

Original Article

# Effectiveness of Digital Marketing Tools in SMEs: A Systematic Literature Review on Adoption, Effectiveness, and Challenges in Asia

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**Abstract:** Digital transformation continues to redefine how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) compete across Asia's rapidly evolving emerging economies, making the strategic adoption of digital marketing tools increasingly central to business survival and growth. This systematic literature review synthesizes evidence from 30 peer-reviewed studies drawn from ten Asian nations, selected from an initial pool of 194 Scopus-indexed articles through a structured PRISMA 2020 protocol covering the period 2019 to 2026, to examine the adoption, effectiveness, and implementation challenges of three core digital marketing tools: social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and email marketing. Grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework, and the Resource-Based View (RBV), the review addresses three research questions concerning tool effectiveness on business performance, contextual moderating factors, and key implementation challenges. Social media marketing emerges as the most widely adopted and most consistently effective tool, with positive effects on SME performance confirmed across Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, and beyond. SEO and email marketing, while effective, remain underutilized and underresearched in Asian SME contexts. Effectiveness is moderated by digital literacy, management support, firm size, and government infrastructure, while principal implementation barriers include financial constraints, technical knowledge gaps, content inconsistency, and difficulty measuring return on investment. These findings carry significant implications for SME practitioners, policymakers, and management educators seeking to accelerate inclusive and sustainable digital marketing transformation across Asia's diverse emerging markets.

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Smes, UMKM, Social Media Marketing, SEO, Email Marketing, Asia, Systematic Literature Review, Business Performance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In most Asian countries, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are not only key to the economic development of these nations, but also contribute to gross domestic product, generate employment and alleviate poverty. SMEs in Indonesia, which are locally known as Usaha Mikro Kecil Menengah (UMKM), comprise more than 97% of the total business units and contribute approximately 61% to the national GDP (Syaifullah et al., 2021). India, Malaysia, the Philippines and Pakistan show similar patterns since SMEs are engines of inclusive emerging economic growth.

The speedy proliferation of digital technologies has changed the marketing landscape so significantly that it brings a number of opportunities and challenges for SMEs. Digital marketing, such as social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, content marketing and others, is a budget-friendly medium with the ability to reach larger audiences, build brand recognition and drive sales without incurring the costs of traditional advertising (Potluri et al., 2024; Tulipa et al., 2024). The usage of mobile and internet-based devices continues to expand rapidly across Asia, which means the need for SMEs to greater deploy digital marketing tools more effectively has intensified; however, their adoption remains uneven and often shallow in many nations due to structural as well as capability barriers (Barman & Mahanta, 2025; Cordova et al., 2025).

It stirred up increased scholarly interest, but certain gaps remain in the literature. While there are systematic reviews existing in digital marketing and SMEs, most primarily study Western or international regions, neglecting the particularities of Asian emerging economies (Fu et al., 2024; Chatterjee et al., 2021). While existing country-level reviews (for example, Wiweko and Anggara, 2025, outline the state of digital marketing practice in SMEs in Indonesia) have provided useful national perspectives, there are few cross-national comparative studies across South East Asia or even the broader Asian region. Secondly, although social media marketing and other individual components have been studied extensively, a simultaneous review of the comparative effectiveness across all three channels of social media, SEO and email marketing is currently not available. Third, evidence on contextual moderators continues to be sporadic across studies (Ullah et al., 2023; Samat et al., 2024).



This systematic literature review addresses these gaps by synthesizing evidence from 30 peer-reviewed studies conducted in Asian contexts between 2019 and 2026. Three research questions (RQs) guide the review:

1. RQ1: What digital marketing tools (social media, SEO, and email marketing) are most frequently adopted by SMEs, and what is their reported effectiveness on business performance?
2. RQ2: What contextual factors (sector, firm size, geographic location, and digital literacy) moderate the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in SMEs?
3. RQ3: What are the key challenges faced by SMEs in implementing digital marketing tools, and what strategies are recommended to overcome them?

