



Digital Marketing & Social Media Strategies for Startups



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Abstract

Digital marketing and social media marketing play an essential role in shaping consumer buying behavior. Social media platforms provide consumers with access to product information, reviews and price comparisons that influence their purchasing decisions. The research will examine how marketing activities in digital and social media such as product reviews, social media advertising, e-mail marketing and influencer marketing affect consumer behavior and purchasing decisions. This study investigates two under-researched areas, social media as it relates to new startup, and marketing capability gaps in an era of rapid digitalization. It will help in new startups to better understand consumer behavior in the digital age and inform their online marketing efforts to increase sales and profitability. The startups of social media marketing capability and associated digital marketing strategies are new to the extant literature moving forward the understanding of digital marketing and social media strategies for startup in theory and practice.



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Research Problem

The digital world has changed incredibly fast, completely altering how customers interact with brands and information. While being connected is still very important, we saw a big change in 2023: the intense "digital craze" from the pandemic years has calmed down. This means people are using digital tools more normally now. Younger generations, especially, want a good balance between their online and offline lives, valuing face-to-face interactions as much as digital ones (Gulati, 2019). This shift means that marketing can't just be about being everywhere online. Instead, it needs to focus on the quality and usefulness of digital interactions as part of a bigger journey that includes real-world experiences. The market is growing up, and it needs smarter ways to connect that mix digital and real-life, rather than just being constantly online.

This return to normal digital use is also happening due to the "digital world is open to everyone." There's so much content online that it's become super competitive. Getting noticed, being different, and being remembered are constant challenges for all kinds of businesses—big companies, small businesses, and even individual creators. Everyone is fighting for customer attention, making it harder for any single brand to stand out.



Fig.1 Seven ways for Start-ups Marketing Approaches.

1.2 Statement of Research Objectives/ Research Questions

This study aims to address these critical gaps by pursuing the following objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the specific digital marketing strategies (e.g., social media content, email personalization, online review management) currently adopted and implemented by startups.
2. To quantitatively assess the influence of these strategies on various stages of consumer purchase decisions (e.g., awareness, consideration, purchase, post-purchase) and brand perceptions.
3. To investigate the mediating role of marketing capabilities (encompassing human, financial, technological, and strategic resources) in determining the effectiveness of digital marketing innovations for startup performance.
4. To qualitatively explore the challenges and opportunities startups encounter in building and maintaining consumer trust and authenticity within a rapidly evolving, AI-influenced digital marketing landscape.

1.3 Statement on Significance of Research

This study aims to help us better understand today's online customers. This understanding will allow businesses to create unique marketing plans that perfectly fit what customers are doing and what they're interested in. The main goal is to show how businesses can really use digital and social media to change what customers think and

how they act. By doing this, the research hopes to give practical advice for making smart decisions in the increasingly complex and fast-changing world of digital marketing.

This research is special because it looks at important areas that haven't been studied enough regarding how digital and social media affect things. It explores the detailed effects of new technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI). While AI can make things much more efficient, it has also made people worry about whether content is real and information is trustworthy. The study also looks at the big impact of growing concerns about personal data privacy, like Google's Consent Mode v2 and the upcoming removal of third-party cookies (Halim, & Ermiani, 2024, p. 169). These changes mean brands need new ways to get permission for tracking, even though customers still really want highly personalized experiences that go beyond just basic information about them.

A major special part of this study is looking at the puzzle of trust versus personalization in today's digital market. Our information shows that people are trusting media less, worrying about AI making things seem less believable, and feeling that most advertising doesn't apply to them only 15% feel truly understood by brands. However, strangely, customers also demand more personalization, finding that basic information about them isn't enough to guess what they need. This creates a big problem: customers want very relevant and custom content, but they're increasingly unsure about where it comes from, if it's real, and how their data is used. This research helps by looking at how brands can deal with this tricky situation to build real trust and be authentic *through* personalization, instead of letting personalization make privacy worries and doubt even worse. This means being open about data use, using AI ethically, and focusing on truly understanding customers and giving them real value.

Also, the study offers fresh ideas on how to use social media as a smart tool to build a brand's image and improve how well new businesses perform overall. It specifically looks at problems faced by new companies, such as not having many resources and not fully understanding how to best use social media tools.



Fig.2 Digital Marketing Strategies.

2. Review of Literature

The discussion relies on numerous relevant literature articles. The study draws from academic literature and practical insights, offering nuanced perspectives on leveraging social media as a strategic tool for cultivating a brand image and influencing overall start-up performance.

2.1 Sources of Literature

Gröhn, (2017) The global digital advertising and marketing market is growing a lot. It's expected to reach \$786.2 billion by 2026, growing by about 13.9% each year. For 2024 alone, the digital advertising market is

expected to hit \$740.3 billion. Within this huge market, search advertising (like ads you see on Google) is still the biggest part, expected to be \$202.4 billion in 2024. Spending on mobile internet advertising is also a big deal, expected to go over \$400 billion globally in 2023.

