

ADOPTION OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SMES IN ETHEKWINI

Xoliswa NZUZA

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1841-859X>
Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa
Email: xolinzuza91@gmail.com

Tshepo TLAPANA

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1777-6177>
Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth, South Africa
Email: tlapana@wsu.ac.za

Raymond HAWKINS-MOFOKENG

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5429-2019>
Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, South Africa
Email: mofokengh@cut.ac.za

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Abstract:

This study investigates the adoption of digital marketing strategies among small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in the eThekwinI region, aiming to understand how these strategies contribute to business growth and sustainability. The research addresses a critical gap in knowledge concerning SMEs' engagement with digital marketing and their ability to adapt to the evolving digital landscape. An exploratory, quantitative, and descriptive research design was employed. The study population consisted of 50 SMEs operating in eThekwinI, and a census approach was used due to the manageable population size. Ultimately, 32 SMEs participated in the study. Data were collected through structured questionnaires that included closed and open-ended questions and analysed using SPSS (version 27). Key findings reveal that while most SMEs recognise the importance of digital transformation, many lack formal marketing strategies and often rely on improvisation. Social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, emerged as the most preferred and effective digital marketing channels. However, limited marketing knowledge and financial constraints hinder the broader adoption of advanced tools such as Google Ads and email marketing. Notably, 59 % of businesses reported acquiring new customers through online channels in the past year, highlighting the tangible benefits of digital engagement. The study recommends targeted interventions, including digital literacy training, differentiated strategies for B2B and B2C SMEs, subsidised access to digital tools, and integrating digital marketing into broader business planning. These measures are essential for enhancing competitiveness, driving sustainable growth, and unlocking the full potential of SMEs in the digital economy.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Digital Marketing Strategy, Marketing Strategy, Small to medium enterprises

1. Introduction

Small to medium enterprises (SMEs) are recognised as crucial components in job creation and the economic propulsion of South Africa. Statistics SA (2019) states that SMEs accounted for 39% of the formal business sector's R2.39 trillion revenue in early 2019. Liedtke (2019) further highlights the sector's significance, noting that SMEs employ 47% of the nation's workforce, contribute over 20% to the Gross Domestic Product, and are responsible for about 6% of corporate taxes. Despite their significant contributions, SMEs often face challenges in implementing effective marketing strategies due to a lack of theories tailored to businesses of their size. This frequently leads to adopting marketing practices designed for larger corporations, which can set them up for potential failure due to differences in context and available resources. Additionally, the rise of digital marketing has left many small businesses struggling to determine effective strategies in rapidly changing digital landscapes and with limited access to tailored digital marketing theories. Bushe (2019) points out that SMEs often mimic the marketing strategies of market leaders, further exacerbating their vulnerability due to disparities in resources and operational scales compared to larger firms. This misalignment with effective marketing strategies undermines the potential of SMEs to become the leading employment sector by 2030 in South Africa, as anticipated.

This paper delves into the current marketing practices among SMEs, explicitly focusing on the influence of digital marketing transformation and its impact on business profitability and sustainability. The study aims to investigate the adoption of digital marketing strategies within SMEs and evaluate their effectiveness in ensuring business survival. This research is particularly relevant in identifying how SMEs' marketing practices evolve with digital advancements, positioning it as a cornerstone for strategic planning within SMEs. Digital marketing strategies can significantly benefit SMEs by enhancing their visibility, expanding their audience reach, and driving growth. When implemented, content marketing, social media marketing, and email marketing enable SMEs to compete effectively with larger enterprises. Furthermore, digital marketing provides flexibility and measurability, allowing SMEs to adjust their strategies based on real-time feedback and analytics, ultimately ensuring sustainability and success in today's digital economy.