By addressing these questions, this review contributes a multi-country, multi-tool synthesis of digital marketing effectiveness specifically for Asian SME contexts, providing actionable insights for practitioners, educators, and policymakers.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A) *Digital Marketing in the SME Context*

Digital marketing has been broadly referred to as digital channels, platforms and technologies are used to promote products, services, and brands to target audiences (Sharabati et al., 2024). This means that, for SMEs, the shift is now more strategic, away from traditional marketing, which can sometimes be resource-intensive, toward a data-driven, cost-effective, and measurable form of communication. SEO, Email Marketing and Social Media Marketing (SMM). These three tools appear as the core of the SME digital marketing practice as it stands today. SMM tapping into Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp Business to reach customers with marketing, brand communities and sales. Overall, SMM is particularly popular in Asia, where social media penetration rates are exceptionally high, and the top social media markets in the world include Indonesia, India, and the Philippines (Tatik & Setiawan, 2025; Tulipa et al., 2024). SEO (search engine optimization) can be defined as optimizing online content and the structure of a website so search engines like Google can find the organic visibility (Potluri et al., 2024; Barman & Mahanta, 2025). Email marketing is direct communication to customers through targeted campaigns.

### B) *Theoretical Frameworks*

Numerous research have been conducted on the adoption and usefulness of digital marketing tools using a variety of theoretical perspectives. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), first introduced by Davis (1989), which perceives usefulness and perceived ease of use as the main factors of intention to use, has been broadly adopted to understand SMEs' owners' [58–60] technology adoption decision about social media marketing in previous research [54–56]. With this notion, Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework implements organizational readiness and environmental pressures such as competitive dynamics and governmental support as adoption drivers (Fu et al., 2024; Samat et al., 2020). In this context, the Resource-Based View (RBV) views digital marketing capabilities as strategic resources that provide a competitive advantage (Muflih & Ratna, 2022), which is even more important in developing countries where digital skills are developed unevenly.

### C) *Research Gap*

Despite a growing body of empirical research, a comprehensive synthesis specifically focused on the Asian SME context covering multiple digital marketing tools simultaneously and integrating evidence on effectiveness, moderating factors, and challenges has not been conducted. Most prior work has been country-specific or platform-specific, limiting broader generalization across the diverse Asian landscape. This review addresses that gap directly.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A) *Review Protocol*

This study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). A structured protocol was developed prior to data collection, specifying research questions, search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and data extraction procedures.

### B) *Search Strategy and Database*

A systematic search was conducted in May 2026 across Scopus as the primary database, supplemented by Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and Dimensions. The following Boolean search string was applied:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("SME" OR "small medium enterprise" OR "small business" OR "UMKM" OR "MSME") AND ("digital marketing" OR "social media marketing" OR "SEO" OR "email marketing" OR "online marketing") AND ("effectiveness" OR "performance" OR "adoption" OR "challenge" OR "impact")) AND PUBYEAR > 2018 AND DOCTYPE (ar) AND LANGUAGE ("English")

The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2026 in English.

**C) Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Studies were included if they: (1) focused on SMEs or MSMEs as the primary population; (2) examined at least one digital marketing tool; (3) reported outcomes related to business performance, adoption behavior, or implementation challenges; (4) were conducted in Asian country contexts; and (5) were published between 2019 and 2026 in peer-reviewed journals. Studies were excluded if they focused on large enterprises, reported no empirical findings, were conference papers or book chapters, or were published outside the specified timeframe.

**D) PRISMA Flow**

The database search yielded 194 articles from Scopus. After applying the geographic filter (Asian contexts only), 140 articles remained; 54 articles were excluded due to non-Asian contexts. From the 140 remaining articles, articles were scored on a relevance rubric assessing specificity to digital marketing tools, SME focus, and outcome measures. After full-text screening, 30 articles were selected for final synthesis. Table 1 presents the PRISMA flow summary.