A very important point is that search engines and showing up naturally in search results are still super important. A huge 93% of website visits come from search engines, and a striking 75% of users don't go past the first page of search results. This really shows how vital Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a strategy that 89% of marketers say works well. These numbers mean that basic digital marketing efforts like SEO aren't just helpful; they're absolutely necessary for getting noticed and finding customers. This is especially true because about 50% of users can't tell the difference between paid ads and regular search results, which means getting real, earned visibility is more important than just paying for ads, especially when customers trust things less and less.

Khanom, (2023) Social media platforms have become a top priority for digital marketers. As of 2023, 4.9 billion people, or 60% of the world's population, actively use social media. This huge number of users has led to a big jump in global social media ad spending, which has gone up by 150% since 2019, from \$97.5 billion to \$244 billion (p. 84). As a result, social media's share of all digital advertising spending has grown from 24.9% in 2019 to 30.8% in 2024.

The fastest growth in social media advertising spending happened in 2020 and 2021, with yearly increases of 36.41% and 36.09% respectively. This was mostly because of the quick shift to digital during the global pandemic. However, the growth slowed down a lot after 2021, with 2022 showing a smaller 4.97% increase. This suggests the market is becoming more mature and that the costs of social media advertising are changing. This trend, which matches the general "digital slowdown" seen in customer behavior, means that the social media advertising market is moving from explosive growth to a steadier, though still growing, phase.

Facebook is still the favorite platform for marketers, with 86% of professionals using it, followed closely by Instagram at 79%. Even though TikTok is getting more popular with users, less than a third of marketers (28%) currently use it for their campaigns. Also, the cost per 1,000 views (CPM rates) dropped sharply by 55.7% between late 2021 and early 2024, going from \$10.19 to \$4.52. This made social media advertising much cheaper during that time. However, these costs started to go up again in 2024. This sharp drop followed by a rebound suggests a period of strong competition and then a market correction. This means that while social media is still a powerful tool, its cost-effectiveness changes, so marketers need to be flexible and smart about where they spend their money and which platforms they choose to get the best results. It also highlights the need to constantly check ad performance and adjust to changing market conditions.

Clark, (2025) The "AI Boom" of 2023 has completely changed advertising, transforming how content is made and how media strategies are planned. However, this fast technological progress, while promising to make things more efficient, has also accidentally made customers trust information less, raising big worries about whether information is real and reliable. What people think shows this concern: 61% of US citizens believe "AI threatens the future of humanity," and it's expected that the number of "AIxious customers" will definitely go up in 2024.

At the same time, worries about personal data have become extremely important. Google's Consent Mode v2 and the upcoming removal of third-party cookies mean brands need new rules for getting permission to track users. This is happening even though some data shows customers actually want personalization. All these factors together point to a basic and complicated challenge for marketers: they

As AI creates more and more content, potentially blurring the lines of what's original, and as getting detailed customer data becomes harder, brands must find open and new ways to build real connections and trust. This means a strategic shift from just targeting based on data to a "life-centric approach" that respects privacy while still giving customers something they value. It means going beyond simple personalization to truly understand and connect with customers in a way that deeply resonates with their real-life experiences. This strategic change is crucial because there's a big disconnect in advertising: only 15% of users worldwide feel that advertising is relevant to their lives or that brands truly understand them.

2.2 Identification of Research Gap Within the Body of Knowledge

Gröhn, (2017) Despite significant studies highlighting effective strategies and essential aspects of social media marketing for managing businesses in today's era of digitalization, there remains limited research on how small enterprises and start-ups can optimize their use of social media and enhance brand image effectively. While existing studies have explored the individual influences of online consumer reviews and expert reviews, a notable gap persists in understanding their simultaneous impact on purchasing behaviors. Clark, (2025), The relationship between digital marketing innovation and firm performance is complex and interrelated with other factors such as firm size and marketing capability, which have not yet been studied. Social media advertising effectiveness is a fundamental issue that remains poorly examined in academic research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Population and Sampling Strategy

The study will encompass two distinct yet interconnected primary populations critical to understanding the research phenomenon:

- **Startup Leaders/Marketing Managers:** This group comprises individuals directly responsible for conceptualizing, implementing, and overseeing digital marketing strategies within new or small enterprises. Their insights are crucial for comprehending marketing capability gaps, assessing awareness and adoption of modern digital tools, and understanding the practical challenges associated with resource allocation in a startup context.
- **Digital Consumers:** Jain, (2022) This population consists of individuals aged 18 and above who regularly interact with digital platforms (including social media, email, and online review sites) for information gathering, product/service evaluation, and ultimately, purchase decisions. Their perspectives are essential for evaluating the actual impact of digital marketing efforts on consumer behavior, brand perception, and purchase intentions.

