

Article

Digital Marketing Trends, Challenges and Opportunities for SMEs: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: This study aims to determine the trend of digital marketing in the last 7 years. In this study, the research method used was Systematic Literature Review (SLR) analysis using the WataSe Uake application. A total of 12 articles were selected for analysis after filtering based on several criteria; keywords "digital marketing strategy SMEs", title, year range 2018-2024, article qualification (Q1, Q2, Q3), abstract, source (Scopus), and keywords. The results of data analysis show that internet penetration, flexibility and adaptability of SMEs, digital innovation, and competitive market pressure are antecedents of digital marketing. Digital marketing has an impact on businesses related to business performance, growth, and development of marketing strategies, and excellence to survive in a competitive environment. The topic of digital marketing of SMEs was first researched in 2012. Theories that are widely used on this topic are *technological acceptance*, *technology-organization-environment* (TOE), *Diffusion of Innovation* (DOI), *Analytical Hierarchy Process* (AHP), *Technological Acceptance Model 2* (TAM 2), and *Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology* (UTAUT). Countries that have conducted research on this topic are United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Taiwan, United States. The development of research on this topic is increasing from year to year. This research presents a topic that is often discussed in social media marketing, namely perceived ease of use, so that it can be used for further research development.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, SMEs, Systematic Literature Review, Business

1. Introduction

The use of digital technology in marketing strategies has become a key element in the success of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) around the world. Especially with the increasing penetration of the internet and social media, small businesses can utilize digital platforms to expand their marketing reach, improve operational effectiveness and gain deeper customer insights (Hoffman et al., 2022). These changes have become increasingly important over time, especially with the breakthrough of digital technologies that continue to develop rapidly and are accessible to SMEs (Yoon et al., 2021). Digital marketing is a good example of the various applications of technological developments. Digital marketing is defined as a form of marketing where goods are promoted using internet-based digital tools (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022). Recent studies have shown that digital platforms such as e-commerce, social media, and mobile apps have become indispensable tools for SMEs in their quest to stay competitive in a rapidly changing market (Chaker et al., 2022). Although the challenges of implementing new technologies cannot be ignored, the successful adoption of digital technologies by SMEs has transformed the business landscape, enabling them to survive and thrive even amid intense competitive pressures (Ciarli et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020).

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However, the shift towards digital marketing also brings new challenges for SMEs, especially in the face of strong market pressures, limited resources, and necessary technical support (Hoffman et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to carefully understand the dynamics of digital technologies (Eller et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). In the face of these challenges, a better understanding of the adoption strategies of digital technologies by SMEs can help in providing the right strategic recommendations for those who want to implement responsive and adaptive adoption (Hoffman et al., 2022). Longitudinal case studies and in-depth analysis of the evolutionary strategies and driving mechanisms of digital technology adoption by SMEs can provide valuable insights in facing new challenges in the digital era (Ciarli et al., 2021; Hoffman et al., 2022).

In the European context, SMEs are crucial to the economy, especially in Italy where they account for 99.9% of all active businesses (Rialti et al., 2019). These companies play an important role in economy growth and development due to their flexibility and ability to adapt to changing market conditions and customer needs. Digitalization has emerged as a key trend to maintain competitiveness, offering SMEs the opportunity to increase their European counterparts in terms of digitalization and IT capabilities, although national policies are starting to address these challenges (Dallochio et al., 2024).

The Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of digital marketing for SMEs. Quarantine and social distancing measures caused by the pandemic led to a significant increase in online shopping and digital interactions, prompting many SMEs to adopt digital tools to survive. This shift is particularly pronounced in sectors such as tourism, where SMEs must update their digital marketing strategies to remain competitive. Social media platforms are becoming crucial for reaching new audiences, building brand awareness, and increasing revenue (Hu et al., 2023; Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2021).

The above explanation allows researchers to explore findings the trend of digital marketing towards SMEs over last the 7 years from 2018-2024? This article is organized by defining the concepts of digital marketing and social media, then describing the methodology used for the literature analysis. Finally, the researcher describes the conclusions related to this research article with a general discussion of the results and indications for future research.

