

## Digital Marketing adoption in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** This paper seeks to analyze the current state of digital marketing adoption by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Colombia and its consequent impact on these entities. To achieve this, the digital marketing strategies employed by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises across various sectors in the country are examined, aiming to understand their level of adoption.

**Methods:** Qualitative study using document analysis methodology with content analysis to analyze the adoption and implementation of digital marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Colombia

**Findings:** It was found that digital marketing strategies have a positive impact on the growth and development of businesses in Colombia. Despite this, many companies lack knowledge to implement these strategies.

**Conclusion:** It is essential for Colombian Small and Medium-sized Enterprises to undergo constant training and updates in information and communication technologies. Small and Medium-sized Enterprises should invest in and educate their labor force on digital tools to enhance their positioning and financial performance.

**Keywords:** Communication technologies; Digital marketing; Information; SMEs; Strategies.

JEL: M31, M21, M39

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**ARTICULO ORIGINAL**

## Adopción del Mercadeo Digital en Pequeñas y Medianas empresas (PyMes)

### RESUMEN

**Objetivos:** En el presente artículo de investigación se realiza un análisis del estado actual de la adopción del marketing digital por las Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas (PyMes) en Colombia, y el impacto que este genera en ellas. Para lo cual se analizan en diferentes sectores las estrategias de marketing digital utilizadas por las pequeñas y medianas empresas del país buscando conocer su nivel de uso por parte de las PyMes.

**Métodos:** Estudio de carácter cualitativo utilizando la metodología de análisis documental con análisis de contenido, para analizar la adopción e implementación del marketing digital en las PyMes de Colombia.

**Resultados:** Se encontró que las estrategias de marketing digital impactan positivamente el crecimiento y desarrollo de las empresas en Colombia, pero a pesar de esto muchas empresas no saben cómo utilizarlo.

**Conclusión:** Se hace necesario que las PyMes se capaciten y actualicen constantemente en tecnologías de la información y comunicación. En éste sentido, deben invertir y capacitarse en herramientas digitales para mejorar su posicionamiento y sus niveles de rendimiento financiero.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategias, Marketing digital, tecnologías de la información y comunicación, PyMes.

**Clasificación JEL:** M31, M21, M39

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## INTRODUCTION

Marketing have become crucial for companies, especially in today's globalized markets. The digitization of data, widespread computerization, and the growth of the internet have led to new forms of business, such as e-commerce and Digital Marketing (Pinagote, 2019). Digital technologies and social media have improved connectivity and collaboration between companies and customers across all sectors (Arrigo, 2018). Digital technologies are used to engage stakeholders, policymakers, and multi-level partners as part of behavior change interventions (Flaherty & Domegan, 2021). Digital Marketing (DM) is an important strategy for promoting commerce in Colombia; however, many organizations do not utilize these tools due to a lack of knowledge and financial resources. DM offers marketing opportunities at a lower cost, even for free, but many companies fail to take advantage of this. DM is crucial for organizations as it helps them stay in touch with their customers, understand them better, and meet their needs (Araque, 2021).

DM is a broad concept encompassing all marketing efforts that apply an electronic device or the internet. It involves promoting and advertising products, services, or brands to a target audience through various digital channels and platforms (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Smith, 2020, Ryan and Jones, 2019; Banker and Roberts, 2020). DM leverage the power of digital technologies and data to connect with potential customers in real-time and can include a wide range of strategies and tactics such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Content Marketing, Social Media Marketing, E-mail Marketing, Affiliate Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Mobile Marketing, Analytical Data Analysis, Video Marketing, Advergates, Pay-per-click Advertising, Chatbots, and Message Applications (Evans et al., 201; DeMers, 2017; Zahay & Roberts, 2019; Holliman et al., 2019).

DM offers numerous advantages, including the ability to target specific populations or a target audience, track the effectiveness of a campaign in real time, and consequently adjust strategies accordingly (Ryan & Jones, 2019; Chaffey & Chadwick, 2019; Holliman et al., 2019). Nowadays, it is a fundamental element of modern marketing, enabling businesses to reach a global audience and

compete in online markets. It's important to highlight that the specific digital marketing channels and strategies used by a company may vary depending on its objectives, target audience, and industry (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Evans et al., 2010).

The primary aim underpinning the adoption of DM strategies by corporations is to increase sales levels, customer loyalty, Brand positioning, penetrate new markets, and increase the number of customers, so that they can ensure the growth and permanence of the organization in the long term, reach a large number of potential consumers, reduce costs, and especially increase their levels of profitability (Acurero et al., 2020).

