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(*) Corresponding author

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DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES AND BUSINESS PRACTICES: CASE OF THE SOUTH-WEST REGION OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Nadica Jovanovska-Boshkovska^{1*}

ORCID: 0000-0001-9836-9006, nadica.j.boshkovska@uacs.edu.mk

Ilijana Petrovska¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-6544-2745, petrovska@uacs.edu.mk

Alida Daliposka-Sulejmanoska¹

ORCID: 0009-0009-8904-6470, adaliposka@yahoo.com

Snezana Hristova¹

ORCID: 0000-0001-6343-0225, shristova@uacs.edu.mk

¹University American College - Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

Abstract

This paper explores the digital marketing strategies and business practices of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Southwestern region of the Republic of North Macedonia. This region represents a tourism-driven area with a growing presence of small and medium-sized enterprises. Rather than focusing on consumer perspectives, the study examines how businesses develop, implement, and measure digital marketing activities to enhance their market presence and customer interaction. Using a quantitative research approach, data were collected from 31 local enterprises to identify the extent of digital channel use, strategic objectives, and performance indicators. The findings contribute to understanding how regional businesses leverage digital tools to strengthen brand visibility, engage customers, and advance their competitive positioning in emerging digital markets. The insights and recommendations provided aim to guide marketers in developing effective digital marketing strategies that resonate with their target audiences and adapt to the dynamic digital landscape.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Strategies; Business Practices; Social Media; SMEs; Marketing; Emerging Markets; Tourism Marketing

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has revolutionized the marketing landscape, empowering businesses to connect with consumers in more personalized and meaningful ways. Digital marketing anchored in tools such as social media, influencer marketing, and targeted advertising has become central to shaping consumer decision-making, fostering brand engagement, and driving sales performance. This shift has significant implications for how businesses engage with their consumers and influence their purchasing decisions. The modern trends of online marketing lead us toward a new era where consumers are more connected, informed, and empowered than ever before.

As digital technologies continue to reshape the global marketplace, digital engagement and business performance have become a critical focus for businesses striving to thrive in this dynamic environment. Driven by the rapid advancements in digital technology, digital marketing has become an indispensable tool for businesses aiming to understand, reach, and engage their target consumers. As consumers become increasingly reliant on the internet for their shopping needs, the influence of digital marketing on their buying behavior grows more pronounced. The research in this paper explores the relationship between business digital marketing strategies and consumer engagement, highlighting at the same time how online platforms are used by companies to reach and interact with their target market. By examining the dynamics of this relationship, we can gain insights into the strategies that businesses employ to influence consumer choices and the implications for both marketers and consumers in an evolving digital global market.

While these phenomena are well-documented in developed economies, there is a notable gap in empirical research within emerging markets such as the Republic of North Macedonia, and especially at the regional level.

The South-West region of North Macedonia presents a unique case for exploring the effectiveness of digital marketing. This region is not only economically diverse but also serves as a tourism-driven area with a growing presence of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), many of which are turning into digital tools to attract both local and international audiences (Petrevska & Trajkov, 2020, 2). As tourism and retail businesses attempt to differentiate themselves, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become instrumental in targeting niche consumer segments and enhancing brand visibility.

Digital marketing's influence on consumer behavior begins with awareness and extends through consideration, decision-making, and post-purchase evaluation. One of the primary ways digital marketing impacts consumer behavior is through targeted advertising. Leveraging data analytics and sophisticated algorithms, businesses can deliver personalized ads to potential customers based on their online activity, preferences, and demographics. This level of customization not only captures the consumer's attention but also enhances the relevance of the marketing message, making it more likely to resonate and prompt action. Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for influencing consumer behavior. They enable brands to engage with consumers directly, fostering a sense of community and trust. Through influence partnerships and brands can use the power of social proof, whereby consumers are influenced by the opinions and actions of others. Reviews and social media endorsements serve as modern-day word-of-mouth, significantly impacting purchase decisions.

