflecting their real-world experiences. In order to reach an agreement about how digital marketing affects the expansion of SMEs, it emphasised the value of communication, compromise, and consensus-building. (Schön, 1983).

3.3 Research Approach

A research approach underscores the reasoning and strategy underpinning the selection and application of certain procedures, tying this selection to the desired study objectives (Creswell, 2014). It helps the researcher make decisions about data collection, processing, and interpretation. The strategy highlights the processes followed to achieve a systematic and valid response to the research question (Silverman, 2013).

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the study used a qualitative research technique that is interpretive and naturalistic, concentrating on the meanings, experiences, and understandings of participants. Qualitative research relies heavily on in-depth interviews and in-person observations of study subjects (Merriam, 2009). It demonstrates the need for studying independent variables in their native settings.

The study's purpose of investigating the thriving SME sector in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality made the qualitative approach used in the research a natural fit. This method simplified the investigation of the multifaceted impacts of digital advertising on the development of SMEs (Yin, 2014). The study used qualitative methods, which enabled researchers to capture the entire scope of the phenomenon and shed light on the subtleties of digital marketing strategies and their role in business operations (Patton, 2015).

This study used a qualitative approach to gather in-depth information that accurately reflected customers' perceptions of the services provided by businesses in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. Such breadth is necessary for grasping the complexities and divergent points of view that shape SME operations and development (Neuman, 2011). By placing a focus on in-depth interviews and observations, as well as other qualitative methods of data collection, the research provided substantial insights into the digital transformation of SMEs (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Choosing a qualitative method allowed for the incorporation of crucial methods, including case studies, ethnographies, and participatory action research (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). When trying to describe a phenomenon in its natural setting, a case study approach is extremely

useful (Stake, 1995). The case study method was essential in providing in-depth knowledge of digital transformation experiences among SMEs in Tshwane.

The qualitative nature of the research was shown via a case study of SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, and an effort was made to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of their experiences with digital marketing. This methodological decision highlighted the significance of context and made it possible to investigate the participants' lived experiences in great detail, which is crucial for elucidating how digital marketing affects the expansion of SMEs (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The qualitative technique was thought to be ideal for this study due to the importance of the participants' experiences and viewpoints (Maree, 2017). The investigation focused on the subjective experiences and individual stories of small- and medium-sized business owners on digital marketing since their perspectives illuminated the realities of applying digital tactics in a cutthroat and dynamic industry (Maxwell, 2012).

In this situation, the qualitative approach's main benefit was its capacity to delve into the complex, individualised roots of social phenomena. Qualitative research is a helpful lens through which the complexity of digital marketing's influence on SMEs may be understood. It does this by giving researchers a way to analyse, explain, examine, and clarify people's experiences and perspectives within their natural surroundings (Maree, 2017).

3.4 Research Design

Creswell (2014) asserts that the research design is essential to every empirical study because it provides an organised method that directs the whole research process. It serves as a strategic framework for outlining data collection, analysis, and interpretation techniques. A robust research design, according to Robson (2011), guarantees that the data obtained is relevant to the research objectives and that the study can be reproduced or verified by other researchers. The research strategy for this study was multidimensional, encompassing components of exploratory and descriptive research. This framework was critical in determining the breadth and nature of digital marketing's influence on SME growth in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. The design was rigorously prepared to allow for flexibility and adaptability when new insights emerged during the study process (Maxwell, 2013).

3.4.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The primary approach used in the study was participatory action research (PAR). By actively including study participants in the research process, PAR is a collaborative strategy that aims to comprehend and enhance the practices of those involved (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). This method works particularly well for studies that seek to advance action and provide useful knowledge, which is what the investigation of the impact of digital marketing on SMEs aimed to do.

An integral part of the study design was engaging with the real-life experiences of small-business owners and managers in Tshwane. This strategy made it possible to comprehend how digital marketing techniques are seen and incorporated into corporate operations on a deeper level. Participants were able to reflect on their practices and contribute to the creation of new information since the study actively included them, fostering a reciprocal connection (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

One of the main principles of PAR is collaborative rapport, which emphasises the value of developing a sense of cooperation and trust with the participants. According to Stringer (2013), this relational dynamic is crucial for promoting candid communication and guaranteeing that the knowledge produced is useful to both parties and actionable. These ideas were included in the study's design, which allowed SME stakeholders to openly discuss their experiences.

The goal of the research design was to improve the practices associated with digital marketing among SMEs by getting to know them better and encouraging positive behaviour change. It was based on the idea of conscientization, which encourages individuals to think critically and become more aware of their own circumstances (Freire, 2014). The design's interactive component played a crucial role in encouraging the study's SME participants to think about themselves and take appropriate action.

The PAR framework was chosen because of its capacity to have observable effects in the real world, especially in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality's socioeconomic setting. It made it possible for the study to move beyond scholarly investigation in order to bring about change and improve SMEs' ability to use digital marketing to fuel expansion (Kinson, Pain, and Kesby, 2007). To guarantee a thorough comprehension of the topic area, qualitative methods and PAR

were used in this study. The specific setting of each SME's circumstance was captured via the use of case studies and anthropological techniques. This integration supported the study's interpretivist epistemological position by enabling a nuanced understanding of the function of digital marketing in SME development (Yin, 2014).

3.5 Population and Sampling

3.5.1 Target Population

The term 'target population' is fundamental in research since it refers to the total group of units from whom the sample is selected and to which the results will be generalised (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). The target demographic for this study was SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, a thriving commercial hub with a varied array of SMEs contributing to its economy. To define the study's population, SMEs were selected based on characteristics such as size, revenue, and number of workers, in accordance with the definitions published by the South African Department of Trade and Industry. Tshwane's SMEs were chosen with care; this group represents a microcosm of South African enterprise confronted with the problems and potential of digital marketing (Babbie, 2016).

Purposive sampling was used in the study to select SMEs that were involved in significant digital marketing initiatives, ensuring that the participants were well-positioned to contribute insights into the phenomenon under inquiry (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Because the study questions needed individuals with direct expertise with digital marketing campaigns, this non-probability sampling approach was chosen over random selection.

Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality SMEs supplied a rich tapestry of digital marketing expertise and practices. These SMEs' managers and representatives presented a wealth of information as well as personal tales of how digital marketing methods affected their business operations and growth trajectories. The selection method considered a variety of industries in order to capture the variability of the SME sector, ensuring that the findings might be indicative of larger trends throughout the municipality (Patton, 2015).

As a result, the sample was not simply a subset of the population but a carefully chosen representative that could provide the most significant and comprehensive insights into the

impact of digital marketing on SME growth. This meticulous selection of participants was critical since it affected the depth and breadth of the qualitative data, which in turn supported the study's later results and recommendations (Merriam, 2009).

3.5.2 Sampling

A focused method of sampling was required in the research on the effect of digital marketing on SME growth within Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality to guarantee that the data obtained was both relevant and rigorous. Individuals in the sample were not only aware of digital marketing inside their SMEs, but they were also decision-makers who could give insights on strategic efforts and their outcomes. The major approach used was purposeful sampling, which allowed the researcher to pick individuals who satisfied certain criteria pertinent to the study's research topics. This approach is especially appropriate for exploratory qualitative research because understanding the depth and variety of participants' experiences is more important than generalizability (Patton, 2002).