For the quantitative phase (surveys), a stratified random sampling approach will be employed for the consumer population. This technique will ensure proportional representation across key demographic segments such as age groups, geographic locations, and income levels, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings to the broader digital consumer base. For startup leaders, an initial

Convenience or snowball sampling method may be utilized to gain initial access, followed by targeted efforts to diversify the sample based on industry sector, startup stage, and organizational size (Leighton, et al., 2021). The use of professional online panels will be leveraged for both populations to achieve a robust and representative sample size.

For the qualitative phase (interviews/focus groups), purposive sampling will be meticulously applied to select participants who are best positioned to offer rich, in-depth insights that directly complement and elaborate on the quantitative findings. For example, startup leaders identified in the quantitative phase as exhibiting particularly high or low digital marketing maturity (as per) could be selected for semi-structured interviews. Similarly, consumers demonstrating specific behavioral patterns (e.g., high reliance on online reviews, or pronounced concerns regarding AI-generated content credibility) could be invited to participate in focus groups.

The selection of appropriate sampling methods is crucial for optimizing data collection for triangulation and generating actionable intelligence. The study's dual objectives – statistical generalizability and deep contextual understanding – necessitate distinct yet complementary sampling strategies. Stratified random sampling for consumers in the quantitative phase ensures representativeness across key demographics like age, income, and lifestyle, allowing for broad conclusions about consumer behavior patterns. This method helps to capture the diversity of the digital consumer base and ensures that findings are statistically reliable for wider application. Conversely, purposive sampling for qualitative participants ensures that the most insightful individuals are selected for deeper exploration. For instance, if quantitative data reveals a significant correlation between a specific social media strategy and brand awareness, purposive sampling can then identify startup leaders who have successfully implemented this strategy to understand the "how" and "why" behind their success. Similarly, consumers who exhibit strong trust or mistrust in AI-generated content, as identified in the quantitative phase, can be selected for focus groups to uncover the underlying reasons for their perceptions (Richter, Jackson, & Schildhauer, 2018). While qualitative samples are not statistically reliable for broad generalization, their depth provides critical context. This integrated approach, by carefully selecting samples for each phase, maximizes the utility of each data type, ensuring that the findings are both statistically sound and practically relevant for startups seeking specific guidance, not just general trends.

3.2 Regarding Sample Size Considerations

Quantitative Phase: To ensure statistical reliability and the generalizability of findings, a substantial sample size is imperative. Drawing from benchmarks in similar digital marketing and consumer behavior studies, a target of:

- **N=1,000-1,500 digital consumers** and **N=200-300 startup leaders/marketing managers** is proposed. A formal power analysis will be conducted prior to data collection to precisely determine the minimum sample size required to detect statistically significant effects for the study's key variables.
- **Qualitative Phase:** For semi-structured interviews with startup leaders, a sample size of **N=15-20 participants** is anticipated to allow for theoretical saturation of themes and in-depth exploration. For consumer focus groups,
- **2-3 groups, each comprising 6-8 digital consumers**, will be convened to facilitate diverse perspectives and capture group dynamics effectively.

4. Research Instruments and Methodology of Data Collection

4.1 Detailed Description of Quantitative Instruments (Online Surveys)

Pentang, (2023) The primary quantitative instrument will be a comprehensive online survey, meticulously designed for scalability and cost-effectiveness. The survey will primarily consist of closed-ended questions, utilizing a variety of psychometric scales to capture nuanced responses.

4.2 Content and Constructs

Digital Marketing Strategy Adoption & Implementation (for Startups): Questions will assess the degree of adoption and perceived effectiveness of key digital marketing channels, including social media marketing (e.g., content quality, engagement frequency, influencer collaborations), email marketing (e.g., personalization, segmentation, mobile optimization), and the strategic leveraging of online reviews and social proof (Teixeira, et al., 2018, p. 107). This section will also inquire about the current utilization and perceived challenges of integrating AI tools into marketing workflows.

Marketing Capabilities (for Startups): Likert scales (e.g., a 5-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") will be employed to measure the perceived strength of human resources (e.g., staff expertise), financial investment, technological infrastructure, and the strategic alignment of digital marketing efforts within the startup.

Startup Performance: Questions will gauge perceived improvements in key performance indicators such as brand awareness, customer acquisition rates, customer retention, sales volume, and overall business outcomes directly attributable to digital marketing efforts.

4.3 Consumer Behavior & Perception (for Consumers)

Brand Awareness & Image: Questions will assess consumers' recognition of and emotional associations with various brands encountered through digital channels.

Purchase Intention & Decisions: Multi-item scales will measure the influence of social media advertisements, email marketing communications, and online reviews on their purchasing decisions. These will utilize Likert scales for agreement/disagreement or importance ratings.