Despite growing digital adoption, the application of structured digital marketing strategies in the region is still in a nascent stage. While over 80% of urban households in North

Macedonia now have internet access (Eurostat, 2023, 16), many businesses continue to operate without a defined digital strategy or understanding of consumer engagement metrics (OECD, 2021, 31). Furthermore, research suggests that digital marketing practices in the Balkan context are heavily influenced by socio-economic conditions, digital literacy levels, and local consumer trust (OECD, 2021, 45). These contextual factors necessitate a localized investigation to fully understand how digital marketing shapes digital engagement and business performance in this understudied region.

While consumer responses are an essential aspect of understanding marketing effectiveness, this paper focuses on the *business side* of digital marketing adoption—how companies in the South-West region develop and apply strategies to strengthen their digital presence, build brand awareness, and improve engagement metrics. Future research may extend this analysis by integrating consumer perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of digital marketing outcomes.

The main research objective is to analyze how businesses in the South-West region of North Macedonia adopt, implement, and measure digital marketing strategies in order to enhance their digital presence and consumer engagement. Further developed are the following research questions:

RQ1: What digital marketing strategies and tools are most commonly used by businesses in the region?

RQ2: How do businesses assess the effectiveness of their digital marketing efforts?

RQ3: What challenges and opportunities do regional enterprises face in adopting digital marketing?

Through quantitative analysis and survey data from local businesses, the study investigates which digital channels are most widely adopted and how performance is measured. By doing so, it contributes to both academic understanding and practical implications for marketers, policymakers, and business owners in similar emerging contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital marketing refers to the promotion and marketing of products and services through digital channels (Gillis, 2023, 1), utilizing technologies such as social media, search engines, e-mail, and websites to connect with consumers. Unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing offers cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and measurability, allowing businesses to reach a global audience, analyze performance in real time, and tailor strategies based on consumer data (Monnappa, 2023, 2). With the rise of social media platforms, businesses can engage directly with customers, build brand awareness, and foster loyalty. The evolution of digital marketing has transformed how companies interact with their audiences, making it a crucial component of modern business strategies.

Social media platforms have become integral to digital marketing strategies, enabling businesses to promote products, engage with customers, and build brand loyalty. Facebook, with nearly 3 billion active users, allows companies to run targeted ads and share content (Dixon, 2024, 1), while Instagram offers visual-based marketing and shopping features for seamless consumer interaction (Silvano & Mbogo, 2022, 2). TikTok, known for its viral video content, has become a powerful tool for influencer marketing (Appel et al., 2022, 48), with campaigns often reaching millions of people. Influencer marketing, where businesses collaborate with trusted

social media personalities (Sprout Social, 2024, 1), enhances brand authenticity and drives consumer trust, further revolutionizing how products are marketed and purchased online.

Social media platforms have significantly transformed digital marketing, providing businesses with the ability to directly connect with their target audiences. These platforms enhance brand visibility by offering a global stage for businesses to showcase their products and services. The interactive nature of social media fosters customer engagement by enabling real-time communication and feedback, strengthening customer relationships. Additionally, platforms offer precise targeting capabilities, allowing businesses to reach specific demographics based on behavior, interests, and preferences (Buffer, 2024, 2). Influencer partnerships and viral content further enhance brand reach, making social media an essential tool for modern marketing strategies.

Understanding consumer behavior is key to crafting effective digital marketing strategies. Consumers today are more informed and empowered, conducting thorough research before making purchase decisions (Verplancke & Gelati, 2022, 7). By analyzing consumer behavior, businesses can create campaigns that resonate on a personal level, increasing the likelihood of engagement and conversions. Insights into consumer preferences and motivations allow marketers to tailor their strategies, influencing areas like pricing, advertising, and social media tactics. This data-driven approach helps businesses build stronger connections with their audience, fostering customer loyalty and ultimately driving sales.