The main objective of this article is to understand how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Colombia have adopted digital marketing; how digital marketing has impacted these companies and influenced their strategies. This study conducted a qualitative systematic literature review to analyze the adoption and implementation of digital marketing in Colombian SMEs during the period 2018-2023.

Within contemporary interactive marketing, DM is a notable area with its specific focus on interactivity. DM has evolved from being company-oriented to being consumer-oriented (Gungor & Cadirci, 2023). The technologies and tools of DM can be used more efficiently to optimize traditional marketing strategy. DM tools are one of the primary means of connecting with customers and attracting them (Ravi & Rajasekaran, 2023).

The development of the internet and the implementation of traditional marketing strategies have led to the emergence of DM strategies used by both SMEs and large corporations. The proliferation of digital media platforms and the commercial use of the internet have changed the business landscape (Abdullah et al., 2023). Companies now combine data science with digital marketing strategies to sell products, raise brand awareness, or access new markets (Saura et al., 2023). Communications through digital or electronic media between companies and consumers have grown rapidly, particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic (Shankar et al., 2022).

According to Kotler and Keller (2015), DM is a marketing approach that relies on the use of online channels and platforms such as a website, search engines, social medias, and email to communicate with the target audience, promote products or services, and achieve business objectives. It involves the use of specific techniques and strategies adapted to the digital environment to attract the brand and build loyalty with them.

DM has become essential for companies seeking to stay competitive in today's markets for several reasons. Firstly, DM has a vast reach, allowing companies to reach a global audience and a large number of consumers regardless of their location, overcoming geographical limitations (Zook & Graham, 20). Similarly, it offers the ability to target specific audience segments based on demographic data, interests, and behaviors, which enhances the effectiveness of campaigns (Hollensen, 2019). DM provides detailed metrics and analysis that allow companies to measure the performance and make data-driven decisions (Ryan, 2016). All of this because DM efforts influence consumers' purchase intention (Dunakhe & Panse, 2022), without forgetting that in times of crisis and uncertainty, such as the pandemic, DM content can help both businesses and society overcome these challenges (Yaghtin *et al.*, 2022).

Additionally, DM helps increase consumer's visibility and awareness of the Brand through online presence and engagement on digital platforms (Chaffey & Smith, 2017), similarly, it facilitates direct interaction with customers through social media, email, and other digital channels, strengthening relationship (Kotler *et al.*, 2017). This allows companies to stay-up to date with trends and best practices in digital marketing providing organizations with a competitive advantage that can be sustained over time (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwich, 2019). However, while some SMEs use DM, the majority cannot harness all its benefits, resulting in varying impacts on their performance (Jadhav *et al.*, 2023; Pandey *et al.*, 2020). Companies must ensure they understand the trends in the field of DM and be able to adapt to changes to remain competitive (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### *Research Design*

This study carries out a qualitative systematic literature review to analyze the adoption and implementation of digital marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Colombia. This qualitative approach helps in understanding complex phenomena by integrating diverse evidence, which often includes empirical studies, narratives, and conceptual frameworks (Finfgeld-Connect & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, Developing systematic review protocols for qualitative studies enhances transparency, minimizes bias, and ensures high-quality recommendations. Protocols include clear search terms, inclusion criteria, and methods for critical appraisal and data synthesis (Butler *et al.*, 2016).

### *Data Sources and Search Strategy*

The primary data sources for this research were Google Scholar and the SCOPUS database. The search terms used in Google Scholar were "Digital marketing in Colombian Companies" and "Digital marketing in SMEs in Colombia," initially yielding 43 documents from the period 2018 to 2023. After a meticulous review

and refinement process, 34 documents were selected for inclusion in this study. The following query string was used as an advanced search engine in SCOPUS:

TITLE ( ( review\* W/6 ( literature OR research ) OR "paper reviews" OR "state of the art" OR "Review article" OR ( a W/2 review\* ) ) W/6 ( ( "Digital Marketing in Colombia" OR marketing OR "Marketing Digital in Colombia" OR "Digital Marketing Innovation in Colombia" ) W/4 ( marketing OR digital ) ) )

This search also was restricted to the years 2018 to 2023 and was limited to documents classified under "Business Management and Accounting" and "Economic Econometrics and Finance." The document types were confined to articles and review articles, resulting in an initial retrieval of 810 documents, which were then narrowed down to 197 documents. However, none of these SCOPUS documents specifically focused on digital marketing in Colombia, with only 16 addressing digital marketing and its impacts on organizations.

#### ***Document Selection Criteria***

The inclusion criteria for document selection were:

1. Publications from 2018 to 2023.
2. Studies focused on digital marketing practices.
3. Research specifically related to SMEs in Colombia.
4. Peer-reviewed articles and review articles.