Trust & Credibility: Semantic differential scales or Likert scales will be used to assess the perceived credibility and authenticity of digital advertisements and online reviews, with specific attention to concerns arising from AI-generated content (Han, 2024).

Engagement: Questions will quantify the frequency and nature of consumer interactions with brands on social media platforms and through email communications.

Demographics & Psychographics: Standard demographic questions (age, gender, income, occupation) will be included, alongside psychographic questions pertaining to lifestyle and personality traits for market segmentation purposes.

The survey will be administered using robust online survey platforms such as Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey, facilitating efficient data collection and preliminary analysis.

4.4 Detailed Description of Qualitative Instruments (Semi-Structured Interviews & Focus Groups) Semi-Structured Interview Guides (For Startup Leaders/Marketing Managers)

Objective: To elicit rich, in-depth insights into the "why" and "how" of digital marketing strategy formulation and execution, including perceived challenges, notable successes, and the intricate role of marketing capabilities. The semi-structured format will allow for flexibility to pursue emergent themes.

Key Themes: Discussions will revolve around current digital marketing practices, delving into specific social media platforms utilized, the nuances of content strategies, and the sophistication of email marketing approaches. A significant focus will be placed on the challenges and opportunities associated with leveraging AI and other emerging technologies. Nayak, Nayak, & Jena, (2020) Strategies employed for building and maintaining brand image and consumer trust in a highly competitive and often skeptical digital environment will be explored. Furthermore, perceived gaps in marketing capabilities (human, financial, technological) and the strategic initiatives undertaken to address these will be a central theme.

4.5 Focus Group Protocols (for Digital Consumers)

Objective: To explore shared perceptions, attitudes, and emotional responses to various digital marketing stimuli, particularly concerning authenticity, personalization, the influence of online reviews, and the impact of AI on their trust. The group dynamic will encourage diverse viewpoints and discussions.

Key Themes: Discussions will cover reactions to different types of social media advertisements (e.g., the differential impact of ads leading to internal social media pages versus external websites, as per). Participants' trust in online reviews (distinguishing between expert and consumer reviews) and their concerns regarding the authenticity of AI-generated content will be probed. Expectations regarding personalization in digital marketing versus concerns about privacy will be a critical area of exploration (Gill, & Baillie, 2018, p. 671). Finally, factors influencing brand loyalty and purchase decisions in online environments, alongside experiences with "irritating" digital marketing practices that might lead to unfollowing brands, will be discussed.

5. Data Analysis and Discussions

The contemporary digital marketing landscape is characterized by its pervasive reach and rapid technological advancements, fundamentally reshaping how businesses interact with consumers. Global digital advertising expenditure is projected to reach an astounding \$786.2 billion by 2026, with mobile internet advertising already surpassing \$400 billion in 2023. This exponential growth underscores the imperative for businesses, particularly nascent startups, to strategically leverage digital channels for market penetration and sustained growth. Social media, in particular, has seen a remarkable surge in ad spend, increasing by 150% since 2019 to \$244 billion, solidifying its position as a central component of digital marketing efforts (Gabhane, 2023, p. 467). Video content has also emerged as a critical tool, with 86% of businesses utilizing it for marketing, and 81% of marketers reporting a positive, direct impact on sales.

However, this dynamic environment presents a multifaceted set of challenges. The "democratization of the digital environment" has led to an unprecedented saturation of content, intensifying competition for consumer attention and making brand differentiation and recall increasingly difficult. Only 15% of users worldwide feel that advertising relates to their lives, suggesting a significant disconnect between brand messaging and consumer perception. Furthermore, a significant paradox emerges where consumers express a desire for personalized experiences, with 41% comfortable with retailers monitoring their shopping patterns for personalized offers, yet concurrently harbour escalating concerns regarding data privacy and the ethical use of their information. This tension necessitates a delicate balance in digital marketing strategies.