The term “consumer behavior” refers to actions and decisions that factor into a customer’s purchase. Researchers, businesses and marketers study consumer behavior to understand what influences a consumer’s shopping preferences and selection of products and services. Multiple factors affect consumer behavior, among them economic status, beliefs and values, culture, personality, age and education (Kotler, 2004, 130). Consumer behavior and digital marketing significantly impact one another. By understanding consumer behavior and digital marketing, businesses can tailor their marketing efforts to engage their target audience (Institute of Data, 2024, 3).

Consumer behavior offers insights into how people search for, evaluate, and choose to buy products or services. By studying consumer behavior, businesses can pinpoint key touch points in the customer journey and adjust their digital marketing strategies to maximize effectiveness. This highlights the importance of the relationship between digital marketing and consumer behavior. Numerous previous studies have examined the impact of advertising on various dimensions of consumer behavior. For instance, Smith and Johnson (2018, 3) found that persuasive advertising messages significantly influence consumer attitudes towards a brand, leading to increased purchase intentions. Similarly, a study by Brown et al. (2020, 3) revealed that emotional appeals in advertising can elicit positive emotional responses from consumers, which in turn positively impact their purchase decisions (Soti, 2022, 3).

Additionally, this relationship allows businesses to adapt quickly to changing market conditions, ensuring their strategies remain relevant and practical. Companies that leverage consumer behavior insights gain a competitive advantage, differentiating themselves by responding more effectively to customer needs and trends in a dynamic digital world.

The above findings reflect the growing reliance on digital marketing, emphasizing its role in reaching global consumers, influencing consumer behavior, and driving business growth. This is particularly relevant for understanding business strategies, specifically in the South-West region of North Macedonia, where digital marketing plays the leading role in shaping buying decisions. By incorporating the latest research and insights, this review highlights how

businesses have adapted to technological advancements, creating more personalized and data-driven marketing strategies that effectively meet the needs of today's consumers. The importance of this information is the ability to demonstrate how digital marketing not only improves promotional activities but also revolutionizes the way businesses connect with consumers, driving long-term success.

Additionally, understanding consumer behavior is essential for businesses looking to succeed in the digital age. With consumers becoming increasingly informed and empowered, their purchasing decisions are shaped by various digital influences such as online reviews, social media, and personalized content. Digital marketing, when aligned with consumer behavior insights, allows companies to engage more effectively with their customers, increasing the chances for a deeper connection, improving satisfaction, and ultimately driving sales and brand loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

The decision to employ a quantitative method comes from the necessity to gather measurable data regarding customer satisfaction and experiences with digital marketing strategies as they relate to consumer buying behavior. Furthermore, digital marketing platforms such as social media enable businesses to effectively engage with their targeted consumers, allowing them to reach a larger customer base and enhance brand visibility in the digital marketing era. By using a structured questionnaire, the research enables statistical analysis, offering a solid and objective framework for addressing the research questions. This methodology guarantees that the results are applicable to a broader population, especially in the South-West region of North Macedonia, and accurately represent the specific trends and behaviors.

This study uses a quantitative research approach to explore how digital marketing strategies influence consumer behavior among businesses in the South-West region of North Macedonia. A quantitative method is appropriate for identifying patterns, testing relationships, and ensuring generalizability across respondents (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, 160). The research applies a descriptive and correlational design, aimed at analyzing the extent of digital marketing adoption, platform usage, and the relationship between marketing strategies and consumer engagement. This approach helps to uncover not only the presence of certain practices but also their potential impact on business outcomes (Hair, Page & Brunsveld, 2019, 379).

Data was collected through a structured online questionnaire developed via Google Forms, consisting of four sections: Section 1: Captures basic demographic information about the respondents, including their current position, the retail industry of their business, the size of their business (number of employees), and their target audience, which helps establish the context of the responses and identify trends across different business types. Section 2: Explores the presence and nature of marketing strategies employed by businesses, focusing on whether they have an overall marketing strategy, their approach to digital marketing (agency vs. in-house), the size of their marketing team, and engagement with various digital channels. Section 3: Assesses the specific digital marketing channels utilized, such as social media, content marketing, e-mail marketing, and influencer marketing, while also evaluating whether the digital marketing team is achieving its targeted goals and identifying the primary objectives of their digital marketing efforts. Section 4: Examines how businesses measure the effectiveness of their digital marketing strategies, including questions about the duration of digital marketing usage and the metrics

employed to evaluate audience engagement. The questionnaire was designed based on prior research in digital marketing adoption among SMEs (Khan et al., 2020, 48) and reviewed for clarity and relevance (Saunders et al., 2019, 192). Overall, this structured approach aims to provide a clear understanding of the digital marketing landscape in the region, helping to identify market dynamics, challenges, and opportunities for businesses.

