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The Evolution of Social Media Marketing Research in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: A Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the evolution of social media marketing research in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), identifying publication trends, influential contributors, major themes, theoretical perspectives, and emerging areas.

Design/methodology/approach: Following PRISMA guidelines, 90 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025 were analysed. Bibliometric analysis using Bibliometrix and Biblioshiny examined publication trends, citations, keyword co-occurrence, thematic and trend-topic analysis, three-field analysis, and co-citation.

Findings: Publications increased consistently, with a surge since 2019. The United States, the United Kingdom, China, Australia, and India were among the leading contributing countries. Customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), business performance, social media marketing strategy, and capabilities were prominent themes. Influencer marketing, artificial intelligence, social commerce, and digital innovation emerged as trending topics. The research evolved from technology adoption towards value creation, organisational capabilities, and competitive advantage.

Research limitations/implications: The study is limited by the selected databases, search terms, eligibility criteria, publication period, and bibliographic metadata. Future research could broaden database coverage and use additional qualitative and quantitative synthesis.

Practical implications: SMEs can strengthen digital marketing and competitiveness by focusing on customer engagement, strategic social media use, digital capabilities, and emerging practices such as influencer marketing, artificial intelligence, social commerce, and digital innovation.

Social Implications: Social media marketing can help SMEs engage customers, build brand awareness, and strengthen consumer relationships while adapting to changing digital behaviours.

Originality/value: The study integrates bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review to map the intellectual structure, major themes, theoretical perspectives, emerging topics, and research gaps in SME social media marketing.

Keywords: Social media marketing; Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); Customer engagement; Digital marketing; Influencer marketing

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have revolutionised marketing practices, with social media becoming one of the most prominent avenues for communicating with customers and creating value. Firms use social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, TikTok, and YouTube to transition from traditional one-way messaging to interactive conversations with customers, build relationships with followers, foster online brand communities, and co-create value (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), social media assumes greater importance because it enables them to increase brand awareness, engage customers, reach wider audiences, and compete with large firms without incurring huge marketing costs despite scarce financial and technological resources (Ainin et al., 2015; Michaelidou et al., 2011). As a result, social media marketing has evolved beyond complementary promotional activity to become an essential business capability for SMEs' innovation, customer relationships, and competitive advantage.

Reflecting its growing use among SMEs, research on social media marketing has expanded substantially over time. Early studies focused on antecedents of social media adoption by SMEs, including technological readiness, organisational capability, and perceived usefulness (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Siamagka et al., 2015). As SMEs become more active on social media platforms, research topics shifted from adoption to understanding how SMEs use social media for customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), brand community development, marketing performance and sales growth (Ancillai et al., 2019; Felix et al., 2017). More recently, studies have begun exploring topics such as influencer marketing, artificial intelligence, social commerce, and analytics (Appel et al., 2020; Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021).

With the rapid expansion of social media marketing, research on it has produced an extensive yet fragmented body of knowledge across multiple disciplines, including marketing, entrepreneurship, information systems, innovation, and strategic management. Empirically, studies have tested numerous theories ranging from the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities theory, technology organisation environment (TOE) framework, social exchange theory, and customer engagement theory, among others, to explain social media use in enhancing firm performance and achieving competitive advantage (Ancillai et al., 2019; Felix et al., 2017). Simultaneously, literature has also grown across multiple themes, including social media marketing strategy, social media capabilities, influencer marketing, customer engagement, eWOM, performance, innovation, purchase intention, etc. As a result, it has become challenging to trace the intellectual development and current state of knowledge on social media marketing.

Several prior review studies have synthesised literature on different phenomena related to social media marketing. However, these studies focused primarily on phenomena-specific topics such as customer engagement (Jacobson et al., 2020), influencer marketing (Ahuja & Loura, 2020), digital marketing (Hein, 2025), or social commerce (Li et al., 2021), but not social media marketing evolution in the SME context. In

addition, the growing body of literature in recent years has significantly changed the intellectual structure of this emerging field, generated new clusters of research, and extended international collaboration networks among authors, institutions, and countries. Addressing these knowledge gaps requires comprehensive analyses that map influential publications/journals/authors and uncover themes, evolutionary trends, knowledge structure, and emerging topics in social media marketing.

To address gaps in the literature, this study maps the intellectual structure and reviews extant literature on social media marketing in SMEs. Bibliometric analysis is conducted to identify trends in publications, authorship, and collaboration, and to map the knowledge structure of social media marketing. A systematic literature review was then conducted to qualitatively summarise findings on prevalent themes, theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches, and avenues for future research. The integrated bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review enable the study to trace the evolution of the field, map its intellectual structure, and synthesise evidence on dominant research themes. This study contributes to the literature by charting the existing body of knowledge on social media marketing and offers a structured research agenda to guide future inquiry and managerial decision-making.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Development of Social Media Marketing Studies in SMEs

The evolution of social media marketing research in SMEs mirrors the broader digital transformation experienced by businesses over the past two decades. Empirical studies published during the early stages of this evolution mostly approached social media from a technological perspective as yet another communication tool that empowered SMEs to build an online presence, expand visibility, and transcend inherent marketing limitations (such as budgetary and manpower constraints) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Michaelidou et al., 2011). Most studies during this era were adoption-oriented and focused on various antecedents of SMEs' social media adoption decisions, including organisational readiness (Ainin et al., 2015), perceived usefulness (Michaelidou et al., 2011), enabling technologies and inhibiting factors (Siamagka et al., 2015). A primary objective of many early studies was to theorise about social media adoption among SMEs and establish a comprehensive list of factors that motivate and enable SMEs to utilise social media (Arora & Predmore, 2013). With advancements in technology and increased adoption rates, the research focus shifted from adoption to utilisation, with scholars theorising about and measuring social media as an enabler of distinct capabilities in SMEs. Adopting social media began to be viewed less as a marketing option and more as a strategic necessity for remaining competitive, especially in industries with a strong customer orientation (Kumar et al., 2016). This phenomenon motivated researchers to approach social media from a marketing capabilities perspective, defining it as 'a collaborative marketing tool that supports dialogue among customers and between customers and firms' (Felix et al., 2017). By and large, researchers studying social media during this period were keen on providing empirical evidence of how SMEs use social media platforms to foster customer relationships, enhance customer engagement, drive eWOM, cultivate online brand communities, build customer loyalty, and improve marketing performance in general (De Vries et al., 2012).