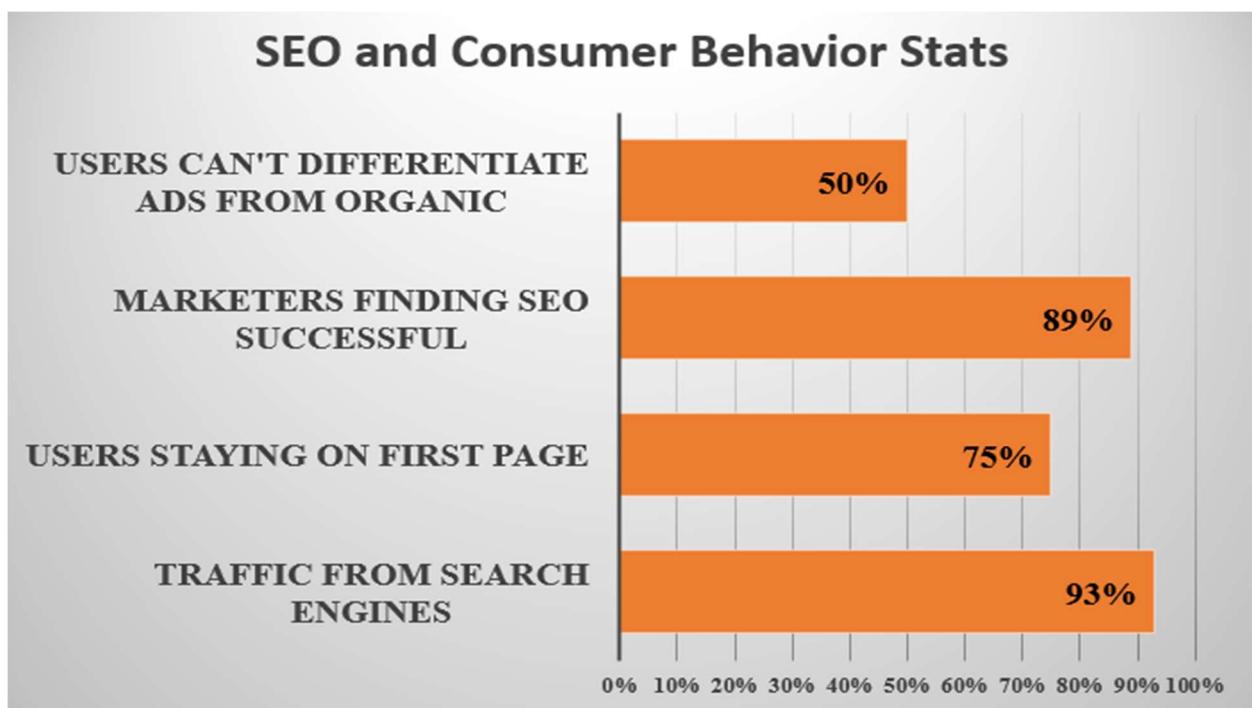


Fig.3 SEO and Consumer Behavior Stats.

Jackson, (2019) The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has introduced a new layer of complexity and opportunity. AI is poised to be as transformative as the Industrial Revolution, with McKinsey sizing its long-term productivity potential at \$4.4 trillion. AI is fundamentally reshaping content generation and media planning strategies. Despite this immense potential and widespread corporate investment, a significant maturity gap exists, with only 1% of companies reporting full integration of AI into their workflows, even though 92% plan to increase AI investments over the next three years. Intriguingly, the primary barrier to scaling AI adoption is identified as leadership's readiness, rather than employee willingness. This rapid proliferation of AI also contributes to a growing public apprehension, manifesting as "Anxiously customers" and a notable 27% increase in general media mistrust, raising critical questions about the authenticity and credibility of digitally presented information.

A notable observation arising from this context is the Paradox of Digital Trust and Authenticity in an AI-Driven Landscape. The increasing prevalence of AI in content creation and media planning, while offering efficiency and productivity gains, has concurrently fostered a significant erosion of consumer trust. This is evident in the reported lack of credibility associated with AI and a substantial 27% increase in general media mistrust. Consumers are increasingly wary, with 61% of US citizens believing AI threatens the future of humanity. This

heightened scepticism directly impacts the effectiveness of digital marketing, as consumers are more likely to engage with and trust advertisements perceived as credible and authentic.