The central research question is: How do SMEs implement digital marketing strategies in the eThekweni region, and to what extent do these strategies contribute to their growth and sustainability? This study addresses this gap by examining the adoption of digital marketing strategies among SMEs in eThekweni. It seeks to assess current marketing practices, identify challenges, and evaluate the effectiveness of digital transformation in enhancing business sustainability.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which provide a solid foundation for understanding how SMEs adopt digital marketing technologies. TAM suggests that perceived usefulness and ease of use influence technology adoption (Abbas and Mehmood, 2021). On the other hand, TPB highlights the significance of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in shaping behavioural intentions (Raj et al., 2024). These models are particularly relevant in the SME

context, where resource constraints and limited digital literacy can hinder technology adoption. In addition to these behavioural frameworks, the study incorporates strategic marketing theory, emphasising the importance of aligning marketing strategies with organisational goals and market conditions (Morgan et al., 2019). Digital marketing strategies such as social media marketing, email campaigns, and search engine optimisation are tactical tools and strategic enablers of growth and sustainability (Li et al., 2021; Swami, 2023).

The framework also addresses specific challenges SMEs face in South Africa, including financial limitations, a lack of tailored marketing theories, and the tendency to imitate the strategies of larger firms (Bushe, 2019; Cant and Wiid, 2013). These challenges highlight the need for a theoretical approach that integrates digital innovation with the practical realities of business. By synthesising TAM, TPB, and strategic marketing theory, this framework provides a comprehensive perspective for evaluating how SMEs in eThekweni adopt and implement digital marketing strategies. It emphasises the necessity for context-specific models that cater to SMEs' operational and strategic needs, thereby enhancing their competitiveness and long-term sustainability in the digital economy.

South Africa's SMEs' Landscape

The definition of SMEs varies among economies or countries, and no unified definition exists. Different researchers propose various standards, such as the number of employees or the value of assets, to define an SME. Additionally, each country has its own definition of SMEs, often based on specific requirements and thresholds. The number of SMEs in South Africa varies across different provinces. In the eThekweni region, SMEs cover many businesses, from well-established family companies employing around a hundred people to small, survival-oriented entrepreneurial ventures. SMEs play an essential role in a country's economy. In most parts of the world, these businesses form the majority of firms and contribute disproportionately to the economy, especially in job creation (Jeza and Lekhanya, 2022; Sheik and Kader, 2022; Small Business Research Specialists, 2020). The statistics provide a comprehensive overview of the country's estimated number of registered SMEs. According to the Small Enterprise Development Agency (2016), in the second quarter of 2015, there were 2,251,821 SMEs in operation. Over a million were classified as informal, and 667,433 were recognised as formal businesses.

Statistics indicate that SMEs make up about 91% of legal business entities in South Africa and contribute between 51% and 57% to the gross domestic product (Ramsuraj, 2023). SMEs must adhere to government regulations regarding registration, licensing fees, and taxes (Cant and Wiid, 2013). In exchange, the government assists them in the form of financial support, guidance in business development, and managerial support programs through various organisations such as the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA), the Rural Economic Development Initiative, and Khula Enterprise Finance (Ogujiuba et al., 2022). However, there is a concerning trend among South African SMEs wherein approximately 75% fail to survive beyond their first five years due to unethical practices such as selling substandard products, deceiving customers, and bypassing quality assurance certification. It has also been observed that SMEs are not as adept at managing their environment as larger companies. Moreover, SMEs in the manufacturing sector encounter challenges from well-established major corporations (Fatoki, 2020; Maziriri, 2020; Nyahuna and Doorasamy, 2021).

The South African government recognises SMEs as a catalyst for economic growth, a solution for the country's high unemployment rate, a contributor to sales, and a generator of tax revenue, which in turn contributes to fiscal revenue (Botha et al., 2021; Rens et al., 2021). The government is trying to address capacity deficiencies in SMEs by tackling the issue of insufficient skills among current and future SME operators. This is being done through Sectoral Education and Training Authorities, which oversee the training and development of SME employees to enhance business growth and make SMEs sustainable (Mukwarami et al., 2020; Nxele and Hoque, 2023).

