

# Visualisation of global research trends and future research directions of digital marketing in small and medium enterprises using bibliometric analysis

Digital  
marketing in  
SMEs

621

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to undertake a bibliometric analysis of digital marketing research in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The study examines papers over the last two decades and performed performance analysis, co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling and scientific mapping.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study examines 247 documents retrieved from the Scopus database using bibliometric analysis, performance analysis and thematic clustering. The study looked at the scientific productivity of papers, prolific authors, most influencing papers, institutions and nations, keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, co-citations and authorship and country collaborations. VOSviewer was employed as a tool in the research to conduct the performance analysis and thematic clustering.

**Findings** – The most productive year was 2021 with 56 publications and the most impactful institute and countries are the University of Birmingham, UK, and the country is United Kingdom, respectively. Similarly, the most influential journal is “Industrial Marketing Management”, and the most productive journal is “International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising”. Furthermore, the most cited article is “Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands”. The authors also identified five thematic clusters of digital marketing research in SMEs.

**Research limitations/implications** – It informs and directs researchers on the current state of study in the field of digital marketing literature in SMEs. It also outlines future research directions in this field.

**Originality/value** – This is the first study which provides the performance analysis and scientific mapping of the digital marketing literature in SMEs.

**Keywords** Digital marketing, Small and medium enterprises, Bibliometric analysis, Co-citation analysis, Bibliographic coupling

**Paper type** Literature review

## 1. Introduction

Today, web technology and industry 4.0 development have provided new avenues for enterprises to research, inform and enhance customer engagement, offering and selling products and services and shall remain on the top in the future business (Malesev and Cherry, 2021; Kraus *et al.*, 2019; Civelek *et al.*, 2020). Most people’s lifestyles have been transformed by digital technology. Today, people spend much of their leisure time on social media and mobile phone apps. Therefore, managers are also very proactive in understanding digital consumer behaviour, offering them better products and services and maintaining customer relationships through digital platforms (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2015; Suharto *et al.*, 2022; Ali Abbasi *et al.*, 2022). The digital marketing evolution has improved small and medium



enterprises (SMEs) capacity to interact with users, inform them and finally sell products to them (Malik *et al.*, 2020; Setkute and Dibb, 2022).

A growing number of scholars are investigating the fast development in digitalisation, social media, Internet marketing and app-based marketing, as well as the technological advancements that have resulted from this transformation in both small, medium and large-scale enterprises (Lepkowska-White *et al.*, 2019; Malik *et al.*, 2020). Digital marketing has evolved beyond the promotion of specific products to the promotion of events, organisations and operations enabled by digital technology (Giantari *et al.*, 2022; Elia *et al.*, 2021; Kaur and Kushwaha, 2021; Setiaboedi *et al.*, 2017). Further, Internet advertising is a dynamic, technology-enabled approach in which small businesses collaborate with clients and partners to achieve the best possible results and transmit, provide and sustainable value across all people concerned in small business marketing operations (Peter and Dalla Vecchia, 2021; Adam *et al.*, 2020). In marketing communication, digital technology enables new adaptive processes for SMEs. Processes generate wealth through novel Consumer engagements and experience in the latest technological environments, whilst SMEs develop basic capabilities to produce similar exceptionally helpful for both users and small businesses (Thukral and Ratten, 2021; Yizhang *et al.*, 2009; Ruiz-Alba *et al.*, 2021).

Social media, which has been around for more than a decade, now incorporates new communication capabilities and information management, such as mobile networking, blogging and image and video sharing, to provide to SMEs' diverse interests (Ali Abbasi *et al.*, 2022; Lepkowska-White *et al.*, 2019; Dapko *et al.*, 2021). Social media has evolved from a niche tool for the selected audience and has become a vital part of millions of people's daily lives throughout the world. Following in the footsteps of social networking sites, digital technology-driven advertising, including artificial intelligence (AI) services, multi-channel systems, virtual reality and augmented worlds, seems to be creating the e-marketing terrain, pointing to emerging research directions in SMEs (Munir *et al.*, 2021; Lashgari *et al.*, 2018).

According to the World Bank, SMEs are an important pillar of any developing economy SMEs play an important role in entrepreneurship and job creation as well as it also accounts for a huge amount of business SMEs contribute 90% of business and more than 50% of gross domestic production (GDP) in an emerging economy (Thaha *et al.*, 2021). Formal small firms in developing nations provide nearly 40% of the GDP in emerging economies. If SMEs are informal, this figure might be greater SMEs are becoming a study topic and a continued focus for several countries due to their enormous economic effect and the percentage of residents they engage SMEs may preserve the market advantage of the current product(s) as Quaye and Mensah (2019) discovered by utilising specialised marketing resources and competencies at the same time. The fast growth of ICT in the Internet age influences many aspects of life, especially changing customer buying behaviour. To properly target relevant customers, businesses must understand using digital marketing. Digital marketing is described as "... reaching marketing objectives via the use of digital technology" (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Internet advertising with the usage of technologies in promotion initiatives and economic operations to market products via the web, apps, display adverts and other e-communication (Eze *et al.*, 2019, 2021). Data-driven marketing uncovers a multitude of techniques for approaching, attracting, resuscitating, delighting and driving customers through online advertising. Though, digital marketing has lots of potential for small enterprises however they are unable to fully utilise this platform for marketing activities (Dam *et al.*, 2019; Kennedy, 2015).