The research intended to investigate a cross-section of SMEs; thus, seven companies were chosen to participate, each of which provided the opinions of three important personnel: the CEO, the head of marketing, and a mid-level manager. This diversification of the sample was designed to gather a variety of insights from different levels of the organization's structure, resulting in a more comprehensive knowledge of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013). In addition, snowball sampling was used as an additional approach. This strategy was especially effective in discovering possible participants inside Tshwane's networked SME community who would otherwise be unavailable through traditional means. Snowball sampling enabled the research to broaden its scope by capitalising on the networks that participants had previously built (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

The use of purposeful and snowball sampling methodologies gave a thorough approach to studying the diverse experiences of SMEs in Tshwane with digital marketing. It allowed for the inclusion of a diversified collection of enterprises ranging in size and sector, ensuring that the study's findings were applicable to a wide range of SMEs within the municipality. The study acknowledged the inherent constraints of non-probability sampling methodologies, such as possible bias and lack of representativeness, in synthesising different approaches. However, given the exploratory character of the research and its emphasis on qualitative insights, the

richness and specificity of the information collected through this technique were assessed to exceed these limitations.

In the light of the present researcher, it has been cautiously crafted in this study to balance the need for depth of insight with the necessity of minimizing potential biases through purposive and snowball sampling. Realizing that purposive sampling might introduce subjectivity in the selection of participants, diversity in the initial sample was paramount to the researcher to capture a wide array of experiences across different SMEs. This ensured that participants are knowledgeable about practices in digital marketing and representative of the SME landscape in Tshwane.

During the process of snowball, the researcher was keen on homogeneity resulting in the sample from where other participations recommended others within their close circles. To balance this, initial contacts were made within diverse sectors, deliberately ranging from technology startups to more traditional brick-and-mortar enterprises. This was an active choice to widen the scope of the study and to reduce potential sampling bias, hence increasing the generalizability of the findings.

3.6 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is a systematic process in which data is analysed, cleansed, converted, and modelled in order to identify important information, offer conclusions, and help decision-making (Silverman, 2013). For this study, Atlas.ti, 23 a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was utilised to conduct thematic analysis and distil the huge amount of data into intelligible and interpretable themes in the context of the research on digital marketing's effect on SME growth within Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

Thematic analysis is a popular approach for detecting, analysing, and reporting data patterns (themes). It organises and summarises the data set in great detail while also interpreting different parts of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach is adaptable, allowing researchers to create themes that are closely related to the data. Thematic analysis was carried out in this study using Atlas.ti after a meticulous process of data familiarisation, data coding, topic formulation, and revision, followed by identifying and naming themes. This iterative procedure began with a close examination of the transcribed interview material within Atlas.ti, followed by the generation of preliminary codes. As the research continued, these codes were

organised into prospective themes, with individual bits of data being compared to produce a cohesive picture.

This study's applicability for theme analysis using Atlas.ti was multifaceted. To begin, given the interpretivist paradigm that underpins the research, theme analysis enabled a rich and thorough yet complicated description of the data. It recognised subjective meanings while offering a systematic way for analysing participants' different viewpoints (Patton, 2002).

Besides, triangulation was ensured by cross-referencing the themes in interview transcript materials, field notes, and any supplementary documents SMEs could provide. For the reason that the identification of those themes is appropriately based on the data, it also reflects a comprehensive approach to the subject matter. In this light, by including these measures of trustworthiness, member checks, and triangulation, the research may yield a valid and credible analysis as to the very impact of digital marketing on SME growth in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

Second, theme analysis was chosen because of its adaptability and application to studies like this one, which attempt to comprehend the range of experiences and attitudes towards digital marketing among SMEs. It allowed the researchers to find not just commonalities across the data but also nuanced variances in how various SMEs engage with digital marketing using Atlas.ti's robust analysis capabilities (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the cyclical nature of thematic analysis in Atlas.ti ensured a rigorous and transparent research process, as data was coded, recoded, and themes were established and improved. This is consistent with the study's goal of providing a reliable and trustworthy evaluation of the impact of digital marketing on SME development.

Atlas.ti improved the rigour and credibility of the analytical process by facilitating data organisation and the efficient handling of codes and topics (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Thematic analysis using this software was the research's fundamental approach for data interpretation, enabling the development of a thorough knowledge of the impact of digital marketing on SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. It offered a systematic but adaptable method for handling the nuances of qualitative data within the interpretivist research paradigm.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

3.7.1 Credibility

The reliability of a research is measured by how confidently one can believe its findings. Several strategies were utilised in this research to promote trustworthiness. Information regarding the effects of digital marketing on SMEs was acquired more fully by triangulating data from observations, interviews, and document analysis. A deeper knowledge of the individuals' experiences was gained via prolonged contact, which improved the data. Member checks, in which people were given the opportunity to look at and provide input on the results, further supported the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the study's reporting's use of rich, descriptive descriptions made it possible to paint a realistic picture of the participants' actual experiences, which increased the study's trustworthiness.

3.7.2 Transferability

The degree to which the results may be used in different situations is known as transferability. The thorough explanation of the research setting, the traits of SMEs in Tshwane, and the participant selection procedure provided by the study made it possible to evaluate the findings' possible applicability. Purposive sampling made it possible to include people with a variety of experiences that were found in comparable environments. The research gave readers sufficient context to assess if the findings might be applied to different situations by giving a thorough explanation of the data (Merriam, 1998).

3.7.3 Dependability

The stability of data over time and environments is known as reliability. The decisions taken during the research process were recorded in an audit trail, enabling a review of the study's methodology. The reliability of the research was enhanced by the iterative strategy to data collecting and analysis used in this study, wherein findings were regularly reviewed and re-examined. Consistency in the interpretation of data was guaranteed by the use of a code-recode technique, in which data were first coded, then examined, then recoded after some time (Morse, 1997).

3.7.4 Confirmability

The degree to which the results might be verified by other people is known as confirmability. To improve confirmability, the researcher kept a reflective notebook in which she recorded her

own thoughts, prejudices, and choices made during the investigation. Utilising NVivo software made it easier to monitor the coding procedure and guarantee that the conclusions reached were supported by the data. In order to enhance confirmability, the investigator proactively pursued contradictory evidence and substitute interpretations for the facts, guaranteeing that conclusions were grounded on the data rather than in previous conceptions or prejudices (Mays & Pope, 1995). By closely implementing these techniques, the study made sure that its conclusions were reliable, transportable, believable, and confirmable, which improved the research's overall credibility.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

3.8.1 Informed Consent

In accordance with ethical research practises, informed consent was an important component of the investigation. Participants were given thorough information about the research's objective, methodology, and potential outcomes. Participants were given the option to ask questions and were assured that their participation was voluntary and may be withdrawn at any moment, in accordance with the rules outlined by ethical frameworks such as those suggested by Northcutt and McCoy (2018). Prior to the start of any data collection, participants completed consent forms outlining the scope of the study and their rights.

3.8.2 Confidentiality

The confidentiality of the information was carefully secured. Codes were used to anonymize participants' identities, and any identifying information was securely kept and available only to the study team. Sensitive data were handled with the utmost caution, as advised by ethical guidelines (Bryman, 2016), ensuring that no personal or business-related information was revealed at any stage during or after the study.

3.8.3 Acknowledgement of Data Sources

The work strictly conformed to academic integrity requirements, with all secondary data sources properly mentioned and referenced. This was in strict accordance with anti-plagiarism regulations, affirming the intellectual property rights of original writers and contributors in accordance with Northcutt and McCoy (2018) norms.

3.8.4 Permission from Administrative Entities and Gatekeepers

The research proposal was approved by the University Ethics Committee of University of Venda and the researcher obtained an ethical clearance certificate prior to data collection. This stage ensured that the study's design and procedures were examined for ethical soundness, including concerns for potential damage to participants and the research's larger social consequences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to ensure that the research method was ethical not just in terms of adherence to formal rules, but also in its practical implementation. Throughout the study, the researcher pondered on their position, any biases, and the power dynamics inherent in the research process, seeking to maintain an ethical posture. By including these ethical practises into the research technique, the study not only protected the rights and well-being of participants, but it also increased the credibility and dependability of its results.