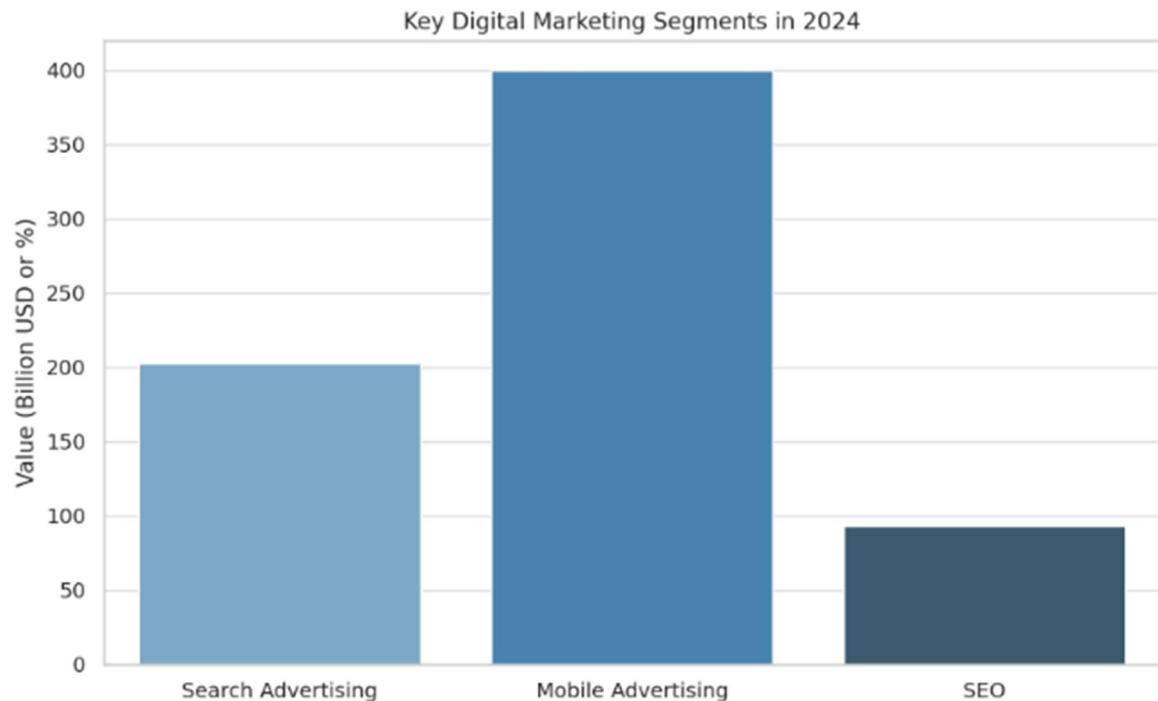


Fig.4 Key Digital Marketing Segments in 2024.

The challenge for marketers, particularly startups with limited resources, is to navigate this environment where mass-produced, potentially AI-generated content can alienate consumers, while the desire for personalization remains high (Jain, Jain, & Nagdev, 2025, p. 111). This implies that the ethical and transparent application of AI in marketing, coupled with a focus on human-centric content and genuine connection, will be a critical differentiator for success, rather than simply adopting the technology.

Despite a growing body of literature on social media marketing strategies, there remains a significant gap in understanding how small enterprises and startups can effectively optimize their social media usage to cultivate a strong brand image, especially when contending with inherent resource limitations. Existing research has not fully explored the nuanced mediating role of marketing capability in translating digital marketing innovation into tangible firm performance, particularly considering the varying firm sizes and resource endowments. The complex interplay of diverse digital marketing elements such as content quality, influencer collaborations, social proof, and email personalization and their multi-stage effects on consumer behavior across the entire purchase journey warrants more granular investigation. This is especially pertinent given the rapid evolution of technologies like AI and the concurrent shifts in consumer trust and privacy expectations.



Fig.5 Global Digital Ad. Market by 2026.

A deeper examination of the challenges faced by startups reveals a crucial observation: the "How" of Digital Marketing Capabilities as a Strategic Imperative for Startups. While companies are significantly increasing their investments in digital tools like AI, with 92% planning to boost AI spending, only a minuscule 1% achieve maturity in their deployment. This suggests that simply acquiring technology is insufficient; the ability to effectively.

Leverage it is paramount. Startups, in particular, frequently struggle with a lack of awareness and comprehension regarding how to best utilize social media tools and often fail to fully exploit the creative and innovative capacities of their strategies due to unawareness of the best modern tools. This indicates that the primary barrier is not merely a lack of investment but a deficiency in the foundational marketing capabilities human expertise, financial allocation, technological infrastructure, and strategic planning that mediate the impact of digital marketing innovation on firm performance (Koseoglu, 2024). The indirect effects of marketing capability on performance are, in fact, greater than the direct effects. Therefore, the critical missing link is not just

what digital tools are adopted, but the organizational and human capacity to effectively implement and integrate them. Understanding the specific components of marketing capability that enable startups to bridge the gap between digital marketing adoption and achieving substantial business outcomes, especially under resource constraints, moves beyond simply identifying "gaps" to understanding the mechanisms by which these capabilities facilitate success.

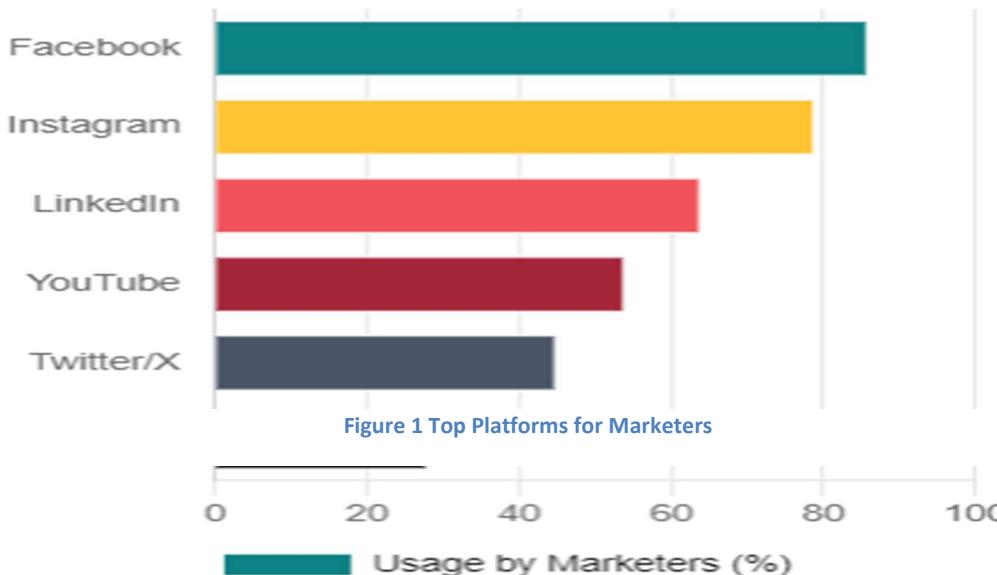


Fig.6 Top Platforms for Marketers.