Role of SMEs in the eThekweni economy

Small, medium, and micro enterprises play a vital role in the economic vitality of the eThekweni Municipality. They make significant contributions to employment creation, poverty alleviation, and innovation. According to Madondo et al. (2024), SMEs account for 98.5% of South Africa's registered businesses and employ nearly half of the workforce, positioning them as key drivers of economic growth. SMEs are widely recognised as crucial drivers of local economic development in South Africa, particularly within the eThekweni Municipality. Enaifoghe and Vezi-Magigaba (2023) argue that SMEs play a significant role in creating employment, alleviating poverty, and promoting economic decentralisation. They point out that SMEs account for over 76% of total employment and contribute to 53% of net new jobs in South Africa, highlighting their importance as engines of growth and innovation. However, challenges such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional inefficiencies prevent them from reaching their full potential. Bophela and Khumalo (2022) emphasise the informal economy's contribution through stokvels, community-based financial systems supporting savings, investment, and microenterprise development. Although these informal SMEs are often overlooked in formal policy frameworks, they inject over R3 billion annually into the eThekweni economy, demonstrating significant financial strength. Their contributions to job creation, social capital formation, and women's economic empowerment further underscore their developmental importance.

Mkhize (2024) expands on this conversation by exploring SMEs' involvement in Corporate Social Responsibility. The author indicates that SMEs in eThekweni are increasingly participating in community upliftment, environmental awareness, and employee development initiatives. These CSR activities not only enhance social cohesion but also improve the competitiveness and trustworthiness of SMEs among stakeholders. Despite resource constraints, SMEs are committed to ethical practices and sustainable development, aligning with national objectives. Together, this literature reaffirms that both formal and informal SMEs are integral to the socio-economic landscape of eThekweni. Their diverse contributions to employment, innovation, and community development highlight the need for targeted support from local government. This includes implementing inclusive policies, investing in infrastructure, and initiating capacity-building programs to help unlock their full potential.

Digital Marketing Strategy in SMEs

Digital marketing is a comprehensive approach that has gained widespread popularity over the past decade. SMEs adapt their operations by embracing physical modifications, incorporating technological innovation, and utilising digital media to achieve marketing objectives through digital technology (Jadhav et al., 2023; Saura et al., 2023). This includes a range of strategies, such as email marketing, search

engine marketing, social media marketing, web display advertising, and mobile advertising. Digital marketing allows SMEs to reach customers regardless of location and effectively monitor and address the needs and desires of potential consumers. Furthermore, it provides easier access for potential consumers to find and obtain product information by navigating the virtual realm (Mechman et al., 2022; Thaha et al., 2021).

Marketing strategy is essential in strategic marketing and vital in marketing practice. It consists of a cohesive set of choices that help the company make critical decisions about marketing activities in specific markets and segments. The primary goal is to create, communicate, and deliver value to customers to achieve specific financial, market, and other objectives. Companies must integrate social media into their marketing strategy to establish valuable and long-term customer relationships. Conversely, the use of technologies in marketing activities to enhance customer understanding by aligning with their needs is known as a digital marketing strategy, and its core goal involves promoting a product or service using digital media (Bala and Verma, 2018; Daud et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2019). A digital marketing strategy includes various approaches, including search engine optimisation, pay-per-click advertising, and email marketing. The goal is to connect with specific audiences and prompt specific actions (Swami, 2023).

Digital marketing is crucial in engaging customers and implementing marketing strategies and communications. Businesses of all sizes, including SMEs, must utilise digital marketing to maintain competitiveness. Embracing innovation and digitalisation is essential for success, enabling businesses to compete in global markets when effectively implemented (Matekenya and Moyo, 2022; Peter and Dalla Vecchia, 2021). SMEs can use digital marketing to establish meaningful connections with customers through interactive services that influence purchasing decisions. Research shows that the success of SME marketing depends significantly on their website, social media marketing, and digital advertising, all of which are integral components of digital marketing. Digital marketing empowers SMEs to compete with larger businesses, gather market insights, reduce marketing costs, and improve new product development, ultimately achieving a competitive edge and sustainable growth. Adopting digital marketing tools has also enhanced internal communication, boosted sales from existing and new customers, and increased brand awareness. These tools also support increased organisational productivity and foster collaboration (Bruce et al., 2023; Mechman et al., 2022; Nuseir and Aljumah, 2020).