3.9 Conclusion

Finally, Chapter 3 described the methodological framework and procedural processes used to assure the research on digital marketing's influence on SME growth in Tshwane's integrity and trustworthiness. The chapter outlined the interpretivist paradigm that served as the study's conceptual framework, allowing for a better comprehension of the subjective experiences of SME operators with digital marketing. The qualitative method and design were carefully chosen to produce in-depth insights, and the sample strategies were deliberately executed to collect a wide range of opinions. To elicit rich, nuanced data, data collecting, and analysis procedures were carefully chosen, and thematic analysis was used to distil major patterns and themes. Ethical norms were strictly observed throughout the study process, maintaining the ideals of respect, fairness, and beneficence. The approaches described in this chapter have been critical in creating a complete picture of the digital marketing landscape as experienced by SMEs in Tshwane, contributing to both academic debate and practical application in the field of digital marketing strategy. The next chapter focuses on the discussion, interpretation and analysis of the research findings

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, the researcher analysed data from fourteen Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality residents on digital marketing's effects on SMEs. This section describes the interviews to learn how local small businesses use online marketing to grow. CEOs and marketing managers from diverse companies discuss digital marketing's future, pros, and cons. This chapter investigates the topic from multiple perspectives to find patterns, conflicts, and new solutions. These numbers might help Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality small firms evaluate digital marketing. These results reveal key trends and strategic issues.

4.2 Descriptive Demographics of the Participants

South African researchers from the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality polled 14 individuals with differing opinions on how small companies might benefit from digital marketing in order to grow. There is a wealth of experience among IT, healthcare, retail fashion, and marketing executives in the realm of digital marketing for local companies. For 2-15 years, they have owned new and existing businesses.

Table 1: Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	2	14.29%
Female	12	85.71%

Table 1: Gender

Table 2: Age Table

Age	Frequency	Percentage
30-40	4	28.57%
21-30	6	42.86%
40-50	3	21.43%
Above 50	1	7.14%

Table 2: Age

Table 3: Occupation Table

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Marketing Manager	4	28.57%
Supervisor	3	21.43%
CEO	3	21.43%

Teacher	1	7.14%
Graphic Designer	1	7.14%
Music DJ and Owner	1	7.14%
Barber	1	7.14%

Table 3: Occupation

Table 4: Education Table

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor's Degree	4	28.57%
Diploma	2	14.29%
Master's Degree	3	21.43%
Certificate	1	7.14%
Matric	3	21.43%
Degree	1	7.14%

Table 4: Education level

Table 5: Firm History Table

History	Frequency	Percentage
2 Years	1	7.14%
3 Years	3	21.43%
4 Years	2	14.29%
5 Years	3	21.43%
6 Years	1	7.14%

7 Years	1	7.14%
10 Years	2	14.29%
15 Years	1	7.14%

Table 5: Firm History

Table 6: Industry Table

Industry	Frequency	Percentage
E-commerce	1	7.14%
Fashion Retail	1	7.14%
IT Services	1	7.14%
Food Delivery	1	7.14%
Travel Agency	1	7.14%
Recruitment Company	1	7.14%
Event Planning	1	7.14%
Education	1	7.14%
Construction Company	1	7.14%
Health Care	1	7.14%
Cleaning Services	1	7.14%
Social Media Marketing	1	7.14%
Entertainment	1	7.14%
Hair Services & Products	1	7.14%

Table 6: Industry

Table 7: Digital Marketing Tools Table

Digital Marketing Tools	Frequency	Percentage
Social Media, Google Ads, Email	1	7.14%
WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook	1	7.14%
Email, WhatsApp, Social Media	1	7.14%
Social Media, Email, SEO, PPC	1	7.14%
Social Media, Email, Google Ads	1	7.14%
LinkedIn, Facebook, Email	1	7.14%
Social Media, Email	4	28.57%
Social Media, Website, Email	3	21.43%
Social Media, SEO, Email	1	7.14%

Table 7: Digital Marketing Tools

The demographic data reported in Table 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 offered valuable insights into the individuals who participated in the study. This gender diversity facilitates the inclusion of a well-rounded spectrum of viewpoints. The age range of the participants is from 21 to over 50 years, with the majority of participants falling within the 30–40-year range. This indicates the range of experience levels present, with the majority of individuals being at the peak of their working years. Regarding education, there is diversity in the levels of certification, diploma, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and matriculation. Nevertheless, the majority of participants have achieved a bachelor's degree or a higher level of education. This suggests that the sample primarily consisted of professionals and people with advanced skills.

Regarding occupation, the sample consists of a diverse range of individuals, including C-level executives, managers, supervisors, and specialists. This stratification provides perspectives from various organisational perspectives. In terms of company history, the establishment dates span from 2 to 15 years. This presents a fusion of fledgling and well-established enterprises.

Various industries are encompassed, including retail, services, construction, and others. This provides additional insights at the sectoral level into the viewpoints that have been expressed. The sample showcases the utilisation of various online channels in terms of digital marketing tools. Common choices encompass various platforms such as social media, email, search engine optimisation (SEO), and pay-per-click (PPC) advertising. This offers valuable perspective on complex digital strategies.

The presence of a wide range of relevant demographics enhances the credibility of the conclusions derived from the study. Teddlie and Yu (2007) emphasise the significance of representativeness in the application of purposive sampling approaches. By capturing a heterogeneous SME profile, the credibility and transferability of results are enhanced. Incorporating demographic contextualization is also crucial when interpreting interview-based research. As Creswell (2014) indicates, understanding participant backgrounds supports robust analysis and conclusion-drawing. The thorough profiling contextualises replies for richer theme identification. Some literature backs this up. Yin (2014) underlines the need for diverse data sources to triangulate evidence when validating case study conclusions. As this study includes demographic characteristics, it aligns well with this approach to trustworthiness.

4.3 Major Theme 1: Digital Marketing Tools Employed by SMEs

4.3.1 Sub Theme 1: Social Media Platforms Usage

Interview results from a sub-theme reveal how Tshwane small firms employ digital marketing tools. People like Participant 1 and Participant 4 use Facebook and Instagram a lot, which shows how important they are for reaching many people. Participant 2's focus on TikTok shows how important it is becoming for attracting younger people, similar to how Participant 5 uses Instagram to show off interesting vacation spots.

Participant 1, suggesting a strategic approach to digital advertising, narrated that:

"Facebook and Google Ads have been pivotal in reaching our online shoppers," states.

Participant 3, focusing on professional services, stated that,

"LinkedIn has been essential for networking and establishing business connections," highlighting the platform's role in professional engagement.

Participant 7, from the event planning sector, remarks,

"Instagram has been invaluable in showcasing our creative work to potential clients."

The analysis of interview responses uncovered how participants strategically chose social media platforms that were customised to their target audiences and aligned with their strategic objectives. Participant 1, an e-commerce marketing manager, emphasised that the use of Facebook and Google Ads has been crucial in effectively reaching our online consumers. This strategic choice is in line with our customers' preferences. Regarding professional networking, Participant 3, who is the CEO of an IT company, emphasised the importance of LinkedIn in developing business relationships and networking with the right audience. Participant 2's strategic emphasis on TikTok as a means to acquire younger fashion clients demonstrates a shrewd alignment of social media platforms with specific consumer demographics. Participant 5 strategically utilising Instagram to display captivating travel destinations demonstrates a deliberate alignment with the industry and objectives. Participant 7 saw that utilising Instagram to interact with event clients aligns with Kannan's (2020) emphasis on creatively capitalising on new trends.