The attractiveness of digital marketing in business has created curiosity in researchers. Researchers have also contributed to this area very much by studying different dimensions of digital marketing research. The studies are concentrated on both large and small enterprises however studies on SMEs are less. According to the Scopus database, the first

study on digital marketing research in SMEs was conducted in 1997. Digital marketing has changed several shapes from birth to the present day. Therefore, there is a need to study research development in the area of digital marketing research in SMEs because a study on bibliographies of digital marketing publications is available however, studies concentrated on SMEs are not present. The study shall provide an understanding of the research development in digital marketing research in SMEs and allows scholars to conduct a study on the missing elements of digital marketing research in SMEs. The understanding of research progression in this area shall motivate and create interest in the mind of emerging scholars to investigate and uncover hidden facts. Furthermore, the scholar shall gain interest to carry out research in this area by knowing the future research directions and requirements. At the outset, the present study aims to understand research trends, the most productive and influencing authors, articles and journals. Furthermore, the present study also identifies the thematic structure and research direction of digital marketing research in SMEs.

Given the importance of digital marketing research in SMEs, we employ bibliometric analysis to provide a retrospection of the existing literature on this domain (Gao *et al.*, 2021; Donthu *et al.*, 2021). The bibliometric review of the literature allows us to identify the foundation and theme of digital marketing research in SMEs. The bibliographic coupling and co-citation analysis shall be conducted to understand the thematic structure and knowledge of digital marketing research in SMEs (Sharma *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, co-occurrence and confluence analysis allow us to comprehend the research trends and research direction in digital marketing in SMEs (Goodell *et al.*, 2021).

The present study shall motivate the readers and scholars by providing a greater understanding of the most popular and influential works on digital marketing in SMEs and allow them to carry out high-quality future research in this domain. It would also allow them to identify publication trends, research progression and influential publications which will help them to understand the research area in the best way. The academician and scholars shall also get a greater understanding of the most common thematic clusters, and present research trends on digital marketing research in SMEs. It also provides several benefits to the business confront when attempting to deploy digital marketing practices for their business promotions. Nevertheless, it shall also contribute to the advancements of digital marketing research in SMEs to uncover new knowledge and findings. Digital marketing practices by SMEs are still very less therefore, the future research directions identified through the present study in this area shall provide several opportunities and shall also provide solutions for SMEs to deal with various digital marketing challenges.

## 2. Background of digital marketing research in small and medium enterprises

SMEs are critical to a country's economic well-being. They generate various perspectives of national revenue, boost economic competitiveness and stimulate economic growth, resulting in economic adaptability and resiliency (Jaswal, 2014). Furthermore, SMEs have a critical role in strengthening social sectors by driving a huge number of jobs, developing indigenous skills and technology, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship and establishing an economic foundation of various sizes (Kawira, 2021; Kimathi *et al.*, 2019). The research in the area of digital marketing in small businesses started in 1997. Initially, the study in this area started with Internet marketing and moved to e-commerce. Though research in this area started in the 1990s however, the number was very less till 2010. From 2011 to 2015, the study moved from Internet marketing to social media marketing (Dam *et al.*, 2019; Thaha *et al.*, 2021; Kushwaha *et al.*, 2021). In this period the productivity of research in this area was increased and new dimensions such as interactive, consumer engagement and participation in marketing activities were added (Hossain *et al.*, 2022; Thaha *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, from

2016 to the present day, the study has gotten more attention from scholars. In the present day, new areas of digital marketing in SMEs such as marketing strategies, innovation, adoption, performance and ease of use are added. The future study in this area shall be on the use of AI, data drive marketing, influencer marketing, chatbot, etc.

Looking at the benefits of digital marketing for SMEs within the national and international market, it is a concern for many governments to protect the interest of SMEs and empower them in the digital business world. Hence, it has raised an area of study for both researchers and the government to understand the hurdles and elements that drive digital marketing adoption by SMEs. According to the findings of [Senn \(2000\)](#), digital marketing removes geographical boundaries. It facilitates businesses to reach any corner of the world and do business through the World Wide Web. It also empowers SMEs to fight large-scale enterprises ([Giantari et al., 2022](#)). Though digital marketing implementation offers several benefits to SMEs, the adoption and implementation are not easy. Nevertheless, understanding the challenges and opportunities shall help in the adoption and implementation of digital marketing for SMEs. It also all allows the government to tailor schemes to assist SMEs to adopt digital marketing. Furthermore, the use of the net by SMEs facilitated the exchange of knowledge instantly stimulates efficiency and helps solve problems at an early stage ([Caniëls et al., 2015](#)). The utilisation of social media is taken into account to own a positive impact on a business, specifically, it can reduce substantial marketing costs and improve good relationships with customers ([Mokhtar et al., 2016](#)).

### 3. Bibliometric research method

#### 3.1 Defining the appropriate search terms

In this study, the terminology used combinations of two cross-disciplinary components: digital marketing terms and small-medium enterprises. To ensure that all components of digital marketing and SMEs were covered in this research, it was necessary to include the keywords associated with each area. [Table 1](#) shows the two strings and keyword sets used for Scopus data extraction and document selections. Upon conducting a preliminary search of important relevant papers, the authors came up with these terms. The digital marketing terms are online marketing, Internet marketing, e-commerce marketing, search engine marketing, data-driven marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, display ads and mobile marketing. Similarly, SMEs related terms are SMEs and small businesses.