Current streams of literature on social media marketing in SMEs are significantly influenced by advances in digital technologies and digital marketing practices. Topics such as influencer marketing (Appel et al., 2020), social commerce (Hudders et al., 2021), artificial intelligence (Huang & Rust, 2021), digital analytics, and user-generated content marketing has spawned several studies that theorise about and measure how SMEs can leverage social media platforms to amplify brand visibility, engage customers, improve personalisation efforts, and optimise marketing performance. Concurrently, scholars have also increasingly devoted attention to

researching organisational capability, innovation, business performance sustainability, and competitive advantage within the context of SMEs' social media marketing (Fan et al., 2021; Garrido-Moreno et al., 2020; Patma et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

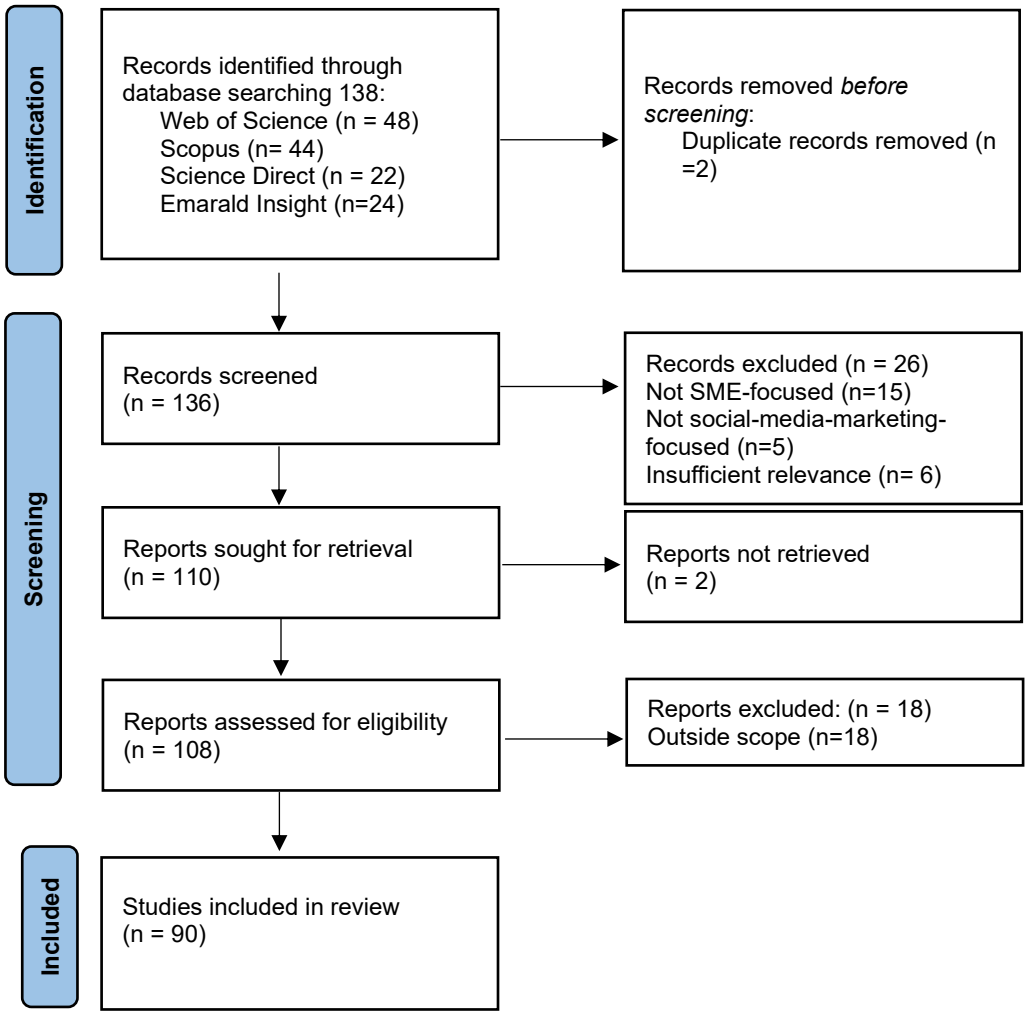


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram
Source: Authors' own work

This study adopted a bibliometric analysis approach and conducted a systematic literature review (SLR). The literature search was conducted using relevant keywords and synonyms for social media marketing and small and medium-sized enterprises ("social media marketing" OR "social media" OR "social networking sites" OR "social networking" OR "social media strategy") AND ("SME*" OR "small and medium-sized enterprise*" OR "small business*" OR "small firm*"). Publication years were limited to 2010-2025 to capture the period when social media marketing became a substantial field of research. Articles retrieved from the initial search (N = 138) were screened for document type, relevance to social media marketing and SMEs, publication period,

and the predefined eligibility criteria. Following the removal of duplicates, subsequent screening, and eligibility assessment, 90 publications were retained for the final bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review. The study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure a systematic and transparent selection process.

Bibliometric analyses were conducted using the Bibliometrix package and the Biblioshiny interface in R. The analysis included annual scientific production, source productivity, author productivity, total citations, countries' contributions, and science mapping.

Science mapping included keyword co-occurrence analysis, thematic analysis, trend topic analysis, three-field plot, and co-citation analysis. These techniques were used to determine and qualitatively analyse the conceptual, intellectual, and social structure of social media marketing research in SMEs. The bibliometric findings were integrated with the systematic literature review to identify major research themes, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and emerging research opportunities.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

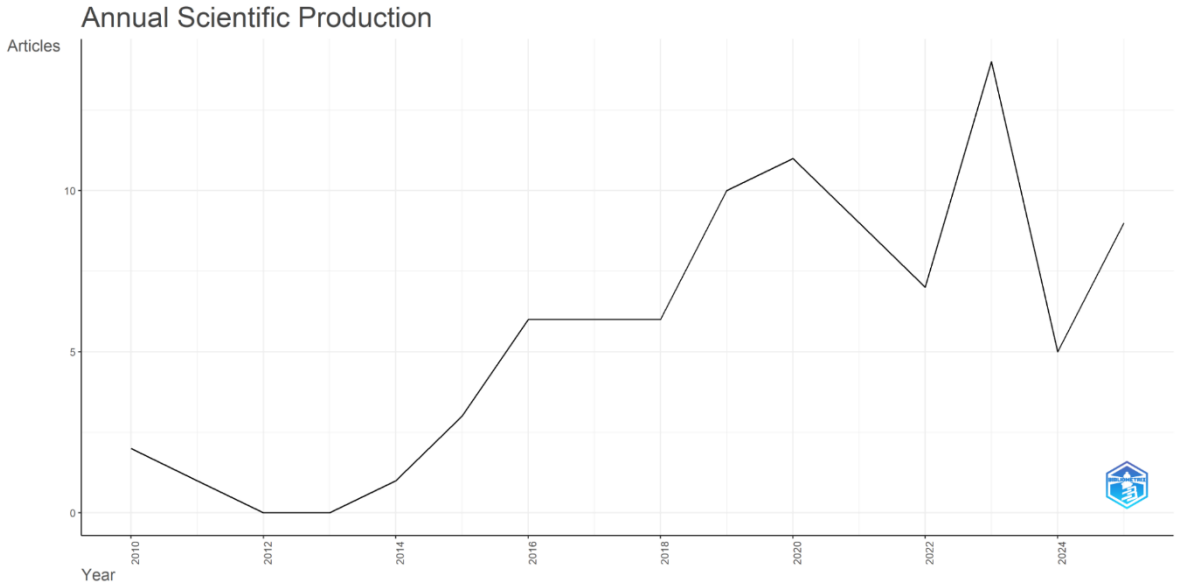


Figure 2: Annual Scientific Production
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

Figure 2 indicates an upward trend in scholarly attention to this topic throughout the period under study, with publications increasing at an annual growth rate of 10.55%. Although research activity remained relatively limited during the early years (2010–2014), publication output gradually increased from 2015 onwards, accelerating substantially after 2019. The highest number of publications was recorded in 2023, highlighting the increased scholarly attention devoted to social media marketing in SME and digital marketing research.