These experiences validate that effective consumer involvement depends significantly on the integration of appropriate social channels (Alalwan, 2020). The choices made by participants aligned with the characteristics of the audience, reflecting the claim made by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) that the key to unlocking the benefits of social media lies in making thoughtful selections based on strategic and market considerations. Effectively portraying target groups through appropriately contextualised networks improves competitive difference, as suggested in Tiago and Veríssimo's (2014) market positioning theory. Participant 2 emphasises the significance of creatively utilising industry-specific platforms such as TikTok for fashion, in addition to properly utilising familiar social technologies, for the benefit of Tshwane SMEs. Participants recognised that their choices were changing in line with Rutz et al.'s (2020) suggestion that adopting adaptive social media fosters sustainable competitiveness. Their meticulously curated networks exemplify digital strategies that progress with technological advancements, so validating Phan et al.'s (2020) perspective on the development of tools and tactics.

4.3.2 Sub Theme 2 Email Marketing and Direct Communication

Semi structured interviews were conducted with Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. Small and medium-sized firms are growing utilising digital marketing techniques, mainly email and direct contact, according to interviews.

E-commerce marketing manager Participant 1 emphasises the importance of email and discounts for mass communication saying.

"Email marketing is a key strategy in our digital marketing arsenal".

Similarly, Participant 3, the CEO of an IT services company, stresses the role of personalized communication for customer engagement, underscoring its capacity to build lasting relationships with clients noting that;

"Personalized emails have significantly improved our customer engagement.

Participant 7, a Marketing Manager in event planning, echoes these sentiments, noting the effectiveness of email campaigns for updates and latest offers in keeping their audience informed and engaged:

"Our email campaigns have been pivotal in keeping our audience up-to-date with our latest offers.

Analysis of interview responses showed that participants relied heavily on email marketing and direct digital communication tools like WhatsApp for business development. E-commerce and IT representatives highlighted the strategic importance of personalized emails in delivering targeted messages to large audiences cost-effectively. Event planning managers stressed the usefulness of email in regularly updating clients on new offerings. These findings indicate email marketing and direct digital communication are important for SME growth due to their low-cost personalisation abilities and capacity for ongoing customer engagement. Their selection reflects an understanding of utilizing fit-for-purpose channels emphasizing interactivity, as emphasized in Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) social media framework. Participants appeared aware that relationship-building underpins competitive advantage, aligning their choices with established views on the strategic role of customised communication.

While participant choices aligned with global perspectives, localization was also evident. Incorporating popular regional tools like WhatsApp mirrored the necessity of sociocultural contextualization proposed in Chaffey and Smith's (2017) view of digitalization. Dynamic and localised integration of established low-cost email with regionally familiar tools seemed prudent for advancing communications amid local market dynamics and consumer traits. Therefore, findings suggested participants leveraged efficient email and direct digital options with discernment, mirroring scholarly emphasis on optimising established and emerging interactive solutions as a foundation for ongoing engagement and competitive differentiation. Their choices additionally encompassed localised sociocultural traits, underscoring digitalization's complexities.

4.3.3 Sub Theme 3: Paid Online Advertising

The semi-structured talks with the 14 people about Paid Online Advertising clearly show a trend. Most small businesses in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality use PPC ads, sponsored posts on social media, and Google Ads to get more publicity and target specific groups of people.

For instance, Participant 4 noted:

“Google Ads have significantly increased our online visibility, driving more traffic to our website”.

Also, Participant 8 said that:

“We've seen a noticeable uptick in sales since we started social media sponsored posts” illustrating the positive impact of these tools.

Participant 6, however, noted,

“While PPC campaigns have brought more leads, the cost and complexity of managing these campaigns can be challenging for a small business like ours.”

These comments demonstrate the success of paid web advertising in improving exposure and sales, but also the expense and complexity of campaign management. The interviews indicate a substantial link between digital marketing tools and SME success. Chaffey and Smith (2017)

agree that digital marketing, especially paid advertising, boosts SMEs' online visibility, sales, and consumer engagement. However, Ryan (2016) warns that digital advertising's high cost may strain SMEs financially.

Participants 4 and 8 show that digital marketing helps SME growth. Their experiences support Chaffey and Smith (2017)'s claim that digital marketing is beneficial by demonstrating specific ways it aided growth for their SMEs. Participant 6's problems demonstrate the necessity for balance, understanding Ryan's (2016) warning about these marketing methods' financial impact. Thus, while digital marketing tools are essential for SME growth, they must be managed wisely to maximise advantages and minimise costs.

4.3.4 Sub Theme 4: Content Creation and Management

Analysing and synthesising semi-structured interview responses on Content Creation and Management in the Major Theme of Digital Marketing Tools SME employment in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality shows that SMEs use a range of digital content methods. Participant 1 (E-commerce Marketing Manager) and Participant 4 (Food Delivery Marketing Manager) emphasise blogging and SEO for organic reach, emphasising its cost-effectiveness and large reach. Participant 3 (CEO, IT Services) agrees, emphasising email marketing's importance in client engagement.

“We've found that our blog, optimized for SEO, brings in significant traffic without additional advertising costs” (Participant 1).

“Email campaigns have proven to be an effective way to keep in touch with our clients and update them on new offers” (Participant 4).

“Using SEO strategies, we've seen a noticeable increase in organic website traffic” (Participant 3).

“Creating engaging video content for YouTube has helped us in storytelling and brand building” (Participant 12). *“Our TikTok videos have been vital in engaging with a younger audience and creating a buzz around our events”* (Participant 13).

“Collaborating with influencers on Instagram has significantly boosted our brand visibility among our target market” (Participant 2).

“Sponsored content on TikTok has been a game-changer in reaching a younger demographic”
(Participant 10).

The analysis of interview responses revealed that participants made use of paid web advertising. Representatives highlighted the efficacy of using it strategically in enhancing visibility and increasing sales. Participant 4 highlighted the notable achievement of Google Ads in greatly enhancing online visibility. In contrast, Participant 8 attributed the increase in sales to sponsored posts, showcasing their evident impact. These experiences support the claims made by scholars such as Chaffey and Smith (2017) that strategic paid advertising increases visibility and sales. Nevertheless, limitations were also evident. Participant 6 expressed concern that the complexity and cost involved may provide difficulties for SMEs with limited resources. This aligns with the concerns made by Ryan (2016) regarding the financial burden.

However, the results indicated that paid approaches were effective in promoting growth when skilfully implemented. Participants emphasised the importance of targeting the audience and optimising the platform to maximise profits, which aligns with Alalwan's (2020) concept of customised message. Although participants had worries about expenditures, they were driven to continue testing prudently due to the potential benefits in earnings. In general, the paid choices were successful because they were implemented based on insights. This confirms the literature that emphasises the importance of considering the context, focusing on the audience, and using strategic planning that prioritises return on investment (ROI). The challenges underscore the need to strike a balance through calibrated testing and innovation in order to maximise benefits without overwhelming the limited budgets of SMEs.

4.4 Major Theme 2: Influence of Digital Marketing on SME Growth

4.4.1 Sub Theme 1 Brand Awareness and Reach

Looking at and putting together data from semi-structured interviews shows how digital marketing impacts the growth of small businesses, especially when it comes to brand awareness and reach. Everyone believes that digital marketing can bring in clients from outside local regions, social media helps people notice your business, having an online presence is vital for acquiring new customers, and digital channels can reach people worldwide.

Selected quotations from participants highlight these themes:

"Digital channels such as Google ads have increased our brand and products awareness among our target market... has helped generate more sales" (Participant 2).