Selection criteria	Exclude	Include
Database: "Scopus"		
Date of Search: "25 March 2022"		
Period of Publications: 1997–2022		
Search term: "Digital Marketing" OR "Online Marketing" OR "online advertis*" OR "Internet marketing" OR "e-commerce marketing" OR "Search engine marketing" OR "data-driven marketing" OR "email direct marketing" OR "Social media marketing" OR "email marketing" OR "display ads" OR "Mobile marketing") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("SME*" OR "Small and Medium Enterprise*" OR "Small Business*"	–	372
Subject area: "Business, management and accounting, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, Social sciences and Arts and Humanities"	115	257
Publication type: "Articles, Conference Paper, Book Chapter and Review"	9	248
Language screening: "Include documents published in English only"	1	247

**Table 1.**  
Article inclusion and  
exclusion criteria

### 3.2 Data collection

Scopus was used to acquire the information since it has a significant amount of double-blind peer-reviewed publications published in high-impact factor journals (Groff *et al.*, 2020). We employed a methodical technique to arrive at the final figure of 274 articles in Table 1. The Keywords “Digital Marketing”, “Online Marketing”, “online advertis?”, “Internet marketing”, “e-commerce marketing”, “Search engine marketing”, “data-driven marketing”, “email direct marketing”, “Social media marketing”, “email marketing”, “display ads”, “Mobile marketing”) AND “SME\*”, “Small and Medium Enterprise\*” and “Small Business\*” were used to include articles only published in the English language from a list of varied disciplines depicted in Table 1. Data extracted/downloaded from Scopus or any other online database is prone to inaccuracies as a result of incorrect bibliographical and bibliometric information emerging from the inclusion of the innovative publication in subsequent articles (Donthu *et al.*, 2021). As a result, using this extracted data without further refinement risks making a dangerous and erroneous diagnosis. As a result, we went through many procedures to clean and put the data. This prompted us to search bibliographic and bibliometric data, as well as the visualisation and interpretation of the outcomes, as recommended by Zupic and Cater (2015) and Donthu *et al.* (2021).

Using the “natural language processing” tool provided in VOSviewer software, the investigators cleaned various terms presented in the article’s “titles, abstracts and keywords” for better analysis and outcomes. For example, we changed several plural nouns to singular (e.g. enterprises to enterprise, SMEs to SME, etc.). Other renderings of similar concepts are also merged (for example, ‘optimisation’ and ‘optimization’ are merged into “Optimization”). Abbreviated forms are translated to enlarged variants in the same way (i.e. KSFs to Key Success Factors). Finally, many of these cleanup methods aid in achieving uniformity in terms of theme assessment.

### 3.3 Selecting the techniques for analysis

Bibliometric analysis is a set of instruments that examines and measures text and information using quantitative methodologies (Mishra *et al.*, 2018; Goyal and Kumar, 2021). This technique allows for the extraction of new information from literature reviews, which may then be used as a supplement to the research (Suominen *et al.*, 2016; Groff *et al.*, 2020). Establishing and publishing biographies on a theme, detecting patterns within a research area and evaluating research works that operate as a guide to know the status of research are all required to accomplish so (Gao *et al.*, 2021; Hossain *et al.*, 2022). Researchers use bibliometric analysis methodologies like authorship, citation, bibliographic coupling, co-citation and co-word analysis to analyse the information on biographic data by Donthu *et al.* (2021).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Performance analysis

Figure 1 represents the publication trends in the area of digital marketing research in SMEs. 2021 was the most productive year however the journey of research in this area was begun by Hamill and Gregory (1997). The initial research trends indicate the use of Internet marketing was popular instead of digital marketing in SMEs research however the word web-based marketing came into practice in this research domain. Harris *et al.* (2008) have first time conducted a study on SMEs using online promotion as a research theme. 2008 was the year when the popularity of digital marketing research in SMEs began and since 2017, their rate of production every year has significantly increased. Overall, looking at the current year trend, the study in this domain shall increase in the coming years.

**Figure 1.**  
Digital marketing in  
SMEs research  
publication trends



*4.2 Prominent authors, organisations and countries for digital marketing research in SMEs*

The above [Table 2](#) indicates the most influential authors, institutions and countries for digital marketing research in SMEs. Harris and Rae are the most influential author with 168 citations and have published 4–4 research papers. Chatterjee has published three documents and has 68 citations. Similarly, the most influential institutions are ‘The University of Birmingham’

TC	Author	TP	TC	Institution	TP	TC	Country	TP
168	Harris L.	4	504	Uni. of Birmingham, UK	1	1,328	The United Kingdom	33
168	Rae A.	4	504	Uni. of Reading, UK	1	268	The USA	27
68	Chatterjee S.	3	194	Uni. of Strathclyde, UK	1	180	South Africa	10
46	Ashworth C.J.	2	139	Uni. of Johannesburg, SA	1	155	Sweden	4
46	Hallsworth A.	2	139	Uni. of Johannesburg, SA	1	133	Finland	3
46	Pioch E.A.	2	139	Uni. of the Witwatersrand, SA	1	127	Indonesia	44
40	Wang L.	2	129	Lund Uni., Lund, Sweden	1	85	India	13
38	Peter M.K.	2	129	Uni. of Stirling, UK	1	81	Australia	7
35	Eze S.C.	7	123	Ai Consultants, Sussex, UK	1	77	Italy	11
33	Bello A.O.	5	123	Uni. of Southampton UK	1	59	Malaysia	19
33	Chinedu-Eze V.C.	5	98	Uni. of Jyväskylä, Finland	1	52	France	4
33	Vrontis D.	4	86	Uni. of Ghana Busi. School, Ghana	1	45	China	7
23	Nwanji T.	2	72	Uni. of Wales, UK	1	45	Spain	9
19	Musa H.	2	72	Uni. of Ulster, UK	1	43	Czech Republic	11
19	Pentina I.	2	71	Uni. Islam Negeri Raden, Indonesia	1	38	Nigeria	8
17	Civelek M.	3	71	Kwansei Gakuin Uni., Japan	1	34	Canada	5
17	Gajdka K.	3	71	Chulalongkorn Uni., Thailand	1	33	Cyprus	4
17	Militaru G.	3	71	Uni. Lampung, Indonesia	1	29	Romania	6
17	Niculescu A.	2	66	Indian Inst. of Tech., Delhi, India	1	28	United Arab Emirates	7
14	Iwu C.G.	2	45	Uni. of Toulouse, France	1	27	Egypt	3

**Note(s):** TC = total citations, TP = total number of article(s) publications

**Table 2.**  
Most influential  
authors, organisations  
and country

and ‘The University of Reading’ with 504 citations each followed by ‘The University of Strathclyde’ with 194 citations with 1 document publication. Likewise, the most influential country is the United Kingdom with 1,328 citations from 33 documents followed by the USA with 268 citations from 27 documents. Furthermore, Eze is the most productive author and Indonesia is the most productive country for digital marketing research in SMEs.