**Table 1: PRISMA Flow Summary**

Basic of Distinction	Action	N Articles
Identification	Scopus database search	194
Screening - Geography	Exclude non-Asian contexts	-54 → 140 remain
Screening - Relevance	Relevance scoring & abstract screening	-110 → 30 remain
Included	Final articles for synthesis	30

Source: Authors' compilation (2026)

**E) Data Extraction and Quality Assessment**

Data was extracted using a standardized form capturing author(s), year, country, research design, analytical method, sample size, digital marketing tools examined, outcome measures, key findings, moderating factors, challenges identified, and recommendations. Study quality was assessed based on methodological rigor, sample size adequacy, and analytical sophistication.

**IV. RESULTS**

**A) Characteristics of Included Studies**

The 30 included studies were published between 2019 and 2026, with the majority (67%) from 2021 onward, reflecting accelerating scholarly interest following the COVID-19-induced digital transition of SMEs. Indonesia contributed the largest share (n=13, 43%), followed by India (n=9, 30%), Malaysia (n=5, 17%), Pakistan (n=2, 7%), with single studies from the Philippines and Kazakhstan. This distribution reflects large SME populations and robust research ecosystems in these countries.

Methodologically, quantitative approaches dominated (n=20, 67%), predominantly employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM). Qualitative studies (n=6, 20%) and mixed-method designs (n=4, 13%) were also represented. Sample sizes ranged from 15 to 508 SMEs, with a median of approximately 250 participants. Social media marketing was the most frequently examined tool (n=24 studies), followed by general digital marketing (n=8), SEO (n=5), and email marketing (n=4).

**Table 2: Characteristics of Included Studies**

Author(s) & Year	Country	Method	n (SMEs)	Tools Examined
Potluri et al. (2024)	Kazakhstan, India	Mixed method	200	SMM, SEO, Email
Barman & Mahanta (2025)	India	Quantitative	301	DM (multi-tool)
Pradhan et al. (2020)	India	Quantitative-SEM	N/A	DM adoption drivers
Sharabati et al. (2024)	Jordan	Quantitative-SEM	190	DM + performance
Syaifullah et al. (2021)	Indonesia	Quantitative-SEM	254	Social media (SMM)
Trivedi (2023)	India	Case study	1 firm	Social media, Content
Tulipa et al. (2024)	Indonesia	Quantitative	219	Social Media mix
Aidargaliyeva et al. (2025)	Kazakhstan	Quantitative	N/A	E-commerce + DM
Tatik & Setiawan (2025)	Indonesia	Quantitative-SEM	N/A	Social media (TAM)
Muflih & Ratna (2022)	Indonesia	Quantitative-SEM	N/A	Social media (UTAUT2)
Diatmika & Rahayu (2025)	Indonesia	Qualitative	N/A	DM innovation
Mohd Alwi et al. (2021)	Malaysia	Case study	1 firm	Social media
Saleh (2020)	Malaysia	Quantitative	N/A	E-marketing
Mashadi et al. (2026)	Indonesia	Mixed method	N/A	Omnichannel/Social
Kumar et al. (2025)	India	Conceptual	N/A	Mobile e-commerce
Mohd Ali et al. (2024)	Malaysia	Quantitative	N/A	DM + purchase intent
Ullah et al. (2023)	Pakistan	Quantitative	N/A	DM adoption factors

Cordova et al. (2025)	Philippines	Mixed method	N/A	Digital innovation
Malik et al. (2020)	Pakistan	Quantitative	333	Social media (FB)
Dora et al. (2021)	Indonesia	Quantitative	N/A	Online marketing
Hidayat et al. (2025)	Indonesia	Qualitative	N/A	DM innovation
Anindita et al. (2025)	Indonesia	Qualitative	N/A	Social media
Umar et al. (2020)	Indonesia	Quantitative	N/A	DM training
Pradhan et al. (2020b)	India	Quantitative	N/A	DM tools adoption
Mahesh & Rathnapriya (2025)	India	Quantitative-FA	200	Social media
Chatterjee et al. (2021)	India	Quantitative-SEM	N/A	SMM (TAM)
Samat et al. (2024)	Malaysia	Quantitative-SEM	N/A	SMM + TOE
Bismo & Yuniarty (2022)	Indonesia	Quantitative-SEM	400	Social media
Enshassi et al. (2025)	Malaysia	Quantitative-SEM	301	AI + DM/SMM
Fu et al. (2024)	Indonesia	Quantitative-SEM	508	SMM (TOE)