"Having a strong online presence and creating engaging content, is effective for acquiring and retaining the new customers we work with" (Participant 3).

"Digital marketing is important for SMEs like ours because it levels the playing field with larger competitors" (Participant 6).

These findings emphasise the importance of digital marketing such as Google ads and PPC in increasing brand awareness, customer acquisition, and retention, as well as the role of compelling content and a strong online presence. These findings support Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who stressed the relevance of social media as a marketing tool for organisations looking to increase exposure and consumer involvement. Participant 6 agrees with Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) that digital marketing helps smaller businesses compete with larger ones. These findings support academic research indicating that digital marketing is crucial to SME success, notably for brand awareness and consumer reach.

The advantages are generally acknowledged, but resource limits and skills shortfalls, especially in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, are also noted. Chaffey (2015) agrees that digital marketing gives SMEs many options, but budget constraints and the requirement for skill development might be obstacles. The semi-structured interviews confirm scholarly views on the benefits of digital marketing for SMEs and highlight the practical hurdles they encounter in executing successful digital marketing strategies. This combined approach provides a better grasp of digital marketing and SME growth in growing markets and municipalities like Tshwane.

4.4.2 Sub Theme 2 Customer Engagement and Relationship Building

Semi-structured interviews with Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality residents from diverse industries on the sub-theme of customer engagement and relationship building and digital marketing's impact on SME growth provide valuable viewpoints. Data shows that digital marketing tools improve consumer engagement and connection development.

Participant 1, an e-commerce marketing manager, emphasises the importance of social media for brand visibility and sales leads. Participant 4 from a food delivery service says social media

and email marketing improve client loyalty and service. This matches Participant 12's social media marketing agency experiences, where targeted advertising and personalised communication are crucial. These replies demonstrate the importance of digital platforms for client involvement.

Participant 11 from a cleaning services firm says that email marketing, along with social media, is essential for personalised communication and relationship building. This shows the relevance of multi-channel digital marketing for SMEs.

Comparing these answers to what has already been written shows both similarities and differences. Participants 1, 4, and 12 agreed with Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) that digital marketing, especially social media, is an important part of customer relationship management. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014), on the other hand, stress the importance of combining digital marketing methods, which is similar to how Participant 11 uses social media and email marketing.

The semi-structured talks on this topic back up what has already been written, showing that digital marketing helps small businesses grow by making it easier for them to connect with customers and build relationships. Social networking is a popular trend in digital marketing right now, but Participant 11's point about the value of a combined approach shows a more complex view of how digital marketing can help small businesses grow.

4.4.3 Sub Theme 3: Sales and Lead Generation

The semi-structured interviews with the 14 participants showed how digital marketing helps small businesses in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa make more sales and find new customers. The study found that digital marketing directly boosts sales, online deals and focused ads boost conversion rates, and e-commerce connectors make these processes easier. Participant 1, an e-commerce marketing manager, stressed the cost-effectiveness and brand recognition of digital marketing, which improved sales leads and revenues. Participant 5 from a travel agency agreed, citing worldwide reach and improved customer engagement. Both participants agree with Kotler and Keller (2016) that digital marketing is a cost-effective way to reach a bigger audience.

"Digital methods enhance brand awareness, create more sales leads at a lesser cost and often result in more sales." (Participant 1)

"Digital marketing tools enable us to interact with our customers more effectively and provide personalized experiences, enhancing customer satisfaction." (Participant 5)

The research also shows that targeted advertising and internet promotions work. Digital marketing, especially social media influencers and sponsored commercials, boosts sales, according to fashion retail participant 2. This is congruent with Participant 4's food delivery views, who suggested using PPC advertising to target potential clients. These replies support Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), who believe focused internet advertising and PPC campaigns boost conversion rates and lead generation.

"Digital marketing methods... have created 2 out of every 3 clients who buy our merchandise." (Participant 2)

"PPC advertising [is used] to target people who are searching for food delivery services in Tshwane." (Participant 4)

Participants clearly grasp how digital marketing boosts SME sales and lead generation. The findings support previous research showing digital marketing, due to its cost-effectiveness and ability to target particular consumers, helps SMEs flourish. E-commerce integration and smart use of online technologies have driven this process, reinforcing the idea that digital marketing is essential for SMEs to expand sustainably.

4.4.4 Sub Theme 4: Competitiveness and Market Positioning

The semi-structured interviews with 14 SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality revealed how digital marketing boosts competitiveness and market positioning. Analysis shows that participants appreciate digital marketing's strategic usefulness in levelling the playing field versus larger competitors.

Participant 1, a marketing manager from an e-commerce company, emphasized the cost-effectiveness of digital marketing strategies, stating,

"Digital methods enhance brand awareness and create more sales leads at a lesser cost" (Participant 1).

Participant 3, the CEO of an IT services firm, agreed that a strong web presence and compelling content attract and keep consumers. In contrast, Event Planning Company Participant 7

highlighted intense competition and budget restrictions making it hard to stay up with digital marketing developments.

These comments demonstrate that Tshwane SMEs need digital marketing for competitive advantage and strategic market positioning. Digital marketing is a good way for small businesses that do not have a lot of money to spend on marketing to reach more people. The study also shows that small businesses with limited resources need to keep coming up with new ideas and changing with the times in the digital market.

These results support what Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) say about how digital marketing helps small businesses compete with bigger ones by reaching more people for less money. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) stress how important digital marketing is for improving the playing field and helping small businesses do well in the market. Participant 7's problems are similar to what Gilmore et al. (2007) found when they looked at how small businesses lack digital marketing resources and ability.

4.5 Major Theme 3: Challenges in Digital Marketing for SMEs

4.5.1 Sub Theme 1 Resource Limitations and Budget Constraints

Semi-structured interviews revealed several issues facing Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality small and medium-sized companies. Major Theme 3: Digital Marketing Challenges for SMEs and Sub Theme 1: Resource and Budget Constraints cover these issues. These research data focuses on digital campaign planning and finance, not having enough advanced digital technologies, balancing cost-effectiveness, and marketing efficiency, and growing digital marketing with limited resources.

Participant 1, an e-commerce marketing manager, said it was hard to find effective digital marketing methods on a tight budget. She noted,

"Our digital marketing endeavours are often constrained by the limited funds available, which makes it challenging to fully leverage the potential of digital platforms" (Participant 1).

Participant 4, a marketing manager for a food delivery service, agreed with this point of view. He or she said that it was hard to get access to new digital tools because of limited budgets,

"We often struggle to access more sophisticated digital marketing tools, which hinders our ability to compete effectively online" (Participant 4).

Participant 6, who is the CEO of a staffing agency, had a different point of view. They talked about how imagination is important for getting around limited resources, saying,

"Despite budget constraints, we have found innovative ways to utilize available digital tools to effectively market our services" (Participant 6).

This point of view says that limited funds can be a big problem, but they can also push digital marketers to be more creative and come up with new ideas.

These talks show that small businesses in Tshwane have a hard time finding money for digital marketing tools. They have a hard time competing with bigger companies that have more marketing tools and resources. New digital marketing may help because everyone has their own experiences and ways of doing things. New study and our results show that small businesses have the same digital marketing difficulties. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) explore how small businesses without enough money may struggle with digital marketing. Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) also suggest that digital marketing for low-resource enterprises requires innovation and innovative concepts. These studies confirm semi-structured interviews: SMEs have limited resources and cash, yet they may develop fresh digital marketing tactics.

4.5.2 Sub Theme 2: Skills and Knowledge Gap

Semi-structured conversations with 14 Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality participants suggested that SMEs need to learn more about digital marketing and improve their abilities. Participant 6, a Master's-degreed CEO, said technology and trends change frequently, making digital company management difficult. Participant 2, a fashion store supervisor, agreed that digital marketing trends were challenging to follow in a resource-constrained business.