4.3 Most influential journals for digital marketing research in SMEs

The above Table 3 represents the most impactful sources of digital marketing research in SMEs. The most influential source for digital marketing research on SMEs is “Industrial Marketing Management” with 520 citations and three publications followed by “International Journal of Information Management” with 205 citations and two publications. The most productive journal is the “International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising” with nine publications followed by “Sustainability (Switzerland)” with seven publications. The most productive year is from 2016 to 2020 in the most influential journals. The most influential marketing journal is the “International Journal of Information Management”, and the most productive non-marketing journal is “Sustainability (Switzerland)”. Though the research on digital marketing in SMEs began in 1997 however, there are no publications in the most influential journals between 1997 and 2004.

4.4 Most influential articles on digital marketing research in SMEs

The Table 4 indicates the most cited and impactful articles in the area of digital marketing research in SMEs. With 504 citations, the article “Usage, barriers and measurement of social

Journal	TC	MKT	TP	1997–2004	2005–2010	2011–2015	2016–2020	2021–2022
Industrial Mark. Manag.	520	X	3			1	1	1
International J of Info Manag.	205		2				2	
J of Small Bus. And Ent. Dev.	156		4		1	2	1	
Int’l J of Internet Mark. and Adv.	95	X	9		7	1	1	
Int’l J of Ent. and Small Bus.	46		2			1	1	
J of Bus. and Ind. Mark.	45	X	2				2	
Academy of Mark. Studies J	43	X	2			2		
Sustainability (Switzerland)	41		7					4
J of Res. in Interactive Mark.	31	X	3				1	2
Int’l J of Tech. Mark.	30	X	3		2	1		
J of Sci. and Tech. Policy Mang.	30		3				2	1
Int’l Small Bus. J: Res. Entre.	29		2			1		1
E-Inn. for Sust. Dev.	23		2			2		
Int’l Review of Manag. And Mark.	19	X	2				2	
Int’l J of E-Bus. Res.	17		2		1	1		
Market-Trziste	16	X	2				2	
Inno. SMEs and Cond. E-Bus.: Tech. Trends and Sol.	15		2			2		
African J of Hosp., Tour. and Lei.	14		2				2	
Advanced Science Letters	12		3				3	
Prob. and Pers. in Manag.	11	X	2			1	1	

Note(s): TC = total citations, TP = total number of article(s) publications, MKT = X if a journal is classified as ‘marketing’ by the 2018 Academic Journal Guide

Table 3. Most influential journals for digital marketing research in SMEs

Author(s)	Title	TC
Michaelidou <i>et al.</i> (2011)	“Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands”	504
Hamill and Gregory (1997)	“Internet marketing in the internationalisation of UK SMEs”	194
Maduku <i>et al.</i> (2016)	“Understanding mobile marketing adoption intention by South African SMEs: A multi-perspective framework”	139
Fillis <i>et al.</i> (2004)	“Factors impacting on e-business adoption and development in the smaller firm”	129
Harris and Rae (2009)	“Social networks: The future of marketing for small business”	123
Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015)	“The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs”	98
Odoom <i>et al.</i> (2017)	“Antecedents of social media usage and performance benefits in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)”	86
Gilmore <i>et al.</i> (2007)	“E-marketing and SMEs: Operational lessons for the future”	72
Syzali <i>et al.</i> (2019)	“Partial correlation analysis using multiple linear regression: Impact on business environment of digital marketing interest in the era of industrial revolution 4.0”	71
Chatterjee and Kumar (2020)	“Why do small and medium enterprises use social media marketing and what is the impact: Empirical insights from India”	66
Poon and Swatman (1999)	“A Longitudinal Study of Expectations in Small Business Internet Commerce	63
Nakara <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Entrepreneurship and social media marketing: Evidence from French small business”	45
Taneja and Toombs (2014)	“Putting a face on small businesses: Visibility, viability and sustainability the impact of social media on small business marketing”	40
Wang <i>et al.</i> (2015)	“On the brink: Predicting business failure with mobile location-based check-ins”	39
Alford and Page (2015)	“Marketing technology for adoption by small business”	38
Mathews and Healy (2008)	“From garage to global: the Internet and international market growth, an SME perspective”	37
Capitello <i>et al.</i> (2014)	“Social media strategies and corporate brand visibility in the wine industry: Lessons from an Italian case study”	32
Morgan-Thomas (2009)	“Online activities and export performance of the smaller firm: A capability perspective”	32
Peter <i>et al.</i> (2020)	“Strategic action fields of digital transformation: An exploration of the strategic action fields of Swiss SMEs and large enterprises”	31
Nobre and Silva (2014)	“Social Network Marketing Strategy and SME Strategy Benefits”	30

**Table 4.**  
Most influential articles on digital marketing research in SMEs

**Note(s):** TC = total citations

media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B firms” by Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) is the most influential. They focussed their research on B2B SMEs’ social media marketing strategies, potential uses, perceived barriers and how the effectiveness of social media marketing may be quantified. They discovered that the primary goal of social media marketing is to acquire new customers and improve brand awareness. The most major impediment, on the other hand, is a dearth of apparent relevancy for a specific industry. With 194 citations, Hamill and Gregory (1997) conducted the second influential study on “Internet marketing in the internationalisation of UK SMEs”. The study focusses on the effects of online marketing on SMEs’ internationalisation. Small businesses in the United Kingdom are making extensive use of online marketing, but many lack the necessary skills and knowledge to make it more effective. As a result, substantial training and education are required to prepare them to seize the worldwide marketing opportunity available in online marketing and to improve their web marketing competencies.