The exclusion criteria were:

1. Studies not directly related to digital marketing or SMEs.
2. Publications prior to 2018.
3. Non peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers.

#### ***Data Extraction and Analysis***

Data from the selected documents were systematically extracted and organized using a predefined framework that focused on key themes such as usage of DM by SMEs in Colombia, Digital Marketing in diverse sectors and the use of advergaming and inbound marketing strategies. The documents sourced from Google Scholar provided the primary data for the analysis, specifically concerning the digital marketing practices of SMEs in Colombia. These documents were thoroughly analyzed and interpreted to extract meaningful insights and conclusions.

The documents retrieved from the SCOPUS database, although not directly addressing digital marketing in Colombia, were essential for constructing the theoretical framework of this research. These documents provided broader context and theoretical foundations of digital marketing concepts and their application in various organizational settings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Usage of Digital Marketing by SMEs in Colombia*

DM is becoming increasingly important in Colombia and is helping companies interact with their customers, understand market trends, and compete with larger firms. Access to technology and e-commerce in Colombia varies, but social media is popular tool for DM strategies. SMEs face cultural barriers and difficulties in fully leveraging DM, but they can benefit from its use for innovation and competitiveness purposes (Pitre Redondo *et al.*, 2021).

DM through email and social media is an effective strategy for companies in Colombia. However, many SMEs do not give enough importance to the marketing department. Despite recognizing the importance of DM, they do not invest adequately in DM tactics and strategies. Larger companies are more competitive and organized in DM, while smaller ones are more likely to fail (Trejo-Gil, 2020).

DM in Colombia was traditionally underutilized by companies, especially SMEs, but in recent years, particularly since the COVID 19 pandemic, its usage has significantly increased in different sectors, especially in SMEs. A study conducted in the city of Medellín by Rendon *et al.* (2022) which analyses the perceptual factors of DM usage in SMEs found that these companies use various DM strategies such as social media, websites, and email with the aim of increasing customers, improving corporate image, and having direct contact with consumers. In the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, the use of DM was crucial for this companies to maintain contact with their customers, providing SMEs with an opportunity for growth during the pandemic (Hoyos-Estrada & Sastoque-Gómez, 2020). Another study conducted during the COVID 19 pandemic in the city of Cucuta by Mojica *et al.*, which focused on analyzing the digital marketing strategies used by SMEs enterprises in the gastronomic and entertainment sectors, found that these companies produced new content on their social media, used e-commerce, and emotional marketing to communicate with their customers and build loyalty (Mojica-Acevedo *et al.*, 2021). Below we will illustrate how SMEs in Colombia in various sectors such as textiles, tourism, and footwear, among others, have utilized DM, as well as the behavior and results of using specific DM strategies such as Inbound Marketing or Advergame.

### *Digital Marketing in the textile sector.*

In research conducted in Usaquen, Bogotá, based on 68 SMEs in the textile sector analyzing their use of DM, Marín Chávez *et al.* (2022), found that its usage was low due a lack of technology and resources. Therefore, the importance of implementing DM strategies to improve the competitiveness of these companies and promote their economic growth is emphasized, suggesting that SMEs should have trained personal in DM and promoting collaboration between government,

businesses, and academia (Marín Chávez *et al.*, 2022). The textile sector in Bogota has experienced a resurgence in growth and recovery but still faces challenges such as smuggling and increased imports. SMEs in the sector have increased the use of DM tools to attract customers during the pandemic, but there is still room for maximizing these strategies.

Olaya Molano *et al.* (2022) suggest that the textile sector strengthens its DM strategies by forming specialized teams and promoting the use of accessible technological tools. Additionally, it is expected that the government makes decisions to reduce tariff costs and improve processes in the textile sector (Olaya Molano *et al.*, 2022). During the COVID 19 pandemic, SMEs in the textile sector in Bogotá increased their use of social media and websites to attract customers, but lacked tactical direction in the DM they used, leading to a decrease in sales. Customers persist about the high level of smuggling and the increase in Asian imports. SMEs in the textile sector need to improve their use of technological tools and digital strategies to increase their competitiveness (Olaya Molano *et al.*, 2022).

Similarly, in the textile sector of Medellin, Londoño-Arredondo *et al.* (2018) observed that although DM is widely used in the clothing sector, it is not as effective in driving online sales. Users have concerns about the quality of the garments, payments methods, and service security. Additionally, housewives are the ones presenting more barriers and fears to use online platforms to purchase clothing. Therefore, greater training and better secure online shopping platforms are required to promote the growth of e-commerce in the textile sector (Londoño-Arredondo *et al.*, 2018).