2. Materials

The development of digital technology has changed the marketing landscape for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), with digital marketing becoming one of the key strategies to engage with customers and expand market reach. In a study by Global Web Index (2018), 54% of customers use social media platforms to search for product information before making a purchase, highlighting the importance of having a solid presence on social media for businesses. This shows that digital marketing, especially SMEs, to reach their audience more effectively. In addition, data from social media can be valuable source of information for companies, helping in customer analysis, market research, and new product development (Scuotto et al., 2022).

However, implementing digital marketing is still a challenge for some SMEs. Studies show that some of them may not have sufficient technical knowledge or financial resources to adopt and manage digital marketing strategies effectively (Ajayi et al., 2017; Matarazzo et al., 2021). Therefore, a comprehensive education and training approach is needed to help SMEs better understand and implement digital marketing in order to optimize their potential in the face of increasing market competition (Gavino et al., 2019). Nonetheless, research shows that successfully adopting digital marketing can provide significant benefits to SMEs, including increased sales, reduced marketing costs, and improved customer service (Rialti et al., 2019). By leveraging various digital platforms such as social media, small

companies can build closer relationships with their customers, generate personalized content, and, effectively increase their brand awareness (Huotari et al., 2015). Factors such as top-level management confidence, benefits perceived by the organization, and effective customer relationships management are key in driving the adoption of digital marketing among SMEs.

Moreover, in the Asian context (Somjai et al., 2020), have highlighted the significant positive impact of digital marketing on sales, accompanied by a decrease in overall marketing costs. This confirm the transformational potential of digital marketing as a cost-effective alternative to traditional advertising methods, especially in raising consumer awareness and driving engagement through social media platforms. However, despite the clear benefits, SMEs face considerable challenges in optimizing the potential of digital marketing. One of the main barriers identified in the literature is the cost associated with integrating digital tools into SME operations. Limited financial resources allocated to technological evolution often prevent SMEs from keeping up with digital trends, resulting in missed opportunities to compete in the market (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). Moreover, while digital marketing offers a great opportunity for SMEs to increase their visibility and reach in the e-commerce market, there is a noticeable gap in the knowledge and effective utilization of digital tools by SMEs (Kovalenko & Kuzmenko, 2020). This gap raises concerns about whether SMEs truly understand the evolving nature of communication triggered by digitalization, thereby hindering their ability to capitalize on the opportunities offered by digital marketing strategies (Ajayi et al., 2017). Given these challenges and opportunities, a comprehensive understanding and strategic adoption of digital marketing becomes essential for SMEs aiming to thrive in today's competitive landscape. By overcoming barriers such as cost constraints and knowledge gaps while capitalizing on the benefits of digital marketing in increasing customer engagement and market reach, SMEs can position themselves for continued growth and success in the digital age (Ajayi et al., 2017).

Internet and social media technologies can reduce costs by reaching a wider but more targeted audience, which in turn can increase the effectiveness of media spending (Paswan 2018). For example, construction companies may allocate 6-11% of their revenue to traditional advertising each year (Malesev & Cherry, 2021), but more and more companies are choosing to shift a significant portion of their marketing spend – in some cases up to 60% - to online marketing (Malesev & Cherry, 2021). The internet has significantly increased the ease and effectiveness of purchasing display advertising or paid search (Fulgoni, 2015), whereas social media has enable a low- or no -cost organic marketing boom, where a company creates content and shares it among their social media followers (Lipsman et al., 2012). Social media can also be used to improve brand equity by increasing brand awareness, expanding brand associations, and improving brand quality perceptions (Alanazi, 2023). Brand equity, which best defined as a measure of brand strength and brand value (Lassar et al., 1995), can be enhanced by using social media to demonstrate a track record in the industry, added value to consumers, and a positive image through community engagement (Yazdanparast et al., 2016). In addition, social media can also be used to build trust and great customer experience in an industry that is often haunted by customer complaints (Singh & Sao, 2021). Moreover, by increasing access to information in an unrestricted manner, the internet helps reduce the difficulty and cost of market research. Companies can obtain – at little or no cost – information and insights about the market, competitors, and potential customers and their needs, mostly generated by social media users (Ainin et al., 2015). Customers use social media to effectively collect and share data and opinions, making them active producers, and research shows that user-generated content and electronic “word-of-mouth” positively influence purchase intentions (Lee & Youn, 2009).