Zhang, & Xiong, (2024) The collection of multi-modal data is crucial for comprehensive behavioral mapping. Consumer decisions are influenced by a complex interplay of personal, social, and psychological factors across the entire purchase journey. Understanding this complexity requires more than just surface-level data. Quantitative surveys are highly effective for measuring stated preferences, attitudes, and reported behaviors on a large scale. However, they may not capture unconscious responses or the "hidden needs and emotions" that truly drive behavior. For instance, while a survey can measure the perceived irritation of an ad, it may not fully explain

why that irritation occurs or how it impacts future brand interactions. Qualitative interviews and focus groups are specifically designed to explore these deeper, often unarticulated, motivations and perceptions. The finding that ad destination (Facebook page vs. website) impacts irritation and credibility highlights that subtle design elements influence consumer response. Capturing this requires both quantitative measurement (e.g., survey questions on ad irritation) and qualitative exploration (e.g., focus group discussions on user experience flow). By combining structured surveys with in-depth interviews and focus groups, the study can map consumer behavior comprehensively. It can identify

what digital marketing elements influence consumers, how they are perceived, and why consumers react in certain ways, providing a holistic view that is crucial for developing effective and ethical digital marketing strategies for startups.

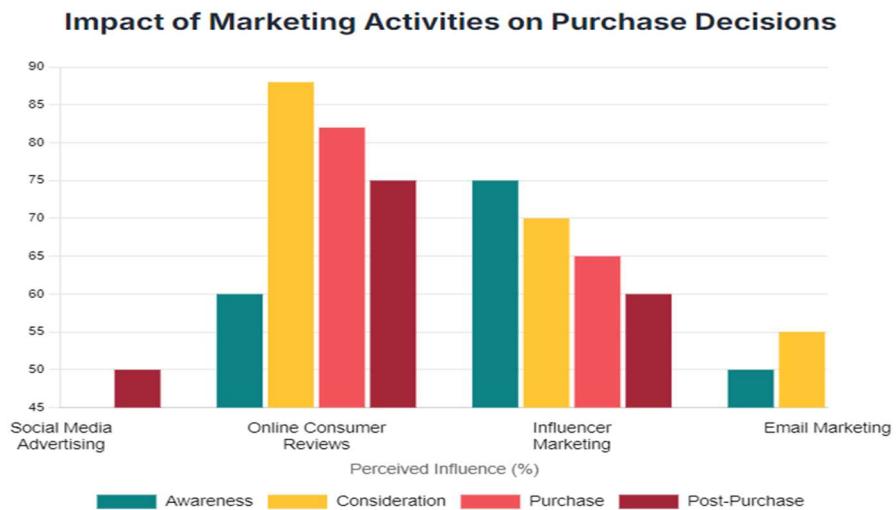


Fig.7 Impact of Marketing Activities on Purchase Decisions.

Quantitative Data Collection: Online surveys will be disseminated through established professional panels and relevant industry associations to reach startup leaders. For digital consumers, surveys will be distributed via reputable consumer panels, ensuring broad reach and demographic diversity (Pentang, 2023). A pilot study will be conducted prior to the main data collection phase to refine survey instruments, assess clarity, and ensure face and content validity.

Qualitative Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted either virtually (e.g., via secure video conferencing platforms) or in-person, with all session's audio-recorded following explicit informed consent. Focus groups will similarly be conducted virtually or in-person, facilitated by an experienced moderator to guide discussions and encourage participation, with all interactions recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Timeline: The quantitative data collection phase will precede the qualitative phase. This sequential design allows for the initial broad findings from the surveys to inform and guide the specific areas of deeper inquiry within the qualitative interviews and focus groups. This iterative approach ensures that the qualitative insights are directly relevant to and can elaborate upon the quantitative trends.

6. Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Suggestions

The analysis reveals a dynamic and complex digital marketing landscape characterized by several interconnected trends. There is a clear normalization of digital engagement post-pandemic, signifying a shift towards a more balanced online-offline consumer experience. This environment is simultaneously grappling with an authenticity imperative, driven by rising consumer scepticism towards AI-generated content and a general mistrust in advertising, alongside increasing data privacy concerns. Despite the rapid growth of social media, search and organic visibility retain their foundational importance as primary gateways to online information and commerce. Gulati, (2019). Digital marketing strategies for start-ups in India, the power of social proof, manifested through user-generated content and peer influence, is amplified in this sceptical market, serving as a critical driver of trust and purchase decisions. Email marketing continues to demonstrate its enduring power, offering a high return on investment and serving as a vital channel for long-term customer relationship building through precision targeting.