The growing body of literature on social media marketing in SMEs is unsurprising, as social media channels are becoming one of the most prominent digital marketing tools SMEs use to attract new customers, engage existing ones, and improve business performance. For instance, Dwivedi et al. (2020) recently reported that organisations have been rapidly advancing their digital transformation since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased adoption of digital technologies motivated by growth in online business activities that entail digital communication with customers. Therefore, many recent publications focus on various topics beyond the initial interest in SM adoption, such as SM-related customer engagement, influencer marketing, social commerce, digital marketing capabilities, or organisational performance (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023; Sheng et al., 2022)

4.2 Most Relevant Sources

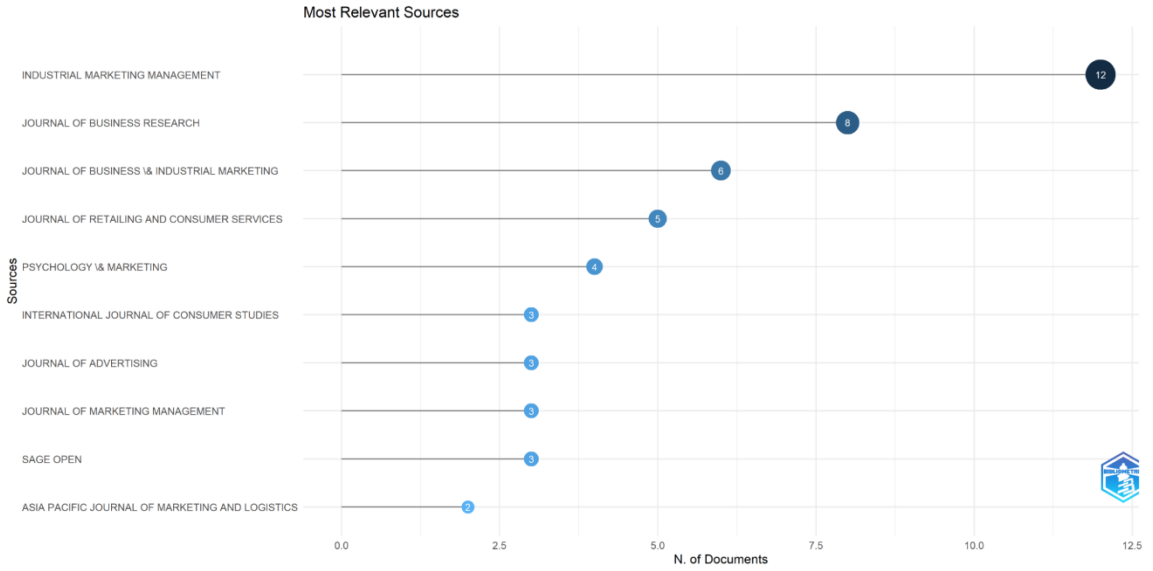


Figure 3: Most Relevant Sources
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

The analysis identified 44 sources that contributed to the development of social media marketing research in SMEs, reflecting the field's multidisciplinary nature. Industrial Marketing Management emerged as the most productive source, followed by the Journal of Business Research, the Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, and Psychology & Marketing. Figure 3 demonstrates that publications in leading sources have generally increased over time, with most of the top five sources showing growth in scientific production. The growing use of social media for digital transformation and competitiveness further explains the increasing research interest in this area.
Research in these sources frequently examines digital marketing efforts, customer engagement, firm performance, and technological innovation. From these findings, we may conclude that SM, as a marketing tool, has already become a mainstream research topic in marketing rather than being confined to information systems, management, or communication studies. Moreover, the inclusion of several journals focused on industrial marketing, customer psychology, and business management suggests that SM marketing research in SMEs is an interdisciplinary research area.

4.3 Most Relevant Authors

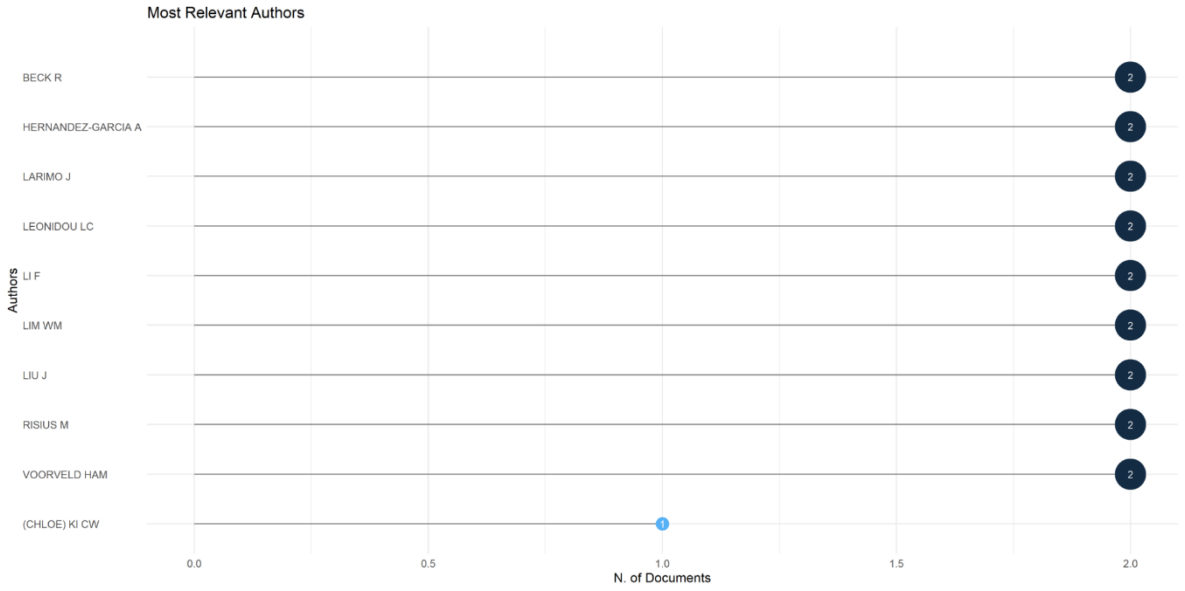


Figure 4: Most Relevant Authors
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

The analysis identified 278 authors who contributed to the development of social media marketing research in SMEs, highlighting the field's collaborative and interdisciplinary nature (Figure 4). The most productive authors were Li, Larimo, Leonidou, Liu, Beck, Hernandez-Garcia, and Voorveld, all of whom have produced research focused on social media marketing strategy, customer engagement, digital capabilities, and organisational performance. The authors' production over time indicates that early highly cited studies provided foundational conceptualisations of social media and its use in marketing, recent years have witnessed the emergence of new contributors responding to evolving digital marketing trends.