It is important to recognise that SMEs often encounter challenges like limited budgets and resources, technological advancements, and global and local competition. Therefore, they must embrace digital marketing (Raj et al., 2024). Digital marketing strategy allows SMEs to strategise, evaluate, and execute customer-focused marketing campaigns. Furthermore, digital marketing provides numerous advantages, including new sales opportunities, broader customer outreach, entry into new markets, cost savings, and quicker customer response times. Moreover, digital marketing enables SMEs to promote their businesses at lower costs and higher revenues. It is especially beneficial as traditional marketing methods typically require substantial expenses, making them more suitable for larger companies (Abbas and Mehmood, 2021; Patil, 2022). Additionally, digital marketing strategy can assist SMEs in customer relationship management systems, facilitating enhanced customer data

management and personalised marketing, which are crucial for customer retention and sales growth (Raj et al., 2024).

3. Research Methodology

The study utilised an exploratory, quantitative, and descriptive research design. Descriptive studies were conducted to measure variables without intervention from the researcher to change people's behaviour and experiences (Price and Lovell, 2018). The study population consisted of 50 SMEs in the eThekweni region, and a census was chosen due to the population size. Cooper and Schindler (2014) recommended the census method for its efficiency in overcoming non-response errors, straightforwardness, and suitability for yielding accurate estimations (Zhang et al., 2007). Additionally, it was advantageous for covering all target respondents and was less time-consuming and resource-intensive (Jim, 2008).

Data was collected using a closed and open-ended questionnaire designed to encourage face-to-face interaction and enhance feedback. The collected data underwent analysis, coding, and error removal before being entered into the SPSS Statistical Package (version 27). A thorough review of the questionnaires was conducted to ensure accurate and satisfactory completion by all participants. The results were presented in the form of graphs and charts.

4. Results and discussion

Figure 1 illustrates the number of employees for each business participating in the study. Of the 32 businesses, twenty-two (22) employ between 3 and 10 individuals, excluding the owner. This group is evenly divided, with 34 % employing 3 to 5 employees and 34 % employing 5 to 10 employees. Additionally, 19 % of the businesses have 10 to 15 employees, while only 13 % employ more than 15 individuals. This distribution further indicates that these businesses tend to be relatively well-established.

Although none of the business owners claimed to have extensive marketing knowledge, Figure 2 shows that a majority of respondents (46.9 %) report having a good amount of marketing knowledge, indicating a solid foundational understanding. A significant portion (34.4 %) still feels they have limited marketing knowledge, highlighting the need for improvement or further training. Only 3.13 % believe they have very little to no knowledge, which is a positive sign. Additionally, 15.6 % consider themselves to have above-average marketing knowledge, reflecting a smaller group with a more advanced understanding of marketing.