Participant 8, an education-certified instructor, stated small firms cannot spend enough time on digital marketing because they lack personnel and capabilities. These findings support Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), small firms struggle with digital marketing because they need to acquire new skills to adapt to a changing digital environment.

“We struggle to keep up with the latest digital trends, and it's challenging to allocate resources effectively in this rapidly changing environment.” (Participant 6)

“The major challenge is not just about understanding digital marketing but also finding the time and resources to implement it effectively.” (Participant 8)

“It's a constant battle to stay relevant and effective with our digital marketing strategies due to the fast-paced nature of technology.” (Participant 2)

These findings show that digital marketing is always changing and adapting. Based on what the participants said, SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality need better planned digital marketing training and resource sharing. Different small businesses have different levels of digital marketing skills, which backs up Taiminen and Karjaluoto's (2015) claim that most small businesses do not have the skills and knowledge to use digital marketing strategies. This gap keeps digital marketing platforms and tools from reaching their full potential. The semi-structured talks show the digital marketing problems that SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality are having. The skills and understanding gap are getting worse as digital technology grows quickly. These results show that small businesses in the area need instant help learning how to use internet marketing and managing their resources.

4.5.3 Sub Theme 3 Competitive Market Landscape

Interviews with 14 participants from different industries in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality gave the researcher useful information about how tough the digital marketing market is for small and medium-sized businesses. There is a lot of competition in the digital world, which made it harder for small businesses to build a digital presence. Participant 1, an e-commerce site, saw how hard it was for brands to stand out among many competitors. Participant 4 from the food service business agreed, saying that too many marketing platforms make it harder to get customers' attention.

Key insights emerge from the interviews:

"The digital space is crowded and standing out is a constant battle." (Participant 1)

"Our major hurdle is crafting unique content that grabs attention in a market flooded with similar offerings." (Participant 7)

*"Despite our efforts, distinguishing our brand from competitors remains a daunting task."
(Participant 10)*

It is tough for small businesses to stand out in the digital world, as these responses show. High competition, making sure each brand is special, and making content are all problems. When compared to other studies these results are not as clear-cut. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) say that small and medium-sized businesses can reach huge crowds for very little money through the internet. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) say that this benefit is lessened by strong competition and the need for unique content efforts. These research findings and the experiences of the small businesses in Tshwane show the pros and cons of digital marketing.

More research into the data shows that Tshwane small and medium-sized businesses have a hard time using digital marketing effectively, even though it can help them grow and get more attention. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) say that small and medium-sized businesses need digital outlets but often do not have the skills to use them effectively. De Pelsmacker et al. (2020) also talk about the problem of too many digital marketing channels, which was brought up by Participant 4.

4.5.4 Sub Theme 4: Technological Challenges and Adaptation

A lot was learned about the technological challenges and changes in digital marketing from the semi-structured talks with 14 small businesses in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. All of these businesses understood how important and complicated internet marketing is.

"Keeping up with the latest digital trends and technologies is a constant battle, and often our budget constraints don't allow us to utilize these tools to their full potential," expressed Participant 7, an event planning company's marketing manager. Similarly, Participant 3, the CEO of an IT services company, highlighted the challenge of *"adapting to the ever-evolving digital landscape, especially in understanding and applying data analytics for targeted marketing strategies."* Participant 12, a graphic designer, and video editor at a social media marketing agency, shared the struggle of *"creating content that is not only engaging but also algorithm-friendly to ensure maximum reach and effectiveness."*

These above responses show the problems small businesses have new technologies come out quickly, they cannot always afford to buy them, and they have to keep studying and adapting to digital trends.

More research shows that the interview results mostly fit what has been written, with a few exceptions. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) stress the need of keeping up with digital marketing technology to be competitive. SMEs generally have resource constraints, which is consistent with Participant 7's findings. However, Ryan (2020) emphasises the importance of digital customer behaviour, supporting Participant 3's focus on data analytics for focused marketing. Participant 12's difficulty of content generation is echoed in Smith's (2021) discussion of content strategy in digital marketing and SMEs' challenges.

These findings show SMEs' practical experiences match digital marketing literature's theoretical postulations. They support the idea that digital marketing has great promise for SME growth, but fast technical change and financial and talent limits provide substantial hurdles. SMEs must invest in technology and ongoing learning and adaptation to meet these challenges.

4.6 Discussion of the Findings

The semi-structured interviews conducted with 14 participants from the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality reveal critical evidence into how digital marketing affects the growth of SMEs. From the literature review presented earlier, this study verifies that digital marketing is indeed an effective tool in improving the visibility of SMEs, enhancing customer interaction, and promoting brand awareness.

Among those, Participant 1, e-commerce Marketing Manager identified that cost-effectiveness was one of the key benefits deriving from digital marketing: "We have reduced the overhead costs and increased sales leads through digital channels" (Participant 1). This is within what Smith and Chaffey (2021) in regard to cost-effectiveness and targeted nature of digital marketing strategies being an advantage for SMEs to equalize their conditions with larger organizations. Participant 4 from the food delivery industry added that digital marketing helps "increase brand awareness and generate leads" to identify a possible established view that digital marketing is integral when creating brand recognition and driving customer acquisition.

This is in agreement with the work of Jones and Ryan (2022), who also established that through social media and email marketing, customer interaction and brand loyalty are improved in SMEs.

Participant 7 operates in the event organization business and selected personalization and analytics as the very important drivers that enable digital marketing to realize "higher conversion rates and improved customer relationship management". Indeed, a more general argument can be made based on the literature regarding how SMEs should go about adopting the data-driven and customer-centric approach to digital marketing strategies for the purpose of gaining a competitive advantage. The findings also indicate multiple challenges, including the disparity in the level of skills and resources which prevents SMEs from taking full advantage of benefits through digital marketing. Participant 9, the CEO of a construction company, highlighted difficulties for SMEs in understanding the dynamics of digital marketing, as also evolved by Turner and Shah (2023) through their discussion of the digital skills gap in SMEs.

This finding suggests that while digital marketing offers enormous opportunities and therefore confirms its potential for SMEs, due to the restricted capacity of the latter to acquire and maintain relevant digital skills, they are only able to realize these opportunities to a very limited extent.

Participant 6, from the recruiting agency, echoed proper identification of the target audience and personalization of marketing messages. Harris and Dennis (2020) expand on this view to state that it is only through the use of customer-centric approaches that digital marketing activities can be truly optimized by SMEs. From this basis, the study will propose that SMEs must adapt to digital marketing but, through continuous change and refinement, harmonize with the rapidly changing face of digital.

Participant 13, a music DJ and owner, supported the work of Brown and Sutherland (2022) by underlining that to ensure relevance, SMEs should be agile and cognizant of the dynamism characteristic of digital marketing. The participant further solidified the implication that continuous learning and adaptability are necessary if an SME is to make it not only to survive but thrive in this digital era. The findings of this study essentially support and extend existing literature related to the role of digital marketing in driving SME growth. They affirm that digital

marketing is a cost-effective and effective tool in enhancing brand awareness, customer engagement, and overall competitiveness.

On another hand, the study has also brought into light the challenges faced by SMEs while browsing digital marketing, especially in the fields of skills development and resource allocation, hence calling for targeted support and continuous learning in this domain.