Analysis of authors' impact on social media marketing shows that only a small number of researchers received substantial citation attention within the field. Classic research focused on defining social media and proposing the first frameworks to approach this new marketing venue (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Michaelidou et al., 2011). Recent articles have focused on expanding research on the effects of customer engagement (Appel et al., 2020) and social media marketing strategies on firm performance (Vrontis et al., 2021) as well as the role of social media marketing and influencer marketing in driving SMEs' digital transformation.

Research collaboration among authors from different countries shows that social media marketing is a topic of interest to researchers worldwide. Additionally, authors coming from marketing, entrepreneurship, information systems, and strategic management have been working together on this topic. These collaborations enable research on social media marketing to continually evolve by offering new perspectives on the subject.

4.4 Country Scientific Production

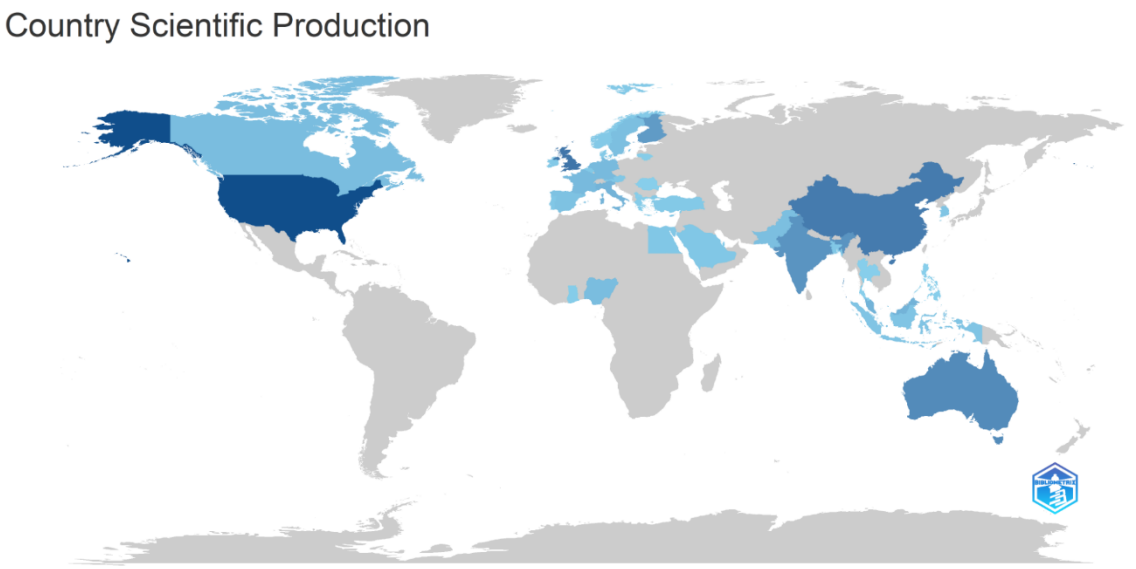


Figure 5: Country Scientific Production
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

The geographical distribution of publications demonstrates that research on social media marketing in SMEs is concentrated in a relatively small number of countries (Figure 5). The United States emerged as the leading contributor, followed by the United Kingdom, China, Australia, and India. All of these countries have published articles focused on developing and validating theories on social media adoption and its implications on customer engagement, digital marketing strategies, and performance in SMEs.

Analysis of country collaboration reveals strong collaboration within international research communities; the international collaboration index is 44.44%. This enables valuable exchanges among researchers from different parts of the world who are interested in social media marketing. However, it is also evident that there is little scientific output from developing and emerging countries. As SMEs play an important role in these economies, more research should be conducted to provide evidence in these contexts.

Although participation from Asian and other developing markets is increasing, substantial geographical gaps remain. As digital technologies continue to diffuse across different economic contexts, future research is expected to provide broader cross-country comparisons and context-specific insights into how SMEs leverage social media to enhance competitiveness and sustainable growth.

4.5 Most Relevant Words

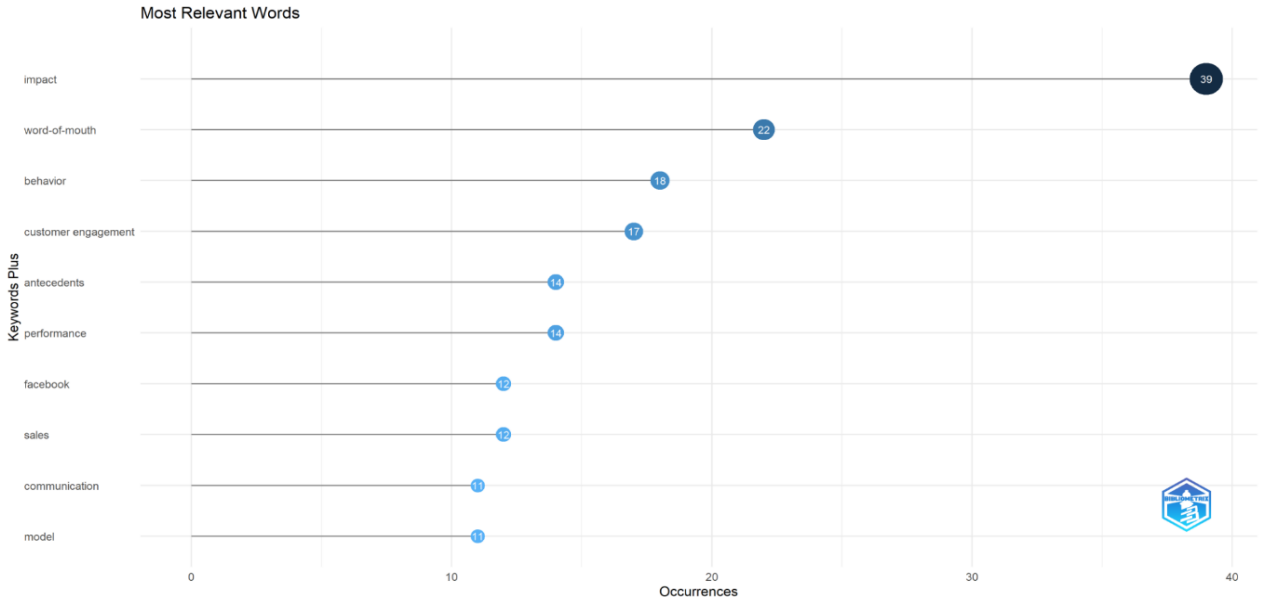


Figure 6: Most Relevant Words
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

Examining keyword frequency enables the identification of predominant topics of interest and tracking the evolution of social media marketing research concepts. The most commonly used keywords included impact, word-of-mouth, behaviour, customer engagement, performance, antecedents, sales, and social media marketing (Figure 6). Such findings indicate a growing interest in examining how SMEs' social media marketing activities relate to their customers' responses and contribute to organisations' outcomes. The use of "social media marketing" as a keyword has been the most common over time, suggesting that research has shifted from simply adopting social media to examining the impacts associated with these platforms.