#### ***Digital marketing in the artisanal sector***

In the case of artisanal trade in Colombia, DM becomes an extremely important strategy to drive it forward. However, many organizations do not use these tools due to a lack of knowledge and economic resources. The artisanal sector faces challenges such as competition with industrial production and a lack of resources to participate in marketing events. Despite efforts to promote the sector, there are still barriers that must overcome for its full development. The virtual store offers free marketing opportunities, but many artisans do not take advantage of it (Araque, 2021).

In the case of indigenous artisanal products manufactured in the municipality of Tuchin (Córdoba), it is suggested to use information and communication technologies to increase sales and the development of the indigenous community, emphasizing the importance of preserving the cultural heritage of the population. It highlights the need for a minimal organization of the artisans of the Cariñito Tuchin reserve to implement DM for Zenú Crafts (Acurero-Luzardo *et al.*, 2020). DM is of vital importance for artisanal organizations as it helps them



meet the needs of customers and contributes to the country's economy. State support and the implementation of public policies would be essential to strengthen the artisanal sector (Araque, 2021). Artisans should seek government support, invest in communication equipment, undergo training in technology, and establish competitive prices. Additionally, they should develop DM strategies such as creating websites and advertising campaigns on social media platforms (Acurero Luzardo *et al.*, 2020).

#### ***Digital Marketing in the advertising sector***

For micro and small advertising companies in Bogotá, they still have a low level of adoption of DM tools. Although they use social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, they are not leveraging them strategically. There is a lack of knowledge in areas such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and DM. Despite digitalization in the advertising market, these companies continue to use traditional methods to promote themselves (Uribe & Sabogal, 2021).

There is space for improvement and growth opportunities in the field of DM for advertising companies in the cities of Bogotá, Barranquilla, and Medellín, so it is necessary for them to continue training in the use of digital tools and to be trained in new skills and techniques to adapt to digital transformation. Restructuring is a continuous process that challenges agencies to devise versatile and self-managed structures (Alzate-Cadavid & Henao-Murillo, 2020; Peralta-Miranda *et al.*, 2019).

#### ***Digital Marketing in the tourism sector***

In the case of tourism sector, Aragón *et al.* (2019) investigated business strategies in SMEs in the tourism sector in the department of Caquetá. They found that DM helped strengthen tourism for these businesses and is essential for offering tourism services. They highlighted the importance of using social networks and other digital tools, as well as regularly updating DM strategies. Therefore, there is a need to promote education in DM and develop appropriate strategies (Aragón *et al.*, 2019).

On the other hand, in the case of ecotourism companies in the department of Santander, Hernández Salas (2022) investigated how they incorporate DM into their strategies, finding that many of these companies do not have defined DM strategies and do not evaluate the effectiveness of their actions. Basto Cardona *et al.* (2019) implemented a DM strategy using virtual reality to promote ecotourism in El Manantial in the department of Caquetá. They found a high potential for the development of ecotourism in the community but emphasized the need to use digital and virtual marketing strategies to promote these activities.

#### ***Marketing Digital in the footwear and self-service platforms***

In the footwear sector, Pitre Redondo *et al.* (2018) combined quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the use of Digital Marketing and ICT tools in this

sector. Authors found that DM can benefit significantly as well as help foster entrepreneurship in the sector. SMEs in the footwear sector can use DM tools and ICT techniques to increase their visibility, reach more customers, and improve competitiveness. DM is a valuable tool for SMEs in the footwear sector to thrive in an evolving global market (Pitre Redondo *et al.*, 2018).

In a study on the evaluation of the DM mix in virtual self-services sales platforms in Colombia, Mejia-Henao and Marín-Chavez (2020) found that these platforms use digital marketing strategies to provide a complete experience to customers. They demonstrate strengths in areas such as product, price, and customers service, but weaknesses in promotion and system quality. Overall, these platforms have overcome initial challenges and have created a unique experience for their customers throughout the purchasing process.

### ***The use of Advergame and Inbound Marketing strategies***

Within Digital Marketing strategies, depending on the target group, companies must choose the most appropriate ones to be used because they affect the outcome of the strategy. In the case of the city of Barranquilla, Durante Rincon *et al.* (2020) found that Advergame is not an effective DM strategy. Although consumers recognize brands and products related to Advergame, they do not effectively promote the brand or influence the player's attention or ability to remember the promoted brand or product. Therefore, the Advergame strategy does not add value to the advertised brand (Duran Rincon *et al.*, 2020). It is important to adapt to changes in consumer behavior and seek new effective marketing strategies. Inbound Marketing can help companies stay competitive by attracting customers with relevant content and using tools such as personalized email and user-generated content on social media. Collaboration between companies and a focus on the end customer are also key. Ultimately, DM and the smart use of strategies like Inbound Marketing are crucial to overcoming current challenges and continuing to succeed in the market (Labrador *et al.*, 2020).