#### 4.5 Top references for digital marketing research in SMEs

The [Table 5](#) indicates the top references of research publications for digital marketing research in SMEs based on local citations and their global citations. The paper authored by [Taiminen and Karjaluoto \(2015\)](#) titled “The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs” is top references paper with 19 local citations and 98 global citations. The local citations upon global citations ratio are 19.39. The study aimed to find out the objectives and utilisation of digital marketing channels in SMEs and the factor influencing the adoption of digital marketing channels in SMEs. The findings indicated that SMEs are not making use of the full potential of digital marketing channels therefore they are unable to grab the benefits of using digital channels for promoting business similarly, [Michaelidou et al. \(2011\)](#) study titled “Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands” has the second-highest references with 15 local citations, 504 global citations, 2.98 local upon global citations ratio. They concentrated their investigation on B2B SMEs’ social media marketing strategies, prospective applications, perceived barriers and how the efficiency of social media marketing could be measured. They discovered that the major purpose of social media marketing is to increase brand recognition and recruit new customers. The most significant stumbling block, on the other hand, is a lack of apparent relevance for a certain business.

#### 4.6 Knowledge foundations of digital marketing research in SMEs through co-citation analysis

The semantic correlations of co-cited references revealed by co-citation analysis show a field’s knowledge underpinnings ([Donthu et al., 2021](#)). [Figure 2](#) depicts the co-citation map of references mentioned at least twenty times by the articles in the review corpus. Dwivedi, Davis, Rana, Venkatesh and Eze (green nodes) have highly cited the works of a particular area of digital marketing research in SMEs. Similarly, Christodoulides, Siamagka, Haenlien and Kaplan (blue nodes) have highly cited the works of a particular area of digital marketing research in SMEs. Similarly, Karjaluoto, Gilmore and Harris (yellow nodes) have highly cited the works of a particular area of digital marketing research in SMEs. Eid and Roghers (red nodes) have highly cited the works of a particular area of digital marketing research in SMEs. Similarly, Hair and Purwanto (purple nodes) have highly cited the works of a particular area of digital marketing research in SMEs.

#### 4.7 Thematic and influence structure analysis through bibliographic coupling

Through bibliographic coupling, [Table 6](#) shows the theme clusters of digital marketing research in SMEs. Internet marketing and digital marketing, e-business and marketing strategy, technology adoption and small company, mobile marketing and social media marketing are the five topic groupings. In the [Table 6](#), the most influential articles of each cluster are also included. The five groups cover every aspect of digital marketing research in small businesses.

Cluster 1 is concerned with online and digital marketing research. [Hamill and Gregory \(1997\)](#) investigated the influence of Internet marketing on the worldwide expansion of UK SMEs. Their findings revealed that few SMEs were utilising the full potential of online marketing, implying that SMEs require extensive training and education to fully utilise digital technology and achieve a competitive advantage in the global market. Similarly, [Taiminen and Karjaluoto \(2015\)](#) investigated the use and purpose of digital marketing channels in SMEs. They also discovered that SMEs are not fully utilising digital platforms to send promotional messages to their target clients. They also discovered that as a result, SMEs are unable to reap the benefits of digital marketing platforms. Furthermore, [Poon and Swatman \(1999\)](#) investigated SMEs’ online commerce expectations, finding a discrepancy

LC	Document	Title	GC	LC/GC ratio (%)	Normalised	
					LC	GC
19	Taiminen HM, 2015, J Small Bus Enterp Dev	"The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs"	98	19.39	9.50	5.82
15	Michaelidou N, 2011, Ind Mark Manage	"Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands"	504	2.98	7.06	7.14
11	Gilmore A, 2007, Eur Bus Rev	"E-marketing and SMEs: Operational lessons for the future"	72	15.28	2.00	1.67
9	Maduku DK, 2016, Int J Inf Manage	"Understanding mobile marketing adoption intention by South African SMEs: A multi-perspective framework"	139	6.47	5.40	6.22
8	Chatterjee S, 2020, Int J Inf Manage	"Antecedents and consequence of social media marketing for the strategic competitive advantage of small and medium enterprises: mediating role of utilitarian and hedonic value"	66	12.12	18.13	10.06
6	Eze SC, 2019, J Sci Technol Policy Manage	"Mobile marketing technology adoption in service SMEs: a multi-perspective framework"	23	26.09	8.29	3.15
6	Hamill J, 1997, J Mark Manage	"Internet marketing in the internationalisation of UK SMEs"	194	3.09	1.00	1.00
5	Taueja S, 2014, Acad Mark Stud J	"Putting a face on small businesses: Visibility, viability and sustainability the impact of social media on small business marketing"	40	12.50	2.86	2.56
5	Nakara WA, 2012, Int J Entrepreneurship Small Bus	"Entrepreneurship and social media marketing: Evidence from French small business"	45	11.11	4.29	3.00
4	Ritz W, 2019, J Res Interact Mark	"Digital marketing adoption and success for small businesses: The application of the do-it-yourself and technology acceptance models"	19	21.05	5.52	2.60
4	Dumitriu D, 2019, Sustainability	"A perspective over modern SMEs: Managing brand equity, growth and sustainability through digital marketing tools and techniques"	17	23.53	5.52	2.33
4	Alford P, 2015, Serv Ind J	"Marketing technology for adoption by small business"	38	10.53	2.00	2.26
4	Nobre H, 2014, J Transnatl Manage	"Social Network Marketing Strategy and SME Strategy Benefits"	30	13.33	2.29	1.92
3	Peter MK, 2020, J Strat Manag	"Strategic action fields of digital transformation: An exploration of the strategic action fields of Swiss SMEs and large enterprises"	31	9.68	6.80	4.73
3	Harris L, 2009, J Bus Strategy	"Social networks: The future of marketing for small business"	123	2.44	3.60	3.75
2	Purba MI, 2021, Int J Data Netw Sci	"The effect of digital marketing and e-commerce on financial performance and business sustainability of MSMEs during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia"	2	100.00	11.20	1.15