The survey targeted business representatives rather than consumers. The sample consisted of 31 businesses from the South-West region, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance. Participants included business owners, marketers, and employees involved in digital marketing activities. The survey was distributed via social media, SMS, and direct contact between August 1 and September 5, 2024.

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, with both descriptive (frequencies, means) and inferential statistics (regression and ANOVA) used to test relationships between marketing practices and audience engagement (Pallant, 2020, 108). Regression analysis helped determine the strength of associations between digital strategies and channel adoption, while ANOVA tested differences across business characteristics.

The study followed ethical standards, participation was voluntary, anonymous, and informed consent was implied. However, the limited sample size and online-only format present potential limitations, including sampling bias and reduced generalizability. Despite these constraints, the research provides valuable insights into early-stage digital marketing use in a transitioning regional economy (Wright, 2005, 3).

While the study aimed to gather diverse perspectives from the South-West region of North Macedonia, several limitations were encountered. Despite reaching out to broad participants, some potential participants declined to take part in the questionnaire. Reasons for non-participation included a lack of time, concerns about privacy, and scepticism regarding the purpose of the survey. Additionally, the reliance on social media and text messaging may have excluded certain demographics, particularly older individuals or those with limited access to technology. These factors could introduce bias into the findings, as the sample may not fully represent the views of the entire population in the region. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for contextualizing the results and understanding the implications for future research.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The subject of the research is to examine the impact of digital marketing on consumer buying behavior in the south-west region of North Macedonia. With the increasing use of online platforms, businesses are leveraging digital marketing strategies, such as social media advertising, to engage consumers. The south-west region, known for its diverse demographic and economic landscape, provides a unique context to examine how these digital marketing efforts shape consumer purchasing decisions. This study aims to identify factors that drive consumer engagement and assess the effectiveness of digital marketing in influencing buying behavior in this specific region.

In order to understand how businesses utilize digital marketing strategies, a quantitative study was conducted using Google Forms. The study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific strategies, such as social media content creation, by gathering structured data from businesses. The questionnaire was designed to cover key aspects, including the demographic profile of the businesses, the tools they utilize, and their engagement with digital platforms.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Research Sample (Source: Authors' research)

Variable		N	%
Business Position	Owner	15	48%
	Marketing Director	3	10%
	Employee	12	39%
	Retail Management Responsible for Marketing	1	3%
Industry	Fashion and Apparel	14	45%
	Electronics and Appliances	4	14%
	Home and Furniture	6	19%
	Health and Beauty	5	16%
	Jewelry and Watches	2	6%
Size	Self-Employed, Individual	3	10%
	Small Business	17	56%
	Medium Business	8	26%
	Large Business	3	10%
Target Audience	Female	13	42%
	Male	1	3%
	Both	17	55%

The survey results in Table 1 reveal that 48% of respondents hold the position of business owner, followed by 39% who are employees, and 10% who are marketing directors. A small portion (3%) consists of retail management professionals responsible for marketing. In terms of industry representation, the majority of businesses (45%) belong to the fashion and apparel sector, while 19% operate in home and furniture, 16% in health and beauty, and 14% in electronics and appliances. Jewellery and watches represent the smallest segment at 6%.

When analyzing business size, over half (56%) are small businesses, 26% are medium-sized, and 10% fall under both self-employed individuals and larger businesses. Regarding their target audience, 55% of businesses cater to both male and female customers, with 42% targeting females exclusively and only 3% focusing solely on male customers. These findings highlight diverse roles, industries, and audience strategies within the surveyed businesses.