Underlying the effective navigation of these trends is the critical role of marketing capability, particularly for startups, which mediates the impact of digital marketing innovation on firm performance. Finally, the successful integration of Artificial Intelligence into marketing workflows hinges on strategic leadership, which is essential to overcome current implementation lags and unlock AI's full potential to amplify human creativity and productivity (Jackson, 2019).



Fig.8 Key tools of Digital Marketing.

7. Conclusions

To thrive in this evolving digital ecosystem, marketers and businesses should adopt a multi-faceted and integrated strategic approach:

- **Prioritize Trust and Authenticity:** Implement strategies that emphasize transparency in data usage and content creation, particularly concerning AI. Foster user-generated content and facilitate genuine engagement to counteract media mistrust and AI credibility concerns (Koulu, 2021, p. 67). Focus on "life-centric" approaches to personalization that genuinely respect privacy and deliver true value, moving beyond superficial targeting.
- **Optimize Across Channels:** Ok, (2024) Maintain a robust SEO and organic search presence as a foundational element of digital strategy, recognizing its enduring primacy for visibility and customer acquisition. Simultaneously, strategically invest in local digital marketing, optimizing online presence to drive high-intent conversions to physical locations.
- **Maximize Social Media Effectiveness:** Focus on creating high-quality, engaging content that resonates with specific target audiences. Actively cultivate and leverage social proof through user reviews and testimonials. Tailor advertising strategies to specific platforms, considering user experience (e.g., in-platform ads versus external website links) to minimize irritation and enhance perceived credibility.
- **Refine Email Marketing:** Prioritize advanced personalization and segmentation strategies based on granular behavioral data. Optimize email timing and frequency for maximum impact (Olayinka, 2021, p. 719). Commit to continuous A/B testing and data analytics to refine campaigns, ensuring sustained high ROI and fostering long-term customer relationships.
- **Invest in Capability Building:** For all businesses, and especially startups with limited resources, a critical focus must be placed on developing internal marketing capabilities. This includes investing in human resources, fostering technological literacy, and cultivating a deep strategic understanding of digital tools and consumer behavior. Recognizing that capability mediates the impact of digital innovation is key to realizing potential returns.
- **Embrace Strategic AI Adoption:** Leaders must proactively steer the integration of AI into marketing workflows, moving beyond mere investment to full deployment that drives substantial business outcomes (Jackson, 2019). The focus should be on how AI can amplify human creativity and productivity, while simultaneously addressing ethical implications and consumer anxieties regarding authenticity and reliability.

8. Recommendation for Future Research

Key recommendations from the study are shown below:

To succeed in this changing digital world, marketers and businesses should use a varied and connected strategic approach:

- **Focus on Trust and Being Real:** Use strategies that are open about how data is used and how content is created, especially with AI. Encourage content made by users and create real engagement to fight against media mistrust and worries about AI's credibility. Focus on "life-centric" ways to personalize that truly respect privacy and offer real value, moving beyond just basic targeting.
- **Make the Most of All Channels:** Keep a strong presence in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and natural search results as a basic part of your digital strategy. This is important for getting noticed and finding

customers (Ok, 2024). At the same time, smartly invest in local digital marketing, making your online presence good to drive people who are ready to buy to your physical locations.

- **Boost Social Media Effectiveness:** Focus on creating high-quality, engaging content that truly connects with your specific target audience. Actively encourage and use "social proof" through user reviews and testimonials. Adjust your advertising strategies for each platform, thinking about the user experience (e.g., ads within the platform versus links to external websites) to reduce annoyance and make ads seem more believable.
- **Improve Email Marketing:** Prioritize advanced personalization and segmentation strategies based on detailed information about customer behavior. Optimize when and how often emails are sent for the best results. Commit to constantly testing different versions (A/B testing) and using data analysis to refine campaigns, ensuring a consistently high return on investment and building long-term customer relationships (Olayinka, 2021, p. 721).
- **Invest in Building Skills:** For all businesses, especially startups with limited money, it's crucial to focus on building internal marketing skills. This means investing in people, improving tech knowledge, and developing a deep strategic understanding of digital tools and customer behavior. Realizing that skills affect how well digital innovations perform is key to getting potential returns.
- **Smartly Adopt AI:** Leaders must actively guide the integration of AI into marketing work, moving beyond just investing to fully using AI to get big business results. The focus should be on how AI can boost human creativity and productivity, while also dealing with ethical concerns and customer worries about authenticity and reliability.

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