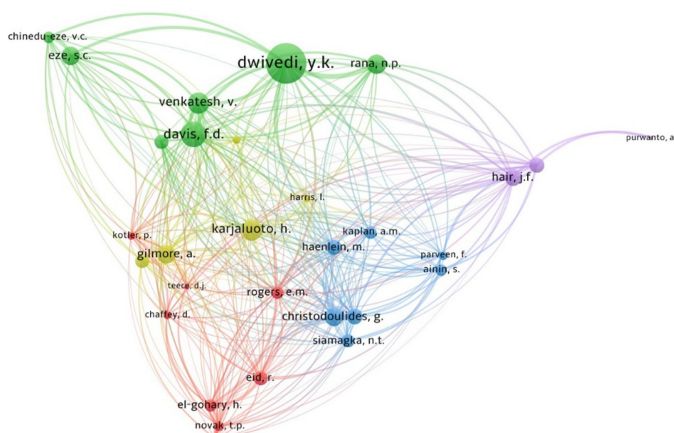
**Table 5.**  
Top references for  
digital marketing  
research in SMEs

(continued)

LC	Document	Title	GC	LC/GC ratio (%)	Normalised	
					LC	GC
2	Djakasaputra A, 2021, Int J Data Netw Sci	“Empirical study of Indonesian SMEs sales performance in the digital era: The role of quality service and digital marketing”	5	40.00	11.20	2.89
2	Malesev S, 2021, Constr Econ Build	“Digital and social media marketing- growing market share for construction SMEs”	5	40.00	11.20	2.89
2	Adam M, 2020, Int J Supply Chain Manag	“The role of digital marketing platforms on supply chain management for customer satisfaction and loyalty in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) at Indonesia”	9	22.22	4.53	1.37
2	Kraus S, 2019, J Macromark	“Content is King: How SMEs Create Content for Social Media Marketing Under Limited Resources”	7	28.57	2.76	0.96

Note(s): LC = local citations, GC = global citations

Table 5.



Note(s): A cited reference and a semantic cluster of references based on theme similarity are represented by each node. The degree of local citations is represented by the size of nodes, with larger nodes reflecting a higher intensity of local citations. Co-citations are represented by the link between nodes. The degree of co-citations is represented by the size of the link between nodes, with thicker linkages indicating more co-citation intensity

Figure 2. Co-citation of references cited by articles on digital marketing research in SMEs

between expectations and reality amongst SMEs engaging in Internet marketing. The expectation of SMEs from the Internet is an instant competitive advantage, which has yet to materialise. Furthermore, rather than promoting and selling, Internet marketing is more beneficial for obtaining information.

Cluster 2 includes research on e-business and marketing strategy in SMEs. [Fillis et al. \(2004\)](#) produced the most significant study in this cluster on variables impacting e-business adoption in SMEs. To better understand the adoption behaviour of SME managers and

Theme	Author(s)	Title	TC
Internet Marketing and Digital Marketing	Hamill and Gregory (1997)	"Internet marketing in the internationalisation of UK SMEs"	194
	Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015)	"The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs"	98
E-business and Marketing Strategy	Poon and Swatman (1999)	"A Longitudinal Study of Expectations in Small Business Internet Commerce"	63
	Fillis <i>et al.</i> (2004)	"Factors impacting on e-business adoption and development in the smaller firm"	129
	Gilmore <i>et al.</i> (2007)	"E-marketing and SMEs: Operational lessons for the future"	72
	Waheed and Jianhua (2018)	"Achieving consumers' attention through emerging technologies: The linkage between e-marketing and consumers' exploratory buying behaviour tendencies"	27
Technology Adoption and Small Business	Syazali <i>et al.</i> (2019)	"Partial correlation analysis using multiple linear regression: Impact on business environment of digital marketing interest in the era of industrial revolution 4.0"	71
	Alford and Page (2015)	"Marketing technology for adoption by small business"	38
	Peter <i>et al.</i> (2020)	"Strategic action fields of digital transformation: An exploration of the strategic action fields of Swiss SMEs and large enterprises"	31
Mobile Marketing	Maduku <i>et al.</i> (2016)	"Understanding mobile marketing adoption intention by South African SMEs: A multi-perspective framework"	139
	Wang <i>et al.</i> (2015)	"On the brink: Predicting business failure with mobile location-based check-ins"	39
	Eze <i>et al.</i> (2019)	"Mobile marketing technology adoption in service SMEs: a multi-perspective framework"	23
Social Media Marketing	Michaelidou <i>et al.</i> (2011)	"Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands"	504
	Harris and Rae (2009)	"Social networks: The future of marketing for small business"	123
	Odoom <i>et al.</i> (2017)	"Antecedents of social media usage and performance benefits in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)"	86

**Table 6.** Thematic clusters of digital Marketing in SMEs through bibliographic coupling

**Note(s):** TC = total citations

entrepreneurs, researchers looked at their motives, attitudes and other micro characteristics. Similarly, the study by Gilmore *et al.* (2007) focussed on electronic marketing and operational learning in SMEs. They discovered that SMEs are not completely leveraging e-marketing in their marketing operations. They also examine the benefits and drawbacks of e-marketing for SMEs. Furthermore, using the moderating influence of gender, Waheed and Jianhua (2018) investigated the use of e-marketing to capture customer attention and identify buying preferences. They claim that SMEs must employ technology that is acceptable to target clients to better understand their purchasing habits.