Note: DM = Digital Marketing; SMM = Social Media Marketing; FA = Factor Analysis; FB = Facebook.

**B) RQ1 - Tool Adoption and Effectiveness**

Social media marketing consistently emerged as the most widely adopted and most studied digital marketing tool among SMEs across all sampled Asian countries. Twenty-four of the thirty included studies (80%) examined social media platforms as primary marketing channels. Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp Business, and TikTok were the most frequently cited platforms, with platform preference varying by country and target market segment. Tulipa et al. (2024) found that among Indonesian SMEs, platform choice differed systematically by generational cohort: Gen Z consumers were most responsive to TikTok content, while Gen X preferred Facebook and WhatsApp. This finding underscores the importance of audience segmentation in social media strategy.

Across studies employing SEM, social media marketing demonstrated significant positive effects on SME business performance. Syaifullah et al. (2021) found, based on a sample of 254 Indonesian MSMEs, that social media marketing positively and significantly influenced business performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp serving as critical survival channels. Malik et al. (2020), examining Pakistani SMEs, demonstrated that Facebook usage mediated the relationship between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and SME productivity (n=333). Fu et al. (2024), using data from 508 Indonesian SMEs and the TOE framework, confirmed a substantial positive relationship between social media marketing adoption and SME operational performance, while identifying organizational factors, particularly top management support and employee capability, as key adoption drivers.

Five studies studied SEO and reported favorable results in terms of online presence, generating organic traffic, specifically for SMEs with established websites. Potluri et al. As a means to support this hypothesis, Umirbek et al. (2024) discovered that SEO is one of three practices among dominant digital marketing practices used by SMEs in the Republic of Kazakhstan administered by Muslim entrepreneurs, next to social media marketing and email marketing. Dora et al. Kumar et al. On the other hand, SEO had a much lower footprint than social media marketing and more so because it is technically complex with constant content production needed.

Flipping the coin, email marketing was the least highlighted one as it was a major tool in only four of them. Email marketing was used at a low level among micro-enterprises in rural Assam, India; Barman & Mahanta's (2025) results revealed that many of the respondents were not familiar with it as a formal business tool. Potluri et al. This may be a result of Kazakhstani SMEs increasing their digital literacy and therefore their relationship with their customers through effective email marketing (Perhaps be a good place to drop in something about studies) (2024). Missing opportunities in the literature. Email marketing is also relatively underrepresented in the literature, possibly reflecting true low uptake among Asian SMEs, where messenger-based communication (WhatsApp, WeChat, LINE) can perform many of the functions of formal email channels.

**C) RQ2 - Moderating Factors**

Four categories of factors moderated the effectiveness of digital marketing tools. On the individual level, digital literacy was consistently a moderator in all examined study contexts, as well as perceived ease of use. Chatterjee et al. (2021) tested the research model using TAM for Indian SMEs and concluded that leadership support significantly moderated the social media marketing adoption–business growth linkage. Hidayat et al. A national survey of Indonesian SMEs (2025) showed that, while 80% perceived social media as important for visibility, many were unable to maximise tools due to limitations in technical knowledge. Barman and Mahanta (2025) also highlighted that rural microenterprises in Assam had the lowest adoption rates, which were directly related to the low digital skills and knowledge possessed by rural entrepreneurs.