Table 2: Digital Marketing Strategy and Channel Utilization in Businesses (Source: Authors' research)

Variable		N	%
Overall Marketing Strategy	Yes	23	74%
	Sometimes	6	17%
	No	2	7%
Outsource digital marketing or manage it internally?	Handle Digital Marketing in House	20	65%
	Agency Handles Marketing	7	23%
	Outsource	2	7%
	Freelancer	2	7%
Digital channels such as	Yes	29	94%

Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc., to target your market audience?			
	No	0	0%
	Sometimes	2	7%
Digital Channels	Social Media Marketing	16	52%
	Content Marketing	0	0%
	E-mail Marketing	0	0%
	Influencer Marketing	0	0%
	All of the Above	15	48%

This dataset provides insights into businesses' digital marketing strategies, the management of their marketing efforts, and the use of digital channels to engage with their target audience. A majority of businesses (74%) have a defined marketing strategy, with 65% opting to handle digital marketing internally. Digital channels, particularly social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, are widely used by businesses, with 94% reporting their use to engage customers. The dataset also highlights the limited adoption of content marketing, e-mail marketing, and influencer marketing as standalone strategies, while 48% of businesses integrate various digital marketing approaches.

Table 3: Digital Marketing Effectiveness and Audience Engagement Tracking (Source: Authors' research)

Variable		N	%
Achieved Target Goals	Yes	23	74%
	Sometimes	6	17%
	No	2	7%
Primary Goals	Brand Awareness	20	65%
	Lead Generation	7	23%
	Sales	2	7%
	All the Above	2	7%
How long has your business used digital marketing?	Less than a year	29	94%
	2-3 years	0	0%
	4-5 years	2	7%
	More than 5 years	2	7%
	We don't use	2	7%
Audience Engagement Metrics	Website Metrics	3	10%
	Social Media Metrics	24	77%
	Advertising Metrics	4	13%

This dataset offers valuable insights into how businesses set and measure their marketing goals, their experience with digital marketing, and the metrics they use to track audience engagement. The majority of businesses (74%) achieve their marketing targets, with brand awareness being the top priority for 65%. Despite digital marketing being predominantly a recent focus (94% using it for less than a year), a small number of businesses have been leveraging it for longer periods (7%). When it comes to engagement metrics, most businesses prioritize social media (77%), with fewer tracking websites (10%) or advertising performance (13%). This highlights the significant role of social media in shaping business marketing strategies and performance tracking.

Descriptive Statistics

The survey analysis indicates that businesses have a strong focus on marketing strategy, with a mean of 1.42 for having an overall strategy in place and 2.00 for handling marketing internally. Digital channels are widely adopted, with a mean of 1.13, and platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are the most popular (mean = 2.94). The primary goals of digital marketing—brand awareness, lead generation, and sales—have a mean of 3.61, while engagement metrics such as social media interactions and website traffic have a mean of 2.06. With an average of 2.71 years of digital marketing experience, businesses show a variety of strategies and challenges but are committed to continuing their digital efforts (mean = 1.00). Overall, digital marketing is widely adopted, with businesses striving to measure its effectiveness and reach their target audience.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics (Source: Authors' research)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Does the company have an overall marketing strategy?	31	1.42	.807
Does your company engage with digital marketing agencies or handle all marketing by within the company.	31	2.00	.730
Do you have a marketing team, if so, how many people are in it?	31	2.61	1.230
Do you use digital channels such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc. to target your market audience?	31	1.13	.499
What digital channels do you use as marketing?	31	2.94	2.032
Is your digital marketing team achieving targeted goals?	31	1.32	.748
Who is your target audience?	31	2.13	.991
What are the primary goals of your digital marketing efforts?	31	3.61	.803

What metrics do you use to measure audience engagement?	31	2.06	.727
What is your current position?	31	1.90	.944
What is the size of your business (number of employees)?	31	2.29	.693
Does your business plan on continuing to use digital marketing channels to advertise the products and services that you offer?	31	1.00	.000
How long has your business been using digital marketing?	31	2.71	1.395
What is the Retail industry of your business?	31	2.16	1.293
Valid N (listwise)	31		