The implication for companies is that social media interactions regarding their business can happen at any time; how well they capitalize on these activities can determine their success and survival in the new era of online marketing. On the other hand, this new era has complicated or created challenges in designing and executing successful marketing strategies. Key features of the online marketplace include powerful customers and direct relationships (e.g., it is easier carrying fewer people in each channel) and the evolution of customer channel needs. To succeed, companies must provide a broader view of products and services, expect that channels will continue to evolve, and be prepared for a broader view of distribution intensity (van Bruggen et al., 2010).

3. Methods

This research uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. SLR is a method that limits the interpretation and creativity of the author to achieve a high level of objectivity (Snyder, 2019). The use of SLR focuses on exploring extensive literature. SLR research is comprehensive and impartial, which distinguishes it from traditional literature reviews (Tranfield et al., 2003). SLR is conducted by collecting previous research to answer research questions. Grounded theory was used to develop the SLR analysis. Grounded theory is a research method based on an interpretative paradigm by interpreting the processes underlying a phenomenon (Sari & Suyono, 2024). The stages in the grounded theory consist of defining, searching, filtering, analyzing, and presenting (Wolfswinkel et al., 2013). SLR preparation based in PRISMA guidelines is to identify the keywords that will be used in the study. The PRISMA stage consists of three parts. The initial stage is planning, which includes searching for articles according to the chosen context. The second stage is implementation, which includes the process of finding references. The last stage is reporting, which contains a summary of the research results that have been processed.

3.1 Data Collection

Data collection is done by exploring, finding and developing research on a particular topic. Data collection is done with some specific criteria in order to get the right articles for the literature review. The search was carried out in several stages starting from identifying and selecting keywords, terms, databases for article searches to analysis according to the research context.

The initial data search was conducted by identifying keywords. The keyword used in this research is "Digital Strategy SMEs". In the keyword search, several criteria were also selected to select relevant articles. The search is limited to the field of economics and business (Foroudi et al., 2021), with the quality of articles in Q1, Q2, and Q3 on the Scopus database. Articles were limited to the range of 2018-2024 to determine the development of research that occurred. Screening was carried out using the Watase Uake application. The screening of articles was carried out in two stages, namely automatically from the application and manually by looking at the suitability of the title, abstract, and keywords of all articles that have been filtered by the system. The initial search based on the keyword "Digital Strategy SMEs" obtained 89 articles. From this total, another screening was carried out where 6 articles were eliminated because they did not match the year range (2018-2024), and 12 articles were eliminated because they did not match the article qualifications (Q1, Q2, Q3) so that 71 articles remained. In the next stage, screening based on title, abstract, and keywords resulted in 12 articles selected for in-depth review. Screening using various criteria is used to reduce bias and human error (Liliani et al., 2020).

3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted after screening the articles. This study used descriptive analysis in explaining the data. Descriptive analysis is used to explain the profile of the

selected articles in categories and classification schemes (Tranfield et al., 2003). Classification was done based on the selected articles which were then categorized by year of publication context, and theoretical perspectives that had been explored. The analysis was also conducted to see the gaps that exist to bring up relevant themes for further research.

4. Result and Discussion

This study presents the main information related to the data analysis that contains the main information of the data, content documents, authors, presented in graphics. This analysis was conducted using the PRISMA protocol. The first step is to identify keywords in PRISMA. The use of keywords helps in finding articles on the Scopus database according to the desire topic. The search process was carried out in the initial stage and resulted in 89 studies from the range of 2012-2024. Research related to digital marketing in SMEs was first researched in 2012 and continues to grow every year. This topic attracts many researchers because of its impact on SMEs business performance, as shown in the following graph.