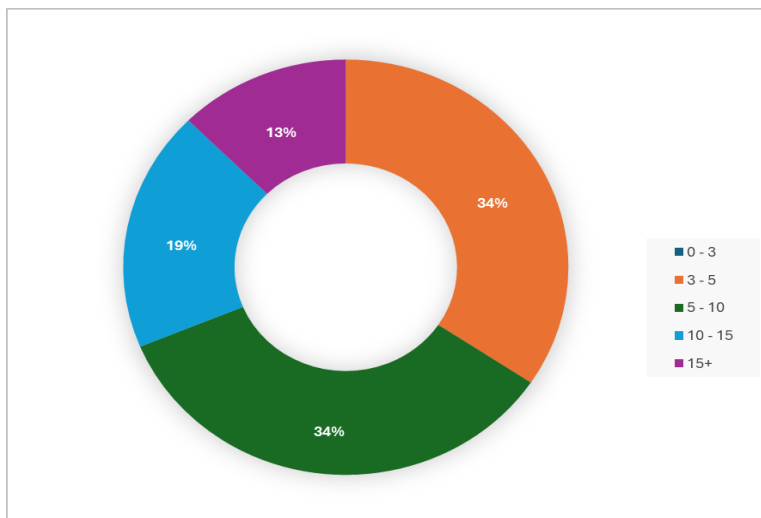


Figure 1. Number of employees per SME

Source: Adapted from own research

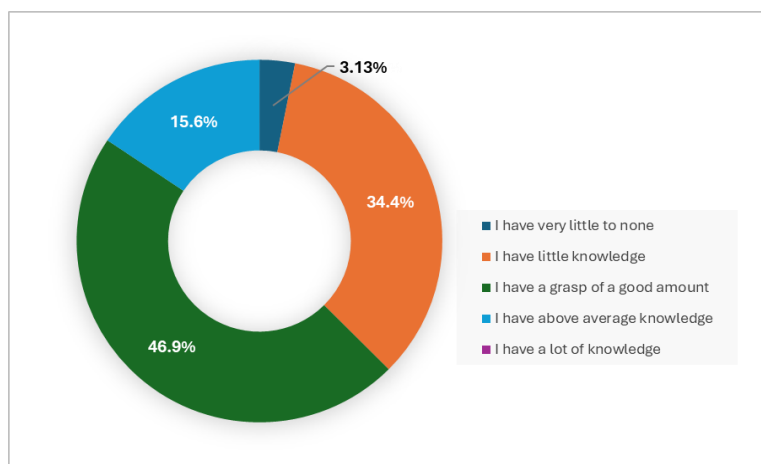


Figure 2. Marketing knowledge

Source: Adapted from own research

The analysis presented in Figure 3 reveals a notable trend: many businesses do not have formal marketing strategies and instead rely on an improvisational approach to their marketing activities. The survey asked respondents to describe how they handle marketing. 37.50 % of respondents indicated that they improvise as needed, demonstrating a flexible and reactive approach. 34.38 % reported having a marketing strategy in place, reflecting a planned and structured approach. 15.63 % stated that they do not engage in any marketing activities, which may suggest a lack of resources or prioritisation. 12.50 % use a combination of strategies, blending both structured planning and improvisation. This analysis highlights that while a significant portion of respondents have established marketing strategies, a slightly

larger group relies on improvisation, and a small minority do not engage in marketing at all.

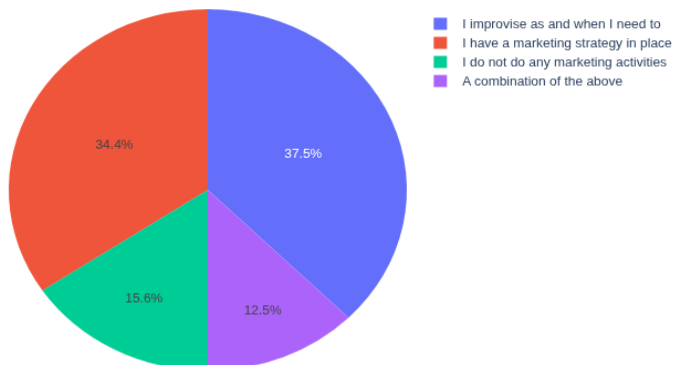


Figure 3. Approach towards marketing activities

Source: Adapted from own research

Social media has become the most prevalent platform for digital marketing. Many businesses establish a social media profile before exploring other marketing strategies. This pattern is evident in the findings, which indicate that Facebook and Instagram are the preferred choices for many of these businesses. The corporate website follows closely, while Google Ads and email marketing rank at the bottom. Additionally, social media is the most effective avenue for promoting their businesses, as illustrated in Figure 4.