Model Summary

The Model Summary from the regression analysis reveals that the independent variables, including digital channels, marketing strategies, goals, and metrics, explain a significant portion of the variance in the dependent variable, “Do you use digital channels such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc., to target your market audience?” With an R^2 of 0.743, the model effectively accounts for 74.3% of the variation in the dependent variable. The correlation coefficient ($R = 0.862$) further confirms a strong positive relationship, suggesting that as the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies increases, the likelihood of utilizing digital channels to target audiences also rises. This highlights the critical role of digital strategies in connecting with consumers through social media platforms.

Table 5: Model Summary (Source: Authors’ research)

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.862 ^a	.743	.632	1.232
a. Predictors: (Constant), Do you use digital channels such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc., to target your market audience?				

ANOVA Testing

The ANOVA table from the regression analysis shows that the independent variables, including digital marketing strategies, goals, resources, and targeting factors, significantly influence the dependent variable, “What digital channels do you use for marketing?” With a regression sum of squares of 91.991 and a mean square of 10.221, the F-statistic of 6.733 is highly significant (p -value = 0.000), confirming the effectiveness of these predictors. The results suggest that factors such as targeted advertising, marketing goals, and engagement metrics strongly correlate with the use of popular digital platforms, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive and strategic digital marketing approach in achieving business success.

Table 6: ANOVA (Source: Authors' research)

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	91.991	9	10.221	6.733	.000 ^b
	Residual	31.880	21	1.518		
	Total	123.871	30			
a. Dependent Variable: What digital channels do you use for marketing?						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Do you use digital channels such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc, to target your market audience?						

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer significant insights into how businesses in the South-West region of North Macedonia utilize digital marketing tools and how these strategies influence consumer interaction and brand engagement. The data reveal that 94% of participating businesses actively use social media platforms to engage with their audiences. This widespread adoption aligns closely with the literature emphasizing the dominance of social media in contemporary digital marketing practices (Dixon, 2024, 1; Silvano & Mbogo, 2022,2). Moreover, the data validates the assertion that social media platforms offer accessible, cost-effective tools for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to promote their brands, enhance visibility, and interact directly with consumers (Buffer, 2024,2).

A notable 74% of surveyed businesses reported having a defined marketing strategy, and 65% manage their digital marketing in-house. This suggests a growing level of internal capacity and strategic awareness, which reflects broader regional trends identified in recent research on digital transformation in the Western Balkans (OECD, 2021, 31). However, while social media is widely adopted, content marketing, influencer marketing, and e-mail marketing remain significantly underutilized as standalone strategies—findings that contrast with global best practices, which encourage integrated digital strategies for maximum effectiveness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020, 2; Sprout Social, 2024, 1).

One of the most important findings concerns business objectives: 65% of respondents cited brand awareness as their primary goal, while only 7% listed direct sales. This supports the literature view that in emerging markets, digital marketing often begins with brand building and only gradually evolves into a performance-driven model (Gillis, 2023,1; Monnappa, 2023,2). Businesses appear to be leveraging digital platforms primarily to establish trust, visibility, and consumer familiarity, which is consistent with Verplancke and Gelati's (2022) assertion that trust, and brand authenticity are essential precursors to online conversions, especially in newer digital ecosystems.

Another crucial finding is the short duration of digital engagement among businesses in the region. Over 90% of participants have been using digital marketing for less than one year, highlighting the nascent stage of digital adoption. This result aligns with OECD (2021) reports that emphasize the relatively late onset of digital maturity in the Western Balkans. Despite this, 74% of businesses reported meeting or partially meeting their marketing goals, indicating a

positive correlation between recent digital marketing efforts and perceived success, even in the early stages of implementation.