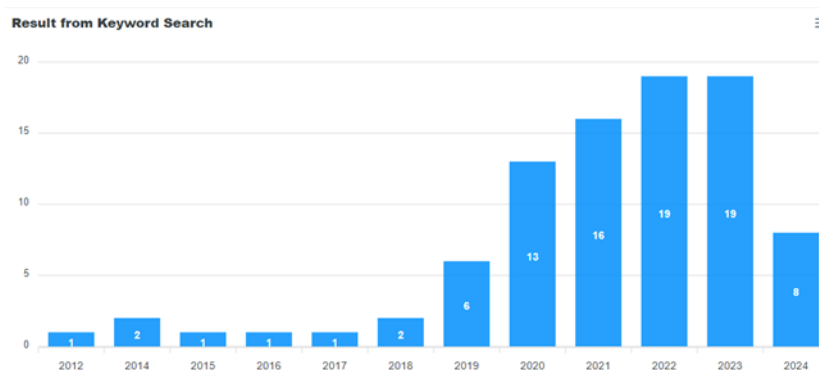


Figure 1. Search results based on keywords

Based on Figure 1. It is known that the number of research published from 2018 to 2023 has increased very high. Digital marketing is an interesting topic to research in the future. The results of the search for SMEs digital marketing keywords obtained as many as 89 research articles with a distribution of year of publication and the number of articles according to the year of publication. In 2018, 2 articles were obtained. In 2019 19 articles were obtained. In 2020, 13 articles were obtained. In 2021, 16 articles were obtained. In 2022, 19 articles were obtained. In 2023, 19 articles were obtained. In 2024, 8 articles were obtained. Apart from being based on the year of publication, classification is also obtained based on the country.

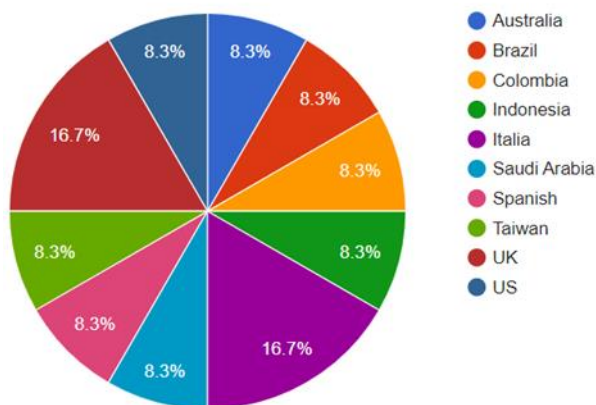


Figure 2. Classification by country

Based on figure 2, we can see the grouping of articles based on country. The most articles came from the United Kingdom and Italy, each of which produced 2 articles (16.7%). Other articles with 1 article each (8.3%) are scattered in several countries, namely Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Spanish and Taiwan.

The second step is to limit the articles according to the research context. Starting from 89 articles related to digital marketing of SMEs available, several stages of filtering were carried out to find out the literature relevant to the research topic so that the final result was 71 articles. Then 71 articles were selected based on predetermined criteria such as title, year of publication, article qualifications, abstracts, and keywords as shown in the following figure.