The keyword co-occurrence suggests there are a few clusters of themes in the literature. First, there is a cluster of keywords centred on customer engagement, performance, and sales, suggesting research efforts that studied how social media marketing contributes to firm competitiveness and organisational outcomes. Second, there is a cluster that connected impact, behaviour, and eWOM, indicating studies that focused on consumers' responses to social media marketing activities and online information sharing. Other keyword clusters include social media strategy, adoption, innovation, digital capability, and influencer marketing, which suggests increasing topical diversification in the literature as social media marketing matures.

4.6 Co-citation Network

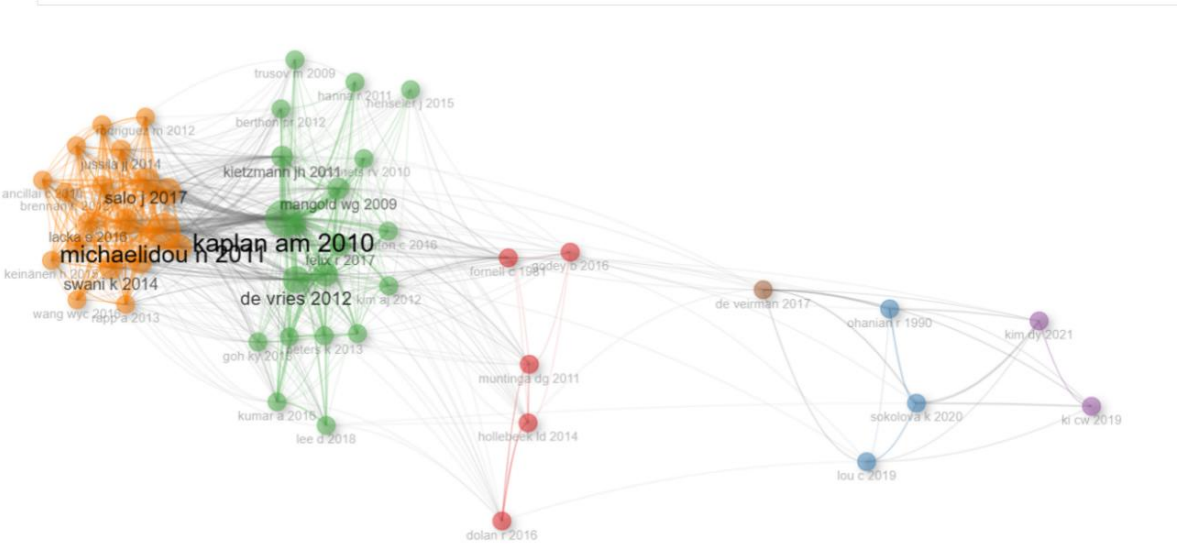


Figure 7: Co-citation Network
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

Several documents have been highly cited in the literature and are credited for building the foundation of social media marketing research, as shown in Figure 7. The most highly cited article by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) defined social media and provided insights into its importance to marketing, Michaelidou et al. (2011) provided an understanding of social media adoption in SMEs, and Kietzmann et al. (2011) developed a framework explaining social media platform functions. These documents continue to receive a high number of citations, suggesting they continue to influence research that centres on social media marketing strategy.

Documents that have received the highest citations in recent years studied customers' engagement, organisations' digital capabilities, digital transformation, and strategies for creating customer value through social media marketing. Research that focused on novel digital marketing tactics, such as influencer marketing, social commerce, and technology-mediated customer engagement, also continues to receive many citations. Documents published within the last three years suggest that the field has shifted from describing SMEs' adoption of social media to a more clearly defined understanding of digital marketing outcomes of interest.

The frequency of citations suggests that the development of social media marketing in SMEs is largely due to both conceptual work that provided the foundation for understanding social media platforms and well-defined studies centring on outcomes of interest.

4.7 Keyword Co-occurrence Network

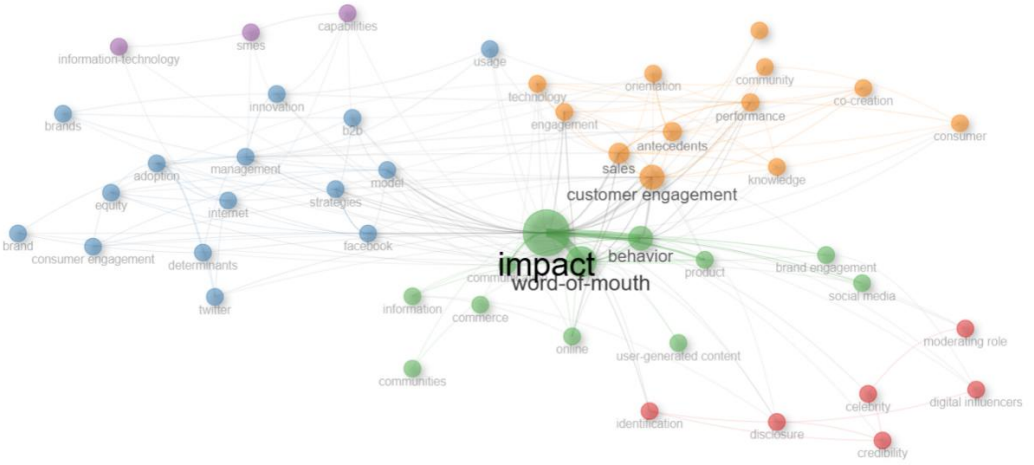


Figure 8: Co-occurrence Network
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to provide insight into how the body of knowledge on social media marketing within SMEs is structured. Research topics were clustered to provide an overview of frequently studied topics and to indicate gaps in the literature. Five primary clusters were developed, illustrating that research on social media marketing within SMEs is broad and continually evolving.

The largest cluster comprises keywords related to impact, word of mouth, consumers, and user-generated content. Research topics within this cluster focus on how interactions on social media platforms can influence consumer purchase decisions and brand conversations. Keywords in the second cluster are customer engagement, performance, sales, and antecedents. This cluster illustrates the growing emphasis research is placing on understanding how and why social media marketing can improve organisational performance (Figure 8).

Cluster three consists of social media, strategy, adoption, Facebook, and management. These keywords were generally found in articles published earlier in the timeline that investigated how and why SMEs adopted social media platforms as marketing tools. Cluster four includes innovation, digital capabilities, information technology, and SMEs. The final cluster is smaller but contains the keywords digital influencers, credibility, and disclosure. The presence of this cluster suggests that researchers are beginning to understand the importance of influencers and the need for transparency through disclosure in digital marketing. (Appel et al., 2020; Felix et al., 2017).