Cluster 3 is concerned with small businesses' use of digital technologies for marketing purposes. Syazali *et al.* (2019) did a study on the impact of digital marketing on the business environment in Industry 4.0. Due to a lack of experience and resources, SMEs find it challenging to implement digital marketing in today's highly competitive business climate.

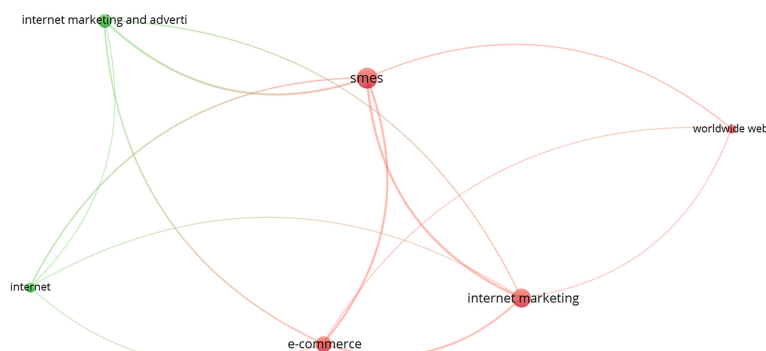
Similarly, [Alford and Page \(2015\)](#) discovered that technology-based marketing efforts for SMEs are highly effective, but that the owners and managers of SMEs do not have much competence in this. Another barrier to adoption is a lack of understanding of how to measure the return on digital technology investments. Another research by [Peter \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) focussed on the digital implementation approach used by SMEs and large corporations. Digital transformation is dependent on digital leadership, process engineering, organisational culture and the nature of the firm, according to the researchers.

Publications on mobile marketing research and digital marketing in SMEs are included in cluster 4. [Maduku \*et al.\* \(2016\)](#) is the most significant paper, focussing on understanding the adoption intention of mobile marketing from many perspectives. They discovered that the technological, institutional and environmental settings of the organisation are the primary determinants of intention to embrace mobile marketing in SMEs. [Wang \*et al.\* \(2015\)](#) focussed their research on forecasting the power of location-based service for visits to a local restaurant. Furthermore, [Eze \*et al.\* \(2019\)](#) looked at mobile marketing adoption in SMEs from a variety of angles and discovered 16 important factors of mobile technology use for marketing activities.

The studies on social media marketing and digital marketing research in SMEs are included in cluster 5. [Michaelidou \*et al.\* \(2011\)](#) work are one of the most prominent studies in this cluster. Their research focusses on B2B businesses' usage of social media marketing, difficulties and analytics. They discovered that SMEs use social media marketing to establish their brands, with the most difficult aspect of doing so being the platform's sectoral relevance. Similarly, [Harris and Rae \(2009\)](#) investigated whether social media is the future of marketing for SMEs and discovered that it will reduce buyer irritation via participation. It promotes a collaborative attitude that is beneficial to corporate success. Furthermore, [Odoom \*et al.\* \(2017\)](#) focussed on the use and advantages of social media for SMEs and discovered that social media motivation and impacts are good, but inconsistent with the product and service-based SMEs.

#### 4.8 Thematic trends of digital marketing research in SMEs

Extending on the underpinnings and topics provided by co-citation analysis and bibliographic coupling, we analyse thematic tendencies in digital marketing studies in SMEs using co-occurrence analysis. Authors' keywords are used for co-occurrence analysis. Those keywords are subjected to a chronological filter to identify the topical development of digital marketing in SMEs issues that feature in at least three articles in our review corpus. [Figures 3–6](#) depict this theme progression.



**Note(s):** Green nodes = Internet Marketing and advertising, Red nodes = internet marketing and e-commerce

**Figure 3.** Influential topics in the “period of 1997–2010”

The study conducted on the theme of digital marketing research in SMEs between 1997 and 2010 was more focussed on Internet marketing, the World Wide Web and e-commerce (red nodes). Research in the same period highlights Internet marketing and advertising (green nodes). It is the initial phase of digital marketing in SMEs which begins with internet marketing and moves to e-commerce.

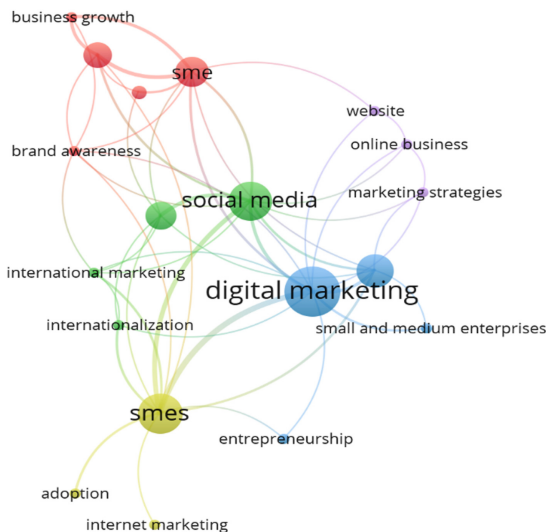
The study carried out between the period of 2011–2015 on digital marketing research in SMEs is focussed on Internet marketing, social media marketing and strategy (red nodes). Furthermore, in this period, the themes such as small business, online marketing (blue nodes); and digital marketing (green nodes). In this period, studies on social media and digital marketing have taken place in SMEs for marketing activities.