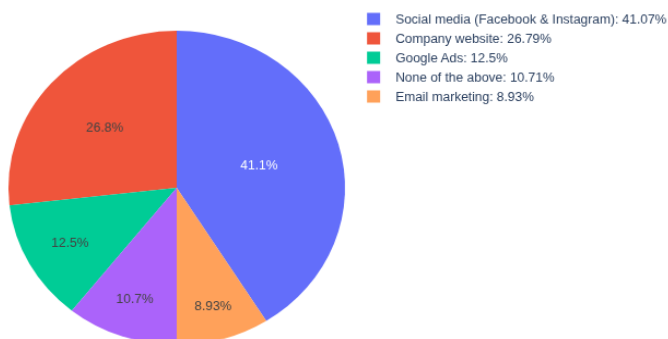


Figure 4. Preferred digital marketing channels

Source: Adapted from own research

Table 1 illustrates the most effective digital marketing channels that businesses use to engage their target audiences and drive conversions. It outlines various channels, including social media, email marketing, content marketing, and search engine optimisation, and highlights their effectiveness based on key metrics such as reach, engagement, and return on investment. The table emphasises the importance of a multi-channel approach, demonstrating that integrating different platforms can enhance overall marketing efforts and yield better results. Notably, social media channels, particularly Facebook and Instagram, are identified as the most effective, capturing 47.06% of the total effectiveness. This highlights the significant impact and reach of social platforms in marketing efforts. Conversely, none of the other channels received a rating higher than 35.29%, suggesting that a considerable portion of respondents either use alternative channels not listed or do not find the listed options effective. Company websites were chosen by 11.76% of respondents, indicating moderate effectiveness, likely due to their capacity to provide detailed information and establish credibility. Google Ads garnered only 5.88%, reflecting limited perceived effectiveness, which may be attributed to factors like cost, targeting challenges, or high competition. Interestingly, email marketing received no responses at all, indicating that it is currently not regarded as effective by any respondents in this context.

Table 1. Effective digital marketing channels

Marketing Channel	Frequency	Percentage
Social media (Facebook & Instagram)	16	47.06 %
Email marketing	0	0.0 %
Google Ads	2	5.88 %
Company website	4	11.76 %
None of the above	12	35.29 %

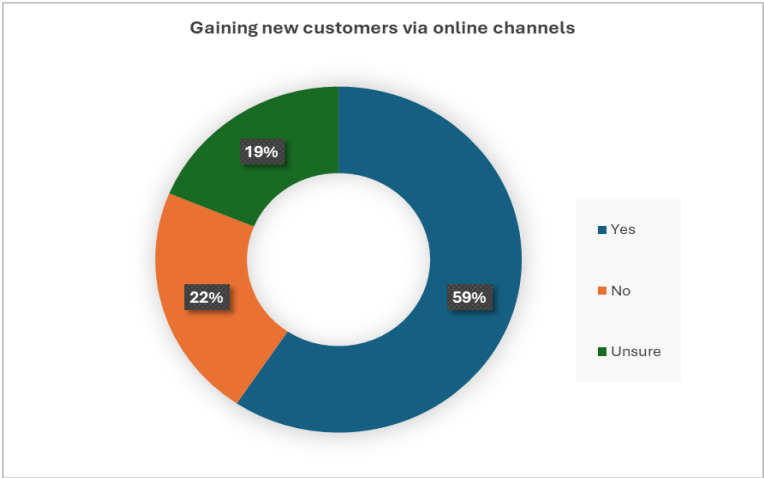


Figure 6. New customers via online channels

Source: Adapted from own research

Figure 6 demonstrates a 59 % increase in new customers acquired through online channels. This significant growth highlights current success and paves the

way for more strategic advancements in digital marketing and customer engagement as businesses aim to leverage this trend.