4.8 Thematic Evolution of Social Media Marketing Research

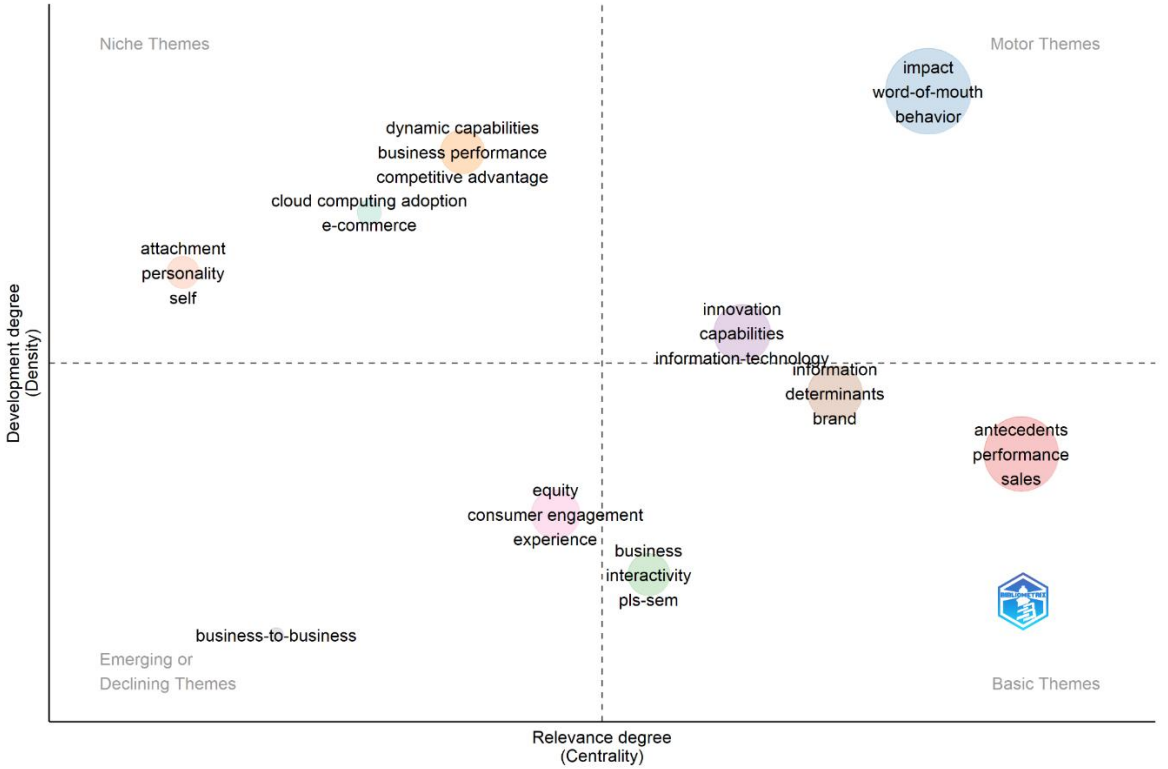


Figure 9: Thematic Evolution
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

Building on the bibliometric results presented thus far, Figure 9 presents a thematic map of the evolution of social media marketing research within SMEs. Specifically, topics are plotted based on their normalised centrality and density within the bibliographic dataset. Consistent with previous visual representations, research topics corresponding to motor themes (i.e., high centrality and high density) include impact, word of mouth, and behaviour. Meanwhile, basic themes include antecedents, sales, and performance; niche themes include dynamic capabilities, competitive advantage, business performance, cloud computing adoption, and e-commerce; and emerging/declining themes include consumer engagement, experience, interactivity, business-to-business marketing, and PLS-SEM.

Examining the thematic evolution of social media marketing research within SMEs generally corroborates previous findings. Motor themes, including impact, word of mouth, and behaviour, represent well-developed and influential areas of research. Their prominence indicates that social media marketing research increasingly examines how social media activities translate into consumer responses and marketing outcomes. The prominence of these themes suggests increasing scholarly attention to behavioural and outcome-oriented measures beyond simple platform adoption.

Basic themes are unsurprising given the centrality values; scholars have continued to investigate how organisational, technological, and environmental antecedents affect both SM adoption and performance contribution. This observation coincides with previous conclusions that antecedents/conditions serve as bridging concepts among disparate lines of research.

Despite their comparatively low prevalence in the literature, niche themes provide valuable context for ongoing sub-disciplinary convergence among scholars of digital transformation, strategic management, and innovation. Current understanding of social media marketing remains underdeveloped with regard to these topics, although each has broadened conceptions of social media marketing beyond promotional communication. Empirically, niche themes reflect relatively siloed pockets of scholarship representing sub-communities of research collaborators.

Topics corresponding to emerging themes were mentioned earlier in this subsection. The thematic map also highlights several specialised and less-developed areas, indicating opportunities for further research.

4.9 Trend Topic Analysis

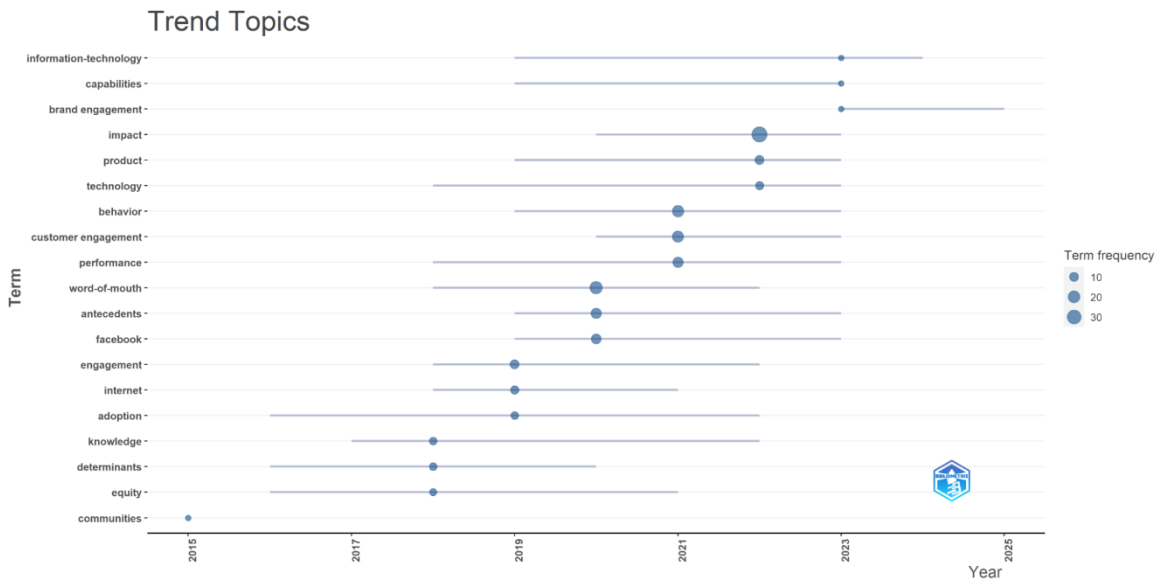


Figure 10: Trend Topics
Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny

Figure 10 illustrates research topics that were extensively studied in the field's early stages, including online communities, internet adoption, and social media usage/implementation. Given the early nature of these studies, it is intuitive that scholars were interested in examining both the technological diffusion of SM and its adoption at the organisational level within SMEs.