The study conducted from 2015 to 2020 on digital marketing research in SMEs concentrated on the themes such as business growth, brand awareness and SMEs (red nodes). Similarly, digital marketing, SMEs and entrepreneurship (blue nodes); SMEs, adoption and



**Figure 4.**  
Influential topics in  
“the period of  
2011–2015”

**Note(s):** Red nodes = Social Media Marketing, Blue nodes = Online marketing and Small Business, Green nodes = digital marketing



**Figure 5.**  
Influential topics in  
“the period of  
2015–2020”

**Note(s):** Green nodes = Social Media Marketing and Internationalization, Blue nodes = Digital Marketing and SMEs, Red nodes = Business Growth and SMEs, Yellow nodes = SMEs and Internet Marketing



**Note(s):** Red nodes = digital marketing and transformation, Purple nodes = social media and adoption, Green nodes = innovation and small business, Blue nodes = social media marketing and perceived ease of use, Yellow nodes = marketing performance and cross-border commerce, Sky-blue node = digital marketing and SME, Orange nodes = mobile marketing and technology adoption

**Figure 6.** Influential topics in “the period of 2021–2022”

Internet marketing (yellow nodes); social media, international marketing and internationalisation (green nodes); and website, online business and marketing strategy (purple nodes). This indicates that digital marketing research in SMEs in the period had grown up and become the wider theme for the research.

The study conducted from 2015 to 2020 on digital marketing research in SMEs is concentrated on the themes such as digital marketing, and SMEs (sky blue nodes). Similarly, the study in this period includes social media marketing, perceived ease of use, and COVID-19 (blue nodes); SMEs, cross-border e-commerce and marketing performance (yellow nodes); mobile marketing, and technology adoption (orange nodes); marketing, adoption, social media and marketing strategy (purple nodes); online marketing, digital marketing strategy, e-commerce, digital transformation and financial performance (red nodes); and small business, innovation and entrepreneurship (green nodes).

## 5. Future research directions

Assessing digital marketing studies in SMEs from a historical context is critical for determining present and future consequences. By examining relevant papers, this study may establish a baseline for the burgeoning area of digital marketing research in SMEs, allowing future scholars to examine the usage and benefits of digital marketing for SMEs.

A future study might look at how the most recent technology drives SMEs to perform better in the local and global markets. Between 1997 and 2010, the studies were focussed on Internet marketing, advertising and e-commerce in the area of digital marketing research in SMEs. While, the study focussed on social media marketing, online marketing and digital marketing from 2011 to 2015. The studies from 2016 to 2020 concentrated on internationalisation, social media marketing, business growth and digital marketing. Furthermore, the study from 2020 onwards is focussed on innovation, transformation, adoption, ease of use, social media and digital media. AI is noteworthy as a digital marketing platform for smart marketing and technology-driven marketing context.

The use of AI in digital marketing is a trending topic in recent studies. AI works in different forms such as machine learning, data mining, text mining, neural networks, big data and artificial human. The future study on Internet marketing and digital marketing themes shall use recent technologies such as AI and algorithm-based marketing. Furthermore, future

research shall be on personalised marketing, historical activity-based marketing, etc. Furthermore, the future research directions for e-business and marketing strategy shall also make use of recent technologies. The study on AI-enable marketing activities is numerous however, the study focussed on AI-enable marketing practice in SMEs are nominal, therefore, a study on this in the future shall change the fate of SMEs and allow them to implement recent technologies to promote their business.

Furthermore, future research on the social media marketing theme could look at the process of ML-driven social media marketing activities in SMEs. Specifically, data-driven, chat-bot, interactive, engagement and influencer marketing applications for SMEs. Furthermore, future research could be on the usage and benefits of social media for consumer co-creation and engagement. Study on the applications of social media for customers' feedback, reactions and use of rich media to promote products and services offered by SMEs. Further study could be conducted on applications of a chatbot, text mining, information procession and brand building on digital media platforms for SMEs. Research could be conducted on influencer marketing and the competitive advantage of technology-driven marketing for SMEs.

Moreover, the future research directions for technology adoption and small business shall be on the process of data collection, challenges of technology adoption and technology integration for understanding consumers' needs and behaviour for personalised marketing practices. Additionally, future researchers shall also focus on the financial, technological and attitudinal aspects of SMEs in the adoption and implementation of digital marketing technology in their business. Further, future research directions on mobile marketing themes shall be conducted concentrating the customised marketing, location-based marketing, search marketing, app-based marketing and push-notification marketing.

Additionally, a future study shall be conducted on the skill and expertise required by the marketers of SMEs to implement digital marketing. Furthermore, government initiatives and financial and technical support are required to motivate SMEs to the adoption of digital marketing. The counselling and training required for small business entrepreneurs to the glass ceiling of using digital marketing to promote their products. Further study could be on the adoption of e-commerce and app-based marketing in digital marketing research for SMEs.

## **6. Conclusion**

Bibliometric analysis has the potential to inform collection development, describe institutional scholarship strengths and citation patterns and suggest visible co-citation networks of schools of thought. The present study has visualised the research trends, thematic evolution and influential research in digital marketing research in SMEs. The Scopus database was used for data extraction and analysis which is the largest biographies database. The study has presented the research progression and themes of digital marketing research in SMEs for different periods. This study has presented the journey of digital marketing research in SMEs and future research directions for scholars. Scholars may conduct a study on the emerging area of digital marketing in SMEs that could provide better insights to policymakers and practitioners. This way the present study has contributed to understanding the research development, emerging areas and future research direction of digital marketing research in SMEs.

The study is limited to the bibliometric analysis of biographical data extracted from only the Scopus database. Therefore, the future study could be done using combined bibliographies data from Scopus and Web of Science because several quality publications are only listed in either of them. Additionally, future studies may conduct using bibliometric analysis on SCI, SSCI and ABDC-listed publications only to understand the research paradigm from high-quality publications.

## 7. Implications of the study

The present study has several implications for marketers, entrepreneurs, academicians and scholars. They should get overall knowledge about the existing studies in this area. By knowing the influential and prominent contributors of this research domain and the reason for becoming important contributors, they can access these articles to solve the prevailing academic and industry challenges. Furthermore, it would also guide them to know the gap in the existing literature, and future research directions which shall assist them to conduct future studies. Furthermore, it will also help the scholar to publish their work in journals with high impact.

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