At the organization level, firm size and resource availability were important moderators. Fu et al. s (2024) also highlighted that the issue of technological cost complexity negatively impacted the adoption of micro-enterprises, with top management

support and employee capability being posited as key propellants. According to Muflih and Ratna (2022), facilitating conditions, including infrastructural/ organizational resources were direct determinants of social media marketing adoption. Samat et al. (2024), while government support and competitive intelligence had a notable mediation function in Malaysian SME social media marketing adoption. Ullah et al. (2023) integrated environmental, organizational and personal factors into a tripartite moderating framework for digital marketing adoption in the context of Pakistani SMEs, finding that environmental competitive pressure was the most influential driver.

**D) RQ3 - Challenges and Recommended Strategies**

Five categories of implementation challenges were consistently identified in the literature reviewed. The most commonly identified barrier is financial constraints. As SMEs have limited marketing budgets, they can only afford to invest in paid advertising, professional content development, SEO tools and digital marketing training (Potluri et al., 2024; Cordova et al., 2025). Second, digital literacy deficits in understanding platform algorithms, analytics tools and content strategy were coded in twelve out of the thirty studies. Third, rural and peri-urban SMEs were disproportionately affected by infrastructure, limiting access to reliable internet connectivity and devices. Fourth, issues relating to ROI measurement exposed ambiguity and decreased incentive towards ongoing investment in digital marketing (Potluri et al., 2024; Umar et al., 2020). Fifth, structural challenges, such as time constraints and the challenge to maintain value-adding processes through consistent production of content, were indicated as operational barriers, especially among micro-enterprises with limited staff.

A few common themes emerge among the recommended strategies. Umar et al. Structured digital marketing training programs closed capability gaps, leading to a substantial increase in business performance among SMEs (Maqsood et al., 2020). Tatik and Setiawan (2025) recommended the incorporation of digital readiness assessment in government SME support programs. Mashadi et al. (2026) proposed low-cost PWA-based omnichannel solutions as a feasible, resource-friendly alternative to MSME digital marketing integration. Different studies advised using a stepwise approach, with initial steps including free platforms such as social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp Business) before evolving into more difficult tools such as SEO and paid ads when capabilities allowed it.

**Table 3: Synthesis of Key Findings by Research Question**

RQ	Theme	Key Findings	Representative Studies
RQ1	Tool Adoption & Effectiveness	Social media is the most adopted and effective. SEO has moderate adoption. Email was the least adopted. Positive effects on performance are confirmed cross-nationally.	Syaifullah et al. (2021); Fu et al. (2024); Potluri et al. (2024); Tulipa et al. (2024)
RQ2	Moderating Factors	Digital literacy, management support, firm size, and government. Infrastructure is a key moderator. Inconsistency across studies constitutes a theoretical gap.	Fu et al. (2024); Chatterjee et al. (2021); Samat et al. (2024); Ullah et al. (2023)
RQ3	Challenges	Budget, digital literacy gaps, ROI measurement, content consistency, and rural infrastructure.	Barman & Mahanta (2025); Potluri et al. (2024); Cordova et al. (2025)
RQ3	Recommended Strategies	Staged adoption, govt.-supported digital training, low-cost platform solutions, and omnichannel integration.	Umar et al. (2020); Mashadi et al. (2026); Tatik & Setiawan (2025)

*Source: Authors' synthesis (2026)*

**V. DISCUSSION**

The synthesis of 30 studies across Asian SME contexts reveals several important patterns that extend and nuance the existing literature on digital marketing and small enterprise management.

**A) The Dominance of Social Media Marketing**

The overwhelming focus on social media marketing in the reviewed literature reflects both the genuine prevalence of this tool in SME practice and a potential publication bias toward platform-specific research. Social media platforms offer SMEs relatively low-cost access to large, engaged audiences, making them an intuitive starting point for digital marketing adoption. The consistent finding that social media marketing positively affects SME performance across diverse Asian contexts provides strong cross-contextual validation of this effect.