Topics that rose in prevalence from 2018 to 2021 include customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, consumer behaviour, Facebook, and marketing performance. The former cluster of keywords emphasises the human element of SM usage, while the latter topics focus on performance assessment. As a result, this phase of research signified a departure from purely technology-oriented investigations toward studies concerning customer interaction and marketing effectiveness.

Research published since 2022 has focused largely on brand engagement, digital capabilities, information technology, innovation, and organisational performance. The former triad of topics is conceptually related and highlights SM's role as both an organisational capability that facilitates digital transformation and a potential

source of sustainable competitive advantage. Concurrently, several topics not discussed above (e.g., influencer marketing, artificial intelligence, and data-driven marketing) suggest the field will continue to adapt as novel digital technologies and marketing paradigms emerge.

Overall, the trend-topic analysis indicates increasing attention to digital capabilities, innovation, and organisational performance, while emerging technologies remain comparatively underexplored.

5. Systematic Literature Review

5.1 Research Themes

Five major research themes were identified throughout the timeline of social media marketing research development in SMEs. These include: Social Media Adoption and Strategy; Customer Engagement and Electronic Word-of-Mouth; Business Performance and Competitive Advantage; Digital Capabilities and Innovation; and Emerging Digital Marketing Practices.

5.1.1 Social Media Adoption and Strategy

The initial wave of studies sought to explore why SMEs adopt social media and the factors that contribute to its adoption within organisations. Arguments were made that social media provided SMEs with an inexpensive marketing channel to overcome barriers posed by limited resources, increase exposure, and better communicate with customers (Ainin et al., 2015; Michaelidou et al., 2011). Influential factors determined to encourage social media adoption among SMEs include technological readiness, managerial support, perceived usefulness, organisational capabilities, and environmental pressures (Siamagka et al., 2015). As research progressed, themes shifted from issues surrounding adoption decisions to a focus on building strategic social media capabilities (Felix et al., 2017).

5.1.2 Customer Engagement and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Another frequently observed research topic was centred around customer engagement and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Unlike traditional marketing strategies, social media allows firms to engage customers through online content sharing, online communities, and two-way communication on an ongoing basis (Brodie et al., 2013). Customer engagement facilitated through such interactions has been found to increase trust and commitment between firms and customers while encouraging customers to participate in brand conversations and develop shared relationships with other customers (Brodie et al., 2013). A second frequently researched topic under this theme was electronic word-of-mouth. Positive eWOM, consistently found to influence consumer purchase intentions and attitudes toward brands, has been shown to help SMEs increase brand awareness and reduce consumer uncertainty (Appel et al., 2020; De Vries et al., 2012). User-generated content and online customer reviews function as cost-efficient methods for SMEs with limited budgets to reach new potential customers.

5.1.3 Business Performance and Competitive Advantage

A substantial proportion of the reviewed studies examined connections between social media use and organisational performance. Findings commonly suggest that social media has a positive influence on businesses' brand awareness, customer attraction, sales growth, and competitive advantage (Ancillai et al., 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021). These performance enhancements are thought to be attributable to social media's ability to help organisations foster better customer relationships and improve customer responsiveness. Nevertheless, it is important to note that some literature suggests performance is heightened when social media is used strategically and integrated into an organisation's broader mission, rather than simply to have

an online presence. For this reason, more recent literature surrounding SM marketing and firm performance includes themes of strategic planning, measurement, and continual content optimisation.

5.1.4 Digital Capabilities and Innovation

The most recent advancement in themes of literature revolves around the characterisation of social media marketing as a digital capability. Previous literature portrayed social media usage as a distinct marketing strategy implemented by businesses to communicate with customers. Newer literature, however, builds off of this idea by discussing social media usage as one facet of a firm's digital capabilities. Digital capabilities have been found to aid firms in knowledge sharing, innovation, and value creation for customers (Teece, 2018; Vrontis et al., 2021). Rooted in the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) literature, this stream of research suggests that SMEs with strong digital capabilities that leverage social media alongside other digital technologies are better equipped to adapt to changing environments and maintain a competitive advantage over rivals.

5.1.5 Emerging Digital Marketing Practices

As reflected in the most recent years of the literature reviewed, there is also an emergence of studies focused on social media marketing in conjunction with other topics. These include research on social media and influencer marketing, social commerce, artificial intelligence, personalisation, and data analytics. Such advancements in technology and marketing strategies have allowed businesses to use social media platforms not only as a way to communicate with customers but also to use the information obtained from social media interactions to better predict customer wants and needs and provide customers with personalised shopping experiences (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Hudders et al., 2021). While these topics may be new to social media research as it pertains to SMEs, they show promise as emerging directions for future research.

5.2 Theoretical Foundations

Over the years, social media marketing research within SME contexts has applied various theoretical lenses from marketing, strategic management, information systems, and organisational behaviour. This diversity illustrates the complexities involved in explaining SME social media adoption, implementation, and value creation through a single theoretical perspective. While the lack of theoretical consistency may be viewed negatively, several theoretical frameworks recur throughout the literature regardless of the study's research focus. Most empirical studies have drawn from established theories to explain decisions to adopt SM (e.g., TOE framework), consumer interactions with SM (Customer Engagement Theory), firms' digital marketing capabilities (RBV), and organisational performance (Resource-Advantage Theory) (Hunt & Morgan, 2004).

Dynamic Capabilities Theory has been an important theoretical lens for viewing SM. Originating from the Resource-Based View of firms, social media marketing is frequently defined as an organisational resource that can create sustainable competitive advantage when it possesses unique attributes and is strategically aligned with other organisational resources (Barney, 1991). An extension of the RBV, Dynamic Capabilities Theory suggests that SMEs need to develop, integrate, and reconfigure digital marketing resources to adapt to dynamic market conditions and technological changes (Teece, 2018). Both theories have been applied to explain how SM enables firms to innovate, manage customer relationships, and enhance performance over time.

Methodologically, many studies that sought to understand SM adoption have adopted the TOE framework, which posits that technology adoption is contingent on technological readiness, organisational characteristics,

and the environmental conditions of the industry in which the organisation operates (Tornatzky and Fleischer, 1990). Studies that have used the TOE framework have found that managerial support, technological expertise, available resources, and competition are drivers of SM adoption among SMEs (Ainin et al., 2015; Siamagka et al., 2015). These studies concluded that while technological availability is critical, it is by no means sufficient for successful SM implementation.