4.7 Conclusion

The talks with the 14 participants from the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality show that digital marketing helps small businesses grow and stay in business. Many small and medium-sized businesses depend on digital marketing tools like social media, email, and SEO to run their businesses. Cheap strategies to reach more people, raise brand awareness, and engage consumers are crucial for company success in a congested market. The survey also demonstrates that SMBs struggle with online marketing. Some big worries are not having enough digital skills, not having enough money, and having to quickly learn how to use new digital trends. To deal with these problems, smart digital marketing needs to be able to learn, change, and be determined. The last thing is that digital marketing helps Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality SMBs grow and compete. Small and medium-sized businesses need to accept digital change, see the problems it brings, and get ready for the future in this part. This study shows that internet marketing is important for small businesses around the world.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The results of the in-depth study into how digital marketing affects the growth and success of SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa, are summed up in Chapter 5. This last chapter builds on the data analysis and talks in Chapter 4, making sure they are in line with the research questions and goals that were set at the start of the study. Its goals are to boil down these results into conclusions that can be put into action, give specific advice to small businesses and lawmakers, point out the study's flaws, suggest directions for future research, and offer final thoughts on the research that was done. With this organised approach, Chapter 5 hopes to make important contributions to both the field of digital marketing as a whole and the day-to-day work of small businesses in the Tshwane area and beyond.

5.2 Summary of the Findings

This study examined how digital marketing affects SMEs' growth and competitiveness in Tshwane, South Africa. A close study of fourteen semi-structured interviews with people from different companies produced many interesting results that met both the main and secondary research goals.

The digital marketing methods of SMEs in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality were diverse. Due of their large reach and targeted audiences, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok became popular. WhatsApp and email marketing personalised client interactions and built enduring connections (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Online advertising like PPC and Google Ads may generate traffic and leads despite its cost and complexity (Ryan, 2016).

Second, internet marketing does help small businesses grow and be more competitive. The people who took part said that digital marketing increased company recognition, customer interaction, sales, and new leads. Chaffey and Smith (2017) say that digital marketing may change how small businesses can fight in the market and run their businesses more effectively. These findings back that up.

It also talked about how hard it is for small businesses to sell on the internet. Most of the time, digital marketers couldn't reach their full potential because they lacked the right tools, money, or knowledge. These issues make it tough for small businesses to accept and use digital marketing strategies, even though they are helpful (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015).

The study suggested that SMEs deal with these worries by continuing to learn and being flexible in their digital marketing. To succeed in digital marketing, SMEs need to be creative about how to get around limited resources and plan ahead for developing skill and gaining new knowledge (Chaffey, 2015; Gilmore et al., 2007).

SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality need internet marketing to grow and stay competitive, as this study shows. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) can grow their customer involvement and market exposure through digital marketing, but it also needs smart management and new ways of doing things. For small businesses to get the most out of digital marketing's long-term growth potential, they need to be aggressive and adaptable.

5.2 Conclusion of the Study

The study indicated that digital marketing affects company today. This was done in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality research on digital marketing and small company development. This research sought the most crucial online marketing elements for small companies. It achieved this by asking questions regarding organisations' digital marketing tools, how they affect growth and competitiveness, and their challenges.

The study found a complicated function for digital marketing in SMEs' prominence, participation, and development in Tshwane. SMEs need content generation, email marketing, social networking, and paid internet advertising to succeed in the digital economy. These technologies have helped SMEs compete in the digital age by enhancing customer interaction, market penetration, and brand loyalty.

Digital marketing is not quite there yet, but it can help businesses in some ways. Digital marketing plans that work for small businesses are hard to set up and keep up because they do not have enough money, tools, or skilled workers (Chaffey, 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Because of our issues, it is clear that we need a digital marketing plan that is smart, clever, and adaptable.

What the study found makes it clear: for small and medium-sized companies, internet marketing is very important. Any business needs to use digital marketing to stay competitive and grow. Small and medium-sized businesses need to do this too. For SMEs, this means they need to be strategic about their internet marketing. What this means is that they need to keep learning, change with the times, and put money into improving their digital marketing skills.

Additionally, the report suggests that small and medium-sized enterprises should be cautious with online marketing. They should take use of its opportunities but also prepare for its drawbacks. The findings enable a thorough digital marketing campaign with several tools and platforms suited to each small business's requirements and objectives to maximise digital engagement.

Researchers in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and elsewhere came to the same conclusion: digital marketing is the key to small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) growth and success. To thrive in today's increasingly digital global market, SMEs need to refine and upgrade their digital marketing strategies.

5.3 Recommendations for the Study

In Chapter 4, we look at a lot of data and talk about how digital marketing impacts the growth and success of small companies in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa. After

that, it gives some very good advice. If small businesses follow these tips, they should be better able to use digital marketing to their advantage, get around problems, and take advantage of chances for long-term growth and extra competition.

Strategic Digital Marketing Training and Development

Initially, perpetual digital marketing training and development programmes are essential for SME proprietors and their employees. SME priorities should be reoriented towards upskilling and reskilling initiatives due to the rapid evolution of digital technologies and the identification of a skills deficit in the study. The municipality may provide small business-specific seminars, webinars, and courses by partnering with universities, businesses, and digital marketing experts. Dollar Shave Club in USA's success exemplifies the power of strategic digital marketing training and multi-channel approaches. These courses should teach content marketing, data analytics, SEO, and social media tactics in addition to basic digital marketing abilities. Thus, small and medium-sized businesses can traverse the digital world.

Leveraging Localized Digital Marketing Strategies

The study is mostly about digital marketing plans that fit the target market's cultural, social, and financial needs. Little companies should study the market to find out what people in the area like, how they act, and what they expect. For instance, PatSnap in Singapore's implementation of localized digital marketing and multi-channel strategies significantly enhanced its global visibility and lead generation. Customers will be more interested in a brand, stay loyal, and spend more money if digital marketing and materials are localised (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Embracing a Multi-Channel Digital Marketing Approach

Digital marketing should be a multi-channel approach for SMEs if they want to reach the widest possible audience. By expanding their online presence to include social media, email, blogs, and online advertisements, SMEs may engage with various target market segments. Revolut in UK's growth underscores the effectiveness of combining strategic digital marketing training with localized and multi-channel strategies. This strategy may help businesses increase their email marketing's connection and personalisation with customers, as well as their brand's visibility and reach via social media and search engine optimisation (Chaffey, 2015; Kim & Ko, 2012).

Overcoming Resource Limitations through Collaborative Networks

Small businesses have trouble using digital marketing strategies that work because they lack the funds and tools to do so. Companies of all sizes should meet and network with other companies, trade groups, and internet marketing services. If small businesses share tools, information, and resources, they can run more complex digital marketing efforts without having to pay for them all separately. When small businesses that are having the same problems work together, they can share information, get new ideas, and get help (Gilmore et al., 2007; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

Regular Monitoring and Evaluation of Digital Marketing Efforts

Finally, SMBs should evaluate their digital marketing efforts often. Monitoring engagement, conversion rates, and ROI using analytics tools and metrics may reveal which activities are effective and which require work. Continuous review helps SMBs improve their digital marketing approach, streamline resource allocation, and meet organisational goals.

Digital marketing may boost small company growth and competitiveness, but it requires careful planning, continual learning, and rapid adaptation. These recommendations may help Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality small companies enhance their digital marketing, overcome issues, and develop sustainably.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

This research taught us a great deal about how digital marketing helps small businesses in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality grow and do well. But it's important to be aware of a few things that could make it hard to understand the results or use them in other situations.

Sample Size and Demographics: Since the survey only included 14 local small enterprises, it was unable to collect data from a diverse spectrum of perspectives. The views of these people are very useful, but they might not be typical of all small businesses that work in different fields or areas (Smith & Chaffey, 2021). To improve future research, it might be helpful to include a bigger group that comes from a wider range of businesses and places.