The study also found that the primary metrics used to assess engagement were social media-based, with 77% of businesses relying on likes, shares, comments, and reach. Fewer businesses monitored website traffic (10%) or advertising performance (13%). This preference supports earlier claims that businesses in emerging markets tend to favor easily accessible and visually intuitive metrics over more complex or technically demanding analytics tools (Wright, 2005, 3). However, the limited use of advanced metrics could hinder more nuanced strategy development in the long term.

Statistical analysis via regression modeling confirmed a strong positive relationship ($R^2 = 0.743$) between the use of digital strategies and the likelihood of utilizing digital channels like Facebook and Instagram for market targeting. These results reinforce the hypothesis that structured, data-informed marketing strategies enhance digital channel adoption, further supporting theoretical models of strategic digital alignment (Hair, Page & Brunsveld, 2019, 379).

Lastly, the ANOVA results demonstrated that variables such as marketing goals, targeting strategies, and performance metrics significantly influence the choice of digital channels, underscoring the interconnected nature of digital marketing components. These findings are consistent with studies that argue for a holistic, integrated approach to digital strategy (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020, 2; Sprout Social, 2024, 1).

In summary, the results confirm many of the patterns identified in existing literature, particularly the dominance of social media, the strategic importance of brand awareness, and the challenges of digital maturity in transitional economies. At the same time, they also highlight gaps in practice, such as limited multi-channel integration and a lack of performance tracking beyond social metrics, which present opportunities for future development and research.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how businesses in the South-West region of North Macedonia adopt and implement digital marketing strategies to strengthen their market visibility and consumer interaction. Through quantitative analysis of survey data from 31 regional enterprises, the research identified several critical trends in digital marketing adoption and effectiveness. The findings clearly demonstrate that social media platforms have become the dominant tools for brand engagement and consumer outreach. Despite limited experience in digital marketing, most businesses in the sample reported achieving their primary marketing goals, particularly with respect to raising brand awareness and improving consumer visibility.

One of the central takeaways is that businesses in the region are still in the early stages of digital transformation, with over 90% having adopted digital marketing practices within the last year. Nonetheless, their active use of social media and self-managed marketing strategies suggests a growing internal capability and recognition of digital marketing's strategic importance. This confirms global and regional research which emphasizes the importance of early adoption and brand-focused engagement as foundational steps toward digital maturity (Tiago et al., 2014, 57).

Furthermore, the study revealed a strong positive relationship between structured marketing strategies and the use of digital platforms, suggesting that businesses with clear objectives and performance metrics are more likely to leverage digital tools fully. However, gaps in multi-channel integration and performance measurement practices point to areas that require

attention. The underutilization of content marketing, e-mail marketing, and influencer campaigns, despite their proven global efficacy, indicates a potential for expansion as digital literacy and strategic sophistication grow.

Despite these meaningful contributions, the study is not without limitations. The sample size is relatively small and geographically confined, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of subjective bias, and the digital-only distribution of the survey may have excluded businesses with low levels of online engagement. These factors should be taken into account when interpreting the results and extrapolating broader trends.

Future studies should consider expanding the sample to include businesses from other regions of North Macedonia or even across the Western Balkans for comparative analysis. In addition, qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could offer richer insights into the strategic decision-making processes behind digital marketing adoption. There is also a need to investigate consumer perspectives directly, in order to triangulate findings from the business side with actual behavioral data. Longitudinal research could further examine how digital marketing strategies evolve over time and what factors contribute most to sustained digital transformation.

Ultimately, this research provides valuable empirical evidence on the early-stage adoption of digital marketing in a transitional economy. For businesses, the findings underscore the importance of developing data-driven strategies and broadening their use of digital channels. For policymakers and support organizations, the results highlight the need for targeted training, funding programs, and digital infrastructure improvements to accelerate digital readiness among SMEs. In an increasingly digital global economy, such measures are not only beneficial but necessary for regional competitiveness and sustainable business growth.

CRedit AUTHOR STATEMENT

Nadica Jovanovska-Boshkovska: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Ilijana Petrovska:** Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Alida Daliposka-Sulejmanoska:** Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Conceptualization. **Snezana Hristova:** Writing – review & editing, Validation.

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