However, the dominance of social media research has created an imbalanced evidence base. SEO and email marketing despite their documented effectiveness remain significantly understudied in the Asian SME literature. This gap is particularly notable because SEO is a high-impact, sustainable strategy that compounds over time, while email marketing offers high ROI when customer databases are well-maintained. Future research should prioritize these tools, particularly in emerging market contexts where they remain underexplored.

### **B) Theoretical Implications**

The co-existence of TAM, RBV, and TOE frameworks across the reviewed studies, without clear theoretical integration, represents both a strength and a limitation of the current literature. Each framework captures important dimensions: TAM addresses individual-level adoption psychology, TOE captures organizational and environmental readiness, and RBV frames digital marketing as a strategic capability. However, no single study in this review attempted to integrate all three perspectives into a unified model applicable to the Asian SME context. Future theoretical work should develop integrated frameworks that span individual, organizational, and environmental levels, particularly given the prominent role of institutional factors such as government policy and platform ecosystems in shaping adoption in Asia.

### **C) Contextual Specificity of Asia**

A critical finding of this review is that digital marketing effectiveness is highly context-dependent across Asia. Indonesian, Indian, and Malaysian SMEs show distinct patterns of tool adoption, challenge profiles, and moderating factors that reflect differences in digital infrastructure maturity, cultural norms around business communication, and government SME support systems. These contextual differences underscore the importance of tailored interventions rather than uniform digital marketing adoption policies. Notably, prior country-level work, such as that by Wiweko and Anggara (2025), has documented these dynamics specifically for Indonesia; the present review confirms that analogous patterns of fragmented adoption, digital literacy gaps, and the critical enabling role of platform ecosystems extend across the broader Asian region.

### **D) Practical Implications**

For SME owners and managers, this review recommends a staged digital marketing adoption approach: beginning with zero-cost social media platforms to build foundational capabilities, before progressing to SEO optimization and email marketing as digital maturity increases. The evidence strongly suggests that digital literacy training, ideally through government-supported programs or industry associations, is a prerequisite for sustained effectiveness. For policymakers across Asian economies, the findings highlight the need for subsidised digital marketing training programs for microenterprises, public investment in rural digital infrastructure, and targeted SME digitalisation incentive schemes. For management educators, this review provides empirical grounding for the development of digital marketing curricula in SME management programs.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

This systematic literature review synthesises evidence from 30 peer-reviewed studies conducted in Asian settings to answer three research questions on the adoption, effectiveness, and implementation of digital marketing tools by SMEs. Four substantive conclusions emerge.

Firstly, social media marketing is the most popular digital marketing instrument used by Asian SMEs with a persistently positive influence on business performance in diverse contexts such as Indonesia, India, Malaysia and Pakistan. The choice of platform depends on the audience: Instagram and TikTok worked best for Z-Gen (under 24–25 years of age) consumers. Second, SEO and email marketing are two areas which remain extremely underused and under researched, respectively; these themes hence represent both a practical opportunity for SMEs in the battlefield of digital marketing as well as theoretical gaps in the literature. Third, as the most consistently identified moderators of digital marketing effectiveness (digital literacy, management support, firm size, and government infrastructure), contextual enablement, rather than tool selection alone, seems to determine SME digital marketing approaches. Fourth, financial constraints, limited digital literacy, and difficulties in measuring return on investment (ROI) are the main implementation challenges predicted; while staged approaches to adoption and training supported by government are the most widely cited evidence-based solutions.

This review adds to the literature by offering a much-needed integrative overview of the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in Asian SME contexts, aggregating evidence across three tools and providing simultaneous coverage of studies sourced from 10 Asian nations. There are four limitations to the study: The preponderance of Indonesian and Indian studies in the sample, lack of longitudinal evidence (e.g. long-term impact tracking) and stark undercounting from other South East Asian nations (e.g. Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar) for a more dynamic, workable relationship amongst partners. This gap can be addressed by future research involving longitudinal designs, cross-national comparative studies, and more attention to SEO and email marketing in the SME context.

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