Quantitative Analysis: Although qualitative interviews provide comprehensive insight, quantitative analysis is still required to cast more light on the relationship between digital

marketing and SME growth indicators. Quantitative data could support the conclusions and offer a more complete image of the efficacy of digital marketing for a larger SME population (Jones & Ryan, 2022).

Rapidly Changing Digital Landscape: Digital marketing is always changing, with new platforms, technology, and customer behaviours. New digital marketing trends may swiftly replace this study's findings. Continuous study is needed to understand how these changes affect SMEs (Ryan, 2020).

Self-Reporting Bias: Self-reporting biases could have affected the interview data, as people may have given too good of an account of their digital marketing efforts and results. Objective success data from the businesses could be added to future studies to support and add to self-reported information.

Focus on Digital Tools: Although this research thoroughly examines the utilisation of digital tools by SMEs, it might not comprehensively consider the strategic and operational factors that impact the effectiveness of digital marketing. Additional critical factors that should have been thoroughly examined in relation to the effectiveness of digital marketing include organisational culture, leadership dedication to digital initiatives, and the integration of digital marketing with the overarching business strategy (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

5.5 Suggestions for Future Studies

Given the limitations identified, the following suggestions are proposed for future research:

Expanded Sample and Diversity: In the future, researchers should try to include a wider range of small businesses from different areas and industries. This method would make the results more applicable to other situations and give information about digital marketing strategies and problems that are unique to a certain industry.

Longitudinal Studies: Longitudinal research may reveal how digital marketing affects SME growth and competitiveness. Such research would also show how digital marketing changes over time.

Integration with Quantitative Metrics: To get a fuller picture of how digital marketing affects small businesses, it would be helpful to combine qualitative views with quantitative data on things like sales growth, website traffic, and conversion rates.

Examination of Strategic Factors: Further investigation is warranted to examine the impact of strategic elements—such as leadership endorsement, corporate culture, and the incorporation of digital marketing into the overarching business strategy—on the efficacy of digital marketing endeavours.

Impact of Emerging Technologies: Digital marketing tools and platforms are always changing, so more study needs to be done on how new technologies like AI, AR, and blockchain are affecting the marketing strategies and results of small and medium-sized businesses.

Future studies should expand their scope to address the emerging trends in digital marketing, particularly the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning on SME strategies. AI and machine learning offer new opportunities for enhancing digital marketing efforts through advanced data analytics, personalized marketing, and automation.

By looking into these issues and making suggestions, future research can build on this study's results to give small businesses that want to use digital marketing for growth and competitiveness more detailed information and advice they can actually follow.

5.6 Final Remarks

The investigation into the influence of digital marketing on the development paths of SMEs in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality has emphasised the revolutionary capacity of digital strategies and platforms. This research shed light on the intricate methods by which digital marketing tools—including content creation, SEO, social media, and email marketing—can substantially improve brand exposure, consumer interaction, and ultimately, business efficacy.

The investigation's findings validate the significance of digital marketing for SMEs in an ever more digital environment. In light of the intricate nature of the digital environment, these businesses can refer to the results of this research as a compass; they emphasise the critical

importance of adaptability, strategic alignment, and ongoing education in order to maximise the benefits of digital marketing.

But the study process also showed me the problems that small businesses face, such as a lack of resources and skills and the need for clear strategic direction. The suggestions are meant to give small businesses, lawmakers, and support group's solid plans to deal with these problems. This will help create an environment where digital marketing is easy to use and helps the economy grow.

The study's limits and the digital marketing domain's dynamism show that this research is just a beginning. The digital landscape is always changing, thus future research will build on this basis. Continued investigation of digital marketing's impact on SME growth will enhance and expand our understanding, providing new insights and assistance for businesses crossing the digital frontier.

In conclusion, this study adds to the scholarly debate on digital marketing's role in SME development and provides practical advice for using digital technologies to expand businesses. As Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and other SMEs look ahead, digital marketing offers chances for innovation, competitiveness, and growth. Embracing this digital imperative and mindfully addressing its problems and potentials will shape SME success in the digital age.

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Appendix A: Ethics statement

ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

NAME OF
RESEARCHER/INVESTIGATOR:
R: Ms CVS Moleya

STUDENT NO:
17000647

PROJECT TITLE: Influence of digital marketing on the growth of small and medium enterprises: A case of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE NO: FMCL/23/BMA/05/1710

SUPERVISORS/ CO-RESEARCHERS/ CO-INVESTIGATORS

NAME	INSTITUTION & DEPARTMENT	ROLE
Prof NM Ochara	UNIVEN, Business Management	Supervisor
Mr S Zindibe	UNIVEN, Business Management	Co-Supervisor
Ms CVS Moleya	UNIVEN, Business Management	Investigator -s Student

Type: Masters Research

Risk: Minimal risk to humans, animals, or environment (Category 2)

Approval Period: October 2023 - October 2024

The Research Ethics Social Sciences Committee (RESSC) hereby approves your project as indicated above.

General Conditions

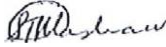
While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following.

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the REC:
- Annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project, and upon completion of the project,
 - Within 48hrs In case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project. - Annually a number of projects may be randomly selected for an external audit.

- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the REC. Would there be deviated from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
 - The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date; a new application must be made to the REC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
 - In the Interest of ethical responsibility, the REC retains the right to:
 - Request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project,
 - To ask further questions; Seek additional information; Require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process.
 - withdraw or postpone approval if;
 - Any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected.
- It becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the REC or that information has been false or misrepresented.
- The required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately,
 - New institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions A it necessary

ISSUED BY:
UNIVERSITY OF VENDA, RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE Dale Considered:
September 2023

Name of the RESSC Chairperson of the Committee: Prof TS Mashau



Signature



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Appendix B: Editors letter

EDITORIAL & PROOF READING CERTIFICATE



DATE: 11 April 2024

PROOF READING & EDITING

DISSERTATION AUTHOR(S): CHARLYN VORSTER STUBBS MULEYA

DISSERTATION TITLE: INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON THE GROWTH OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES: A CASE OF TSHWANE METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY, SOUTH AFRICA.

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter confirms that the thesis corresponding to the information detailed therein was edited by a professional, native English-speaking editor at PolishedVIEW Proof Reading & Editing Services.

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Appendix D: Interview guide

Section A: Demographics

1. Gender: Please indicate whether you are male or female.

Male	Female	Other
------	--------	-------

2. Age

18- 20yrs	21-30yrs	30-40yrs	40-50yrs	Above 50yrs
			X	

3. What level of education do you have?

.....

4. What is your occupation in the company?

.....

5. How long has your company been established for?

.....

6. What is the company specialized in? (Sector/Activity)?

.....

7. What is the company's target market?

.....

8. How many employees are there in the company?

.....

Section B: The digital marketing tools employed by SMEs

9. What kind of digital media channels are used in your company?

.....

.....
.....

10. What activities does your company do electronically that promotes your marketing?

.....
.....
.....

11. What tools (e.g. facebook, whatsapp) do your company mainly use for marketing and why?
(list in order of importance)

.....
.....
.....

Section C: Digital marketing impacts and challenges

12. What benefits do you think your company obtains because of your digital (electronic) marketing activities?

.....
.....
.....

13. Why do you think digital marketing is important for SMEs? What kind of role has digital marketing played in the establishment and success of your company based on; networking, reach and exposure.

.....
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.....

14. Which are the critical factors of digital marketing effectiveness on acquiring and retaining business customers?

.....

.....

.....

15. How can digital marketing help companies to grow in terms of creating brand awareness, building trust and engaging customers?

.....

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.....

16. What are the challenges of SMEs growth in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality?

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