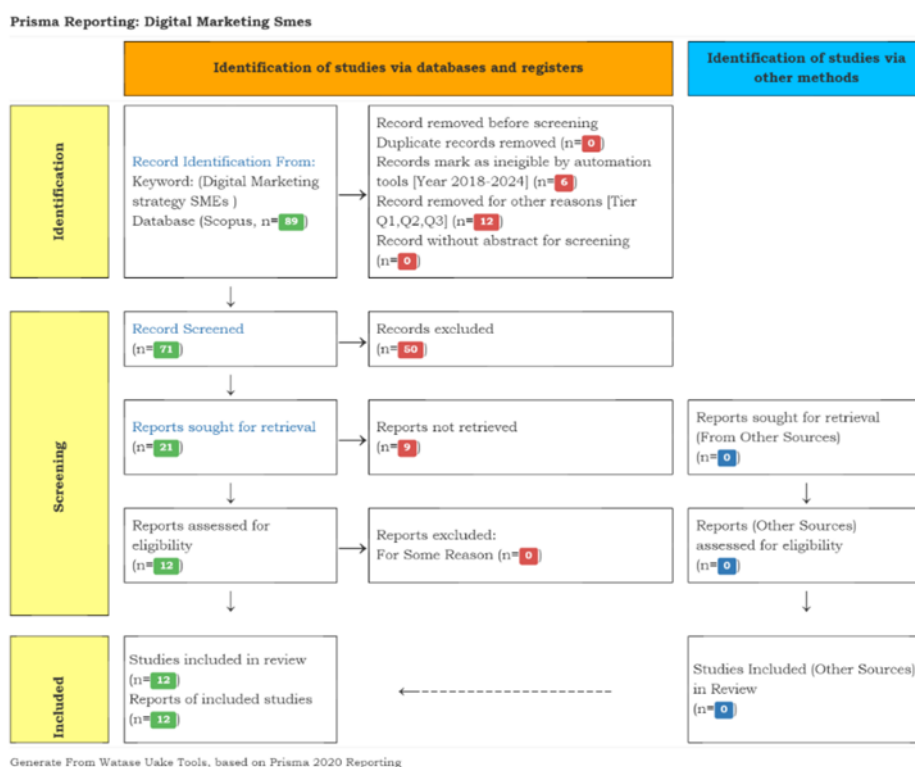


Figure 3. Prisma Analysis Results

Based on figure 3, the search results obtained 12 studies that are included in the research criteria. The selected articles show that digital marketing carried out by SMEs is mostly related to the adoption and use of social media marketing which is associated with

the impact felt by SMEs and their development. The screening results based on title, article qualifications and year publication can be seen in detail as follows.

Table 1. Results of article analysis

No	Author Name	Title	Journal Publisher	Quartile	Citation
1.	(Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020)	Why do small and medium enterprises use social media marketing and what is the impact: Empirical insights from India	International Journal of Information Management	Q1	203
2.	(Su et al., 2023)	How market pressures and organizational readiness drive digital marketing adoption strategies evolution in small and medium enterprises	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	Q1	9
3.	(Kieling et al., 2023)	Website stage model for Brazilian wineries an analysis of presence in digital and mobile media	International Journal of Wine Business Research	Q2	0
4.	(Hu et al., 2023)	Dynamically adapting to the new normal unpacking SMEs adoption of social media during COVID-19 outbreaks	Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	Q1	4
5.	(Eid et al., 2020)	Antecedents and consequences of social media marketing use an empirical study of the UK exporting B2B SMEs	Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	Q1	62
6.	(Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2021)	Female Micro-Entrepreneurs and Social Networks Diagnostic Analysis of the Influence of Social-Media Marketing Strategies on Brand Financial Performance	Frontiers in Psychology	Q1	18

No	Author Name	Title	Journal Publisher	Quartile	Citation
7.	(Alnajim & Fakieh, 2023)	A Tourist-Based Framework for Developing Digital Marketing for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in the Tourism Sector in Saudi Arabia	Data	Q2	0
8.	(Lin, 2021)	Investigating Complimentary E-Marketing Strategy for Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises at Growth Stage in Taiwan	Information	Q2	7
9.	(Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022)	Factors Influencing the Use of Digital Marketing by Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises during COVID-19	Informatics	Q1	8
10.	(Dallocchio et al., 2024)	The Role of Digitalization in Cross-Border E-Commerce Performance of Italian SMEs	Sustainability	Q1	1
11.	(Malesev & Cherry, 2021)	Digital and Social Media Marketing - Growing Market Share for Construction SMEs	Construction Economics and Building	Q3	32
12.	(Praswati et al., 2024)	The adoption of business-to-consumer commerce for small and medium enterprises growth	Uncertain Supply Chain Management	Q2	0