DM is essential for SMEs as it allows them to reach a broader market and improve their revenue, as well as their returns. The lack of presence on social media affects brand awareness, so valuable content should be shared, active participation in social networks should be encouraged, and exclusive promotions should be offered to generate income. It's important to integrate digital strategies into the company's structure and to track and analyze interactions on social network. DM is crucial for the success of SMEs and can help generate revenue through sales and customer loyalty (Mena & Mena, 2021).

Furthermore, DM is becoming increasingly important in Colombia and is helping businesses to interact with their customers, understand market trends, and compete with larger companies. Access to technology and e-commerce in Colombia varies, but social media is a popular tool for DM strategies. SMEs face

cultural barriers and difficulties in fully leveraging DM, but they can benefit from its use for innovation and competitiveness (Pitre Redondo *et al.*, 2021). It's very important for SMEs to develop DM strategies to promote and sell their products and/or services through digital platforms (Hernández Salas, 2022). Companies must develop strategies base on internal competitiveness indicators and adapt to changing external factors to thrive, as both have a significant impact on their ability to satisfy customers and generate profitability (Peralta Miranda *et al.*, 2019).

It is necessary to train competent professionals aligned with market needs in the field of marketing. DM is supremely important as tool to face an uncertain and changing business environment. To succeed in such a competitive business environment as the current one, it is necessary for companies to implement DM strategies and adapt to new technological trends (Núñez & Miranda, 2020). Microenterprises face challenges, but e-commerce can be an efficient tool to overcome barriers and increase sales. Social media also plays an important role as communication and digital marketing channel. Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) must implement a digital marketing plan to position themselves and expand their market, analyze the market, implement personalized sales strategies, and use digital tools to increase visibility and brand recognition (Urango, 2019).

## CONCLUSIONS

Digital Marketing (DM) is an essential tool for the growth and consolidations of SMEs, enabling them to expand their market reach and position themselves in new business niches (Rendon *et al.*, 2022). To achieve these goals, SMEs need to constantly train and update themselves in information and communication technologies to adapt to changes in consumer habits (Mojica-Acevedo *et al.*, 2021). It becomes supremely important for companies to comprehensively plan their DM efforts and align them with business objectives (Uribe & Sabogal, 2021).

During times of pandemic, DM becomes a crucial strategy for SMEs as it enables them to adapt to changes and maintain their market presence. Government measures to support SMEs during this crisis are important, but companies must be proactive in protecting their employees to ensure economic stability (Velasco *et al.*, 2021; Ochoa Guevara *et al.*, 2020). SMEs should invest in and train themselves in digital tools to enhance (Ochoa Guevara *et al.*, 2020). Investment in training and connectivity should be made to promote the digitalization of businesses, with government support for entrepreneurs (Hoyos-Estrada & Sastoque-Gómez, 2020). Digital transformation involves changes in businesses and their interaction with reality. Companies that adopt digital tools have advantages and opportunities for growth (Barrios Parejo *et al.*, 2021). Digitalization is supremely important in today's business environment. Companies must adapt to this trend to remain competitive in current markets and ensure

their sustainability and longevity (Velasco *et al.*, 2021). For DM based on Advergame, it's important to consider elements suitable for creating brand experiences and carefully select the target audience. Not all niches are receptive to this type of advertising, so it's essential to consider the Advergame's objectives and the gaming attitudes and profiles of the target audiences (Durante Rincon *et al.*, 2020).

In general, DM has a positive impact on the growth and development of Colombian businesses (Pitre Redondo *et al.*, 2021). It is recommended that SMEs establish a digital marketing department and utilize metrics and technological tools to improve brand visibility and return on investment (Trejos-Gil, 2020). Businesses must adapt to new technologies and implemented digital marketing strategies to remain competitive in the digital age (Urango, 2019).

### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

A. Caraballo, contributed to the search strategy and data analysis, the interpretation of the results, conclusions and prepared the manuscript text and manuscript edition. J. Luna conducted the systematic literature review and the interpretation of the results. In addition, prepared the manuscript text and manuscript edition. A. Carbal, contributed to the data analysis and the interpretation of the results, as well as the manuscript text.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this document. In addition, the authors observed the ethical issues, which include plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication/falsification, double publication/submission.

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