Summary of Results

The study examined digital marketing practices among 32 small businesses, focusing on employee size, marketing knowledge, strategy, and channel effectiveness. Most of these businesses employed between 3 and 10 individuals, indicating a moderate operational capacity. Marketing knowledge varied widely; only five owners reported having above-average expertise, while most possessed a limited or basic understanding. Regarding marketing strategy, 12 businesses indicated that they improved their marketing activities, while 11 had formal strategies. Notably, five businesses did not engage in marketing at all, highlighting a significant gap in strategic planning. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram, emerged as the most preferred and effective digital marketing channels, utilised by 23 businesses and rated as most effective by 16. Company websites ranked next, while Google Ads and email marketing were the least employed.

Customer acquisition trends further supported the effectiveness of digital marketing. Nineteen businesses (59 %) reported gaining new customers through online channels in the past year, demonstrating the tangible benefits of digital engagement. This suggests that even with limited formal marketing knowledge, small businesses can achieve growth through the strategic use of digital platforms.

The Results indicate that small businesses in South Africa primarily rely on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram for marketing. However, they exhibit limited formal strategies and minimal use of advanced digital tools. This observation aligns with Khambule (2022), who noted that small businesses view digital marketing as a cost-effective survival strategy, particularly through social media. Nonetheless, they face challenges such as limited skills and financial resources. Both studies stress the significance of utilising free or low-cost platforms to enhance visibility and customer engagement.

Ntuli (2022) further expands on this perspective by focusing on manufacturing SMEs in eThekweni. He highlights that while emerging technologies like cloud computing and the Internet of Things can provide competitive advantages, their adoption remains low due to financial constraints and a lack of technical expertise. This complements the findings from this study, which showed reluctance among businesses to adopt formal marketing strategies or invest in tools like Google Ads and email marketing. Bvuma and Marnewick (2020) went on to provide a theoretical framework for the adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), utilising the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). They emphasise that perceived usefulness and ease of use are crucial for adoption. Their study reveals that township SMMEs often lack ICT awareness and training, resonating with the observation that many businesses improvise their marketing efforts and lack structured digital engagement.

In summary, these studies collectively highlight the need for targeted interventions such as digital literacy training, infrastructure support, and strategic guidance to bridge the gap between the digital potential and actual usage among South African small businesses. They affirm that while digital tools are available and effective, their adoption is hindered by contextual barriers that must be addressed to promote growth and sustainability.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

The study highlights the increasing importance of digital marketing for SMEs in eThekwin, revealing both enthusiasm and challenges in its adoption. To bridge the gap between digital potential and actual implementation, SMEs must have foundational digital marketing skills. Government agencies, universities, and private sector partners should collaborate to offer training programs tailored to SME needs. These programs should cover essential tools like social media management, search engine optimisation, email marketing, and analytics.

Small and Medium Enterprises should tailor their digital marketing strategies according to their business models, whether they operate in a Business-to-Business or Business-to-Consumer environment. B2B SMEs may gain more from using platforms like LinkedIn and conducting email campaigns, while B2C SMEs should prioritise social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. SMEs need to integrate digital marketing into their overall business strategies. This involves setting measurable goals, identifying target audiences, and ensuring digital efforts align with broader business objectives. To maximise the effectiveness of their digital marketing strategies, SMEs should implement monitoring systems to track engagement, conversion rates, and customer acquisition. The data gathered from these metrics can help inform future strategies and resource allocation adjustments.

The study emphasises the importance of digital marketing for the growth and sustainability of SMEs in eThekwin. Despite recognising the need for digital transformation, many SMEs face challenges such as limited resources, low digital literacy, and inadequate strategic planning. Social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, are the most utilised channels, but formal marketing strategies are often overlooked. The findings suggest that effective digital marketing requires strategic implementation and tailored approaches, as SMEs are diverse and not a uniform group. The TAM and the TPB highlight the factors influencing digital adoption, pointing to the necessity for accessible and relevant digital solutions.

In conclusion, digital marketing is a strategic tool for enhancing competitiveness and resilience among SMEs. Addressing barriers and providing support can foster a more robust entrepreneurial ecosystem, contributing to socio-economic development, job creation, and inclusive growth.

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