Source: secondary data processed, 2024

Based on Table 1. Above, it is known that the article (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020) with the title "Why do small and medium enterprises use social media marketing and what is the impact: Empirical insights from India" published from the international journal of information management including Q1, received the most citations, total 203 citations. Article written by (Eid et al., 2020) with the title "Antecedents and consequences of social media marketing use an empirical study of the UK exporting B2B SMEs" published by the journal of business & industrial marketing including Q1, received 62 citations. Article written by (Kieling et al., 2023), (Alnajim & Fakieh, 2023), and (Praswati et al., 2024) got the least citation, namely 0 citations. Each article is written based on a different theory. The following is table 2. Which explains the theory used by the article in discussing digital marketing.

Table 2. Most frequently used theories

No	Theory	Total	Definition	Author
1.	<i>Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)</i>	4	Individual acceptance of technologies that are considered highly influential and representative of many people.	(Alnajim & Fakieh, 2023; Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022; Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020; Eid et al., 2020)
2.	<i>Unfiled Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)</i>	1	Social media marketing adoption behavior by SMEs business owners.	(Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020)
3.	<i>Technology-organization-environment (TOE)</i>	2	Consideration of the external environment, technical and organizational content that will provide a more complete picture of the factors influencing an organization's adoption decision.	(Praswati et al., 2024; Su et al., 2023)
4.	<i>Diffusion of Innovations (DOI)</i>	2	Macro-level diffusion patterns of an innovation and views innovation decision-making as a series of behavioral processes.	(Eid et al., 2020; Su et al., 2023)
5.	<i>Technology Acceptance Model 2 (TAM 2)</i>	1	The dynamic capabilities of SMEs encourage organizations to implement social media marketing because of its ease and usability.	(Hu et al., 2023)
6.	<i>Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP)</i>	1	Determine the weight of the marketing index of SMEs in the growth stage and provide some suggestions for the appropriate use of complementary social media to achieve the above marketing objectives.	(Lin, 2021)

Source: secondary data processed, 2024

Every research has a theory that becomes a source of reference in conducting its research. In SMEs digital marketing research related to its impact on business, there are several theories that are widely used by researchers. Table 2 presents information related to the theories used in the context of SMEs digital marketing research. The theory is widely

that the center of data analysis with arrows to various other search topics. The arrows indicate that there is literature or findings that connect social media marketing variables with the intended variables. Figure 4 also shows the thickness of the arrow indicates the number of articles that discuss the theme. Based on this information, it can provide an overview for further research to be able to develop research on the topic of digital marketing of SMEs in theories that have been carried out or with other theories.

5. Conclusion

The increasing penetration of the internet and social media makes marketing by utilizing digital technology very important and relevant for SMEs players in order to thrive in the midst of competitive competition. This research uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to identify the impact on digital marketing business as the topic raised through the extraction of articles within the last seven years until 2024. The information displayed is the result of data processing from Watase UAKE, an application that explains the key parts of the article to answer the research question. This research concludes how digital marketing affects SMEs businesses. Previous researchers often made the topic of the influence of digital marketing on SMEs businesses. This happens because it is influenced by suitability factors, facilitating conditions and perceived benefits. Internet penetration, flexibility, and adaptability of SMEs, digital innovation, and competitive market pressure are antecedents of digital marketing. Past research related to the application of digital marketing measures its impact on business performance, growth, and development of marketing strategies, and excellence to survive in a competitive market.

Theories that are widely used on this topic are Technological Acceptance Model (TAM), Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE), Diffusion Of Innovation (DOI), Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP), Technological Acceptance Model 2 (TAM 2), and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Countries that have conducted research on this topic are United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Taiwan, United States. This research provides insights and research gaps that can be developed for future research. The topic of digital marketing was first researched in 2012 and is increasingly popular so that it is widely researched in the range of 2018-2024. This indicates that the topic of digital marketing is interesting to research for researchers. This research also presents a topic that is often discussed, namely perceived convenience. This related to the application of digital marketing, especially social media marketing. So based on this framework, it can be a source of knowledge for further research to examine the gaps that have not been done in the scope of digital marketing for SMEs.

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