Most studies interested in consumers have adopted Customer Engagement Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and communication-based theoretical perspectives to explain firm-customer interactions on SM platforms. The underlying assumption of these theories is that interactive communication, trust, reciprocity, and customer-brand value creation deepen customer relationships and positively influence electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Because most SM platforms are primarily used to communicate with customers rather than advertise to them, many researchers have adopted these perspectives to explain consumers' SM behaviour.

Emerging research streams studying influencer marketing, social commerce, and digital ecosystems have leveraged novel theories such as Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Social Influence Theory to explain how and why followers trust influencers' opinions and change their attitudes toward products/services that influencers endorse (Hudders et al., 2021). The application of multiple theoretical perspectives across studies highlights maturation within this body of knowledge. However, the lack of a consistent theoretical perspective to which most studies can relate also suggests that we do not yet have a framework that can comprehensively explain the increasingly complex nature of social media marketing within SMEs. Moving forward, research should continue to borrow from different theoretical schools of thought to provide well-rounded explanations of social media phenomena that consider organisational differences and cultural contexts.

5.2 Methodological Trends

The selected studies demonstrate considerable methodological diversity, although quantitative approaches are more frequently represented in the literature. The majority of articles used cross-sectional studies with structured questionnaires to examine relationships between SM use and various outcomes, such as CE and organisational performance. Researchers then used survey data collected from SME managers or owners, social media practitioners, or customers to statistically analyse relationships between study variables through regression or various forms of SEM. Qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and content analyses were less popular but provided additional insights into social media implementation strategies, organisational challenges, and decision-making processes that survey data could not sufficiently address.

The methodological literature also shows increasing use of more advanced analytical approaches. Recent studies have examined mediation and moderation relationships, developed constructs such as digital marketing capabilities, and employed advanced statistical techniques to examine relationships among social media marketing variables. In addition, some studies have moved beyond hypothesis testing by developing theoretical explanations from empirical findings. Bibliometric analysis, systematic literature reviews, and science-mapping techniques have also been used to examine research trends, thematic structures, and knowledge clusters within the field (Donthu et al., 2021). Moving forward, scholars should consider greater use of longitudinal, experimental, comparative, and mixed-method designs to capture changes over time and provide stronger evidence regarding temporal relationships and potential causal mechanisms.

5.3 Research Gaps and Future Research Agenda

Although the literature on social media marketing in SMEs has advanced considerably, some research gaps persist that warrant further investigation. First, most prior studies focus on developed economies, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. Fewer studies have focused on SMEs in developing and emerging markets, which differ in digital infrastructure, institutional contexts, customer needs, and social media practices. Understanding these dynamics can enrich the literature and enhance external validity and generalizability.

Second, most studies use cross-sectional survey data, limiting researchers' ability to examine changes and developments in social media marketing capabilities and outcomes over time. Previous research has revealed important correlations between social media usage, customer engagement, and organisational performance. Future studies would benefit from longitudinal designs that allow inferences about changes in digital marketing activities, capabilities, technology adoption, customer engagement, and performance. Such studies could provide stronger evidence regarding temporal relationships and potential causal mechanisms between social media marketing practices and performance-related outcomes.

Third, while research on customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, and firm performance is well established in the literature, few studies have considered newer, emergent digital technologies. Examples include artificial intelligence, generative AI, predictive analytics, social commerce, augmented reality, and one-to-one marketing. As many SMEs increasingly adopt these technologies, future research should examine how they can complement social media marketing within SMEs.

Fourth, although prior research has drawn from different theoretical lenses to study social media marketing in SMEs, these theories have seldom been integrated in individual studies. For instance, prior research has drawn on the Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the Technology–Organisation–Environment framework, and Customer Engagement Theory. Integrating these theories could help researchers gain deeper insights into how resources, technological capabilities, environmental conditions, and customer relationships shape social media marketing in SMEs.

Lastly, future studies could use different methods of data analysis and research design. Examples include longitudinal analyses, mixed-method studies, cross-country comparative studies, and experimental studies. Methodological diversity would increase confidence in inference while allowing researchers to gain greater insights into how social media marketing may differ across industries, organisational contexts, countries, and platforms.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the evolution of social media marketing research in small and medium-sized enterprises through a bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review. The analysis shows that research on social media marketing in SMEs has grown over time, as SMEs increasingly view social media platforms as important avenues for enhancing customer engagement and relationships, improving marketing performance, and increasing competitiveness.

The results from the bibliometric analysis show that studies on social media marketing have seen increased research attention since 2010, with significant growth since 2019. The research domain has also seen

increased international collaboration, with publications appearing across established marketing and interdisciplinary journals. Science mapping revealed that research topics have evolved from an initial focus on social media adoption to include constructs such as customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, digital capabilities, digital innovation, influencer marketing, and business performance. The SLR complemented these findings by revealing that studies on social media marketing in SMEs can be broadly grouped into five themes: (1) social media adoption and usage, marketing strategies, (2) customer engagement and electronic word-of-mouth, (3) business performance and competitive advantage, (4) digital capabilities and innovation, and (5) emerging digital marketing trends and technologies. The SLR also revealed that scholars have tested their theoretical propositions using different theories and methods. However, there are gaps in the study of SMEs in developing countries, in the use of longitudinal data, in the integration of theories, and in the consideration of newer and emergent digital technologies.

As digital technologies evolve, social media marketing is expected to remain an important strategic capability for SMEs to enhance customer engagement, drive innovation, and achieve sustained competitive advantage.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, this study provides an intellectual panorama of social media marketing in SMEs. By combining bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review, this study makes a novel contribution beyond existing reviews that focus on a single topic (e.g., customer engagement, influencer marketing, or digital transformation). By integrating bibliometric evidence with the systematic literature review, the study provides a consolidated theoretical map of the perspectives used to explain social media marketing in SMEs and identifies areas where greater theoretical integration is needed.

Second, the SLR helps construct a holistic picture by consolidating fragmented theories tested in prior studies. Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Technology-Organisation-Environment framework, Customer Engagement Theory, and Social Exchange Theory are all widely cited theories in extant studies of SME social media marketing. Although existing studies have developed a relatively nuanced understanding of SME social media marketing based on individual theories, future research needs to make concerted efforts to integrate multiple theories to understand the complex relationships among digital capabilities, customer engagement, and business performance.

Third, the scoping review maps out emergent themes and topics (e.g., artificial intelligence, influencer marketing, social commerce, and digital capabilities) that are likely to expand the conceptual boundaries of social media marketing. These findings provide directions for future theoretical development concerning SMEs' digital marketing strategies and capabilities.

6.2 Practical Implications

SME owners, managers, marketers, and policymakers could also benefit from this study's findings. Managers could take away that social media is more than just another tool for communication and promotion. Social media presence needs to serve specific strategic purposes, constantly engage with customers, monitor social media performance, and align with SMEs' overall business strategy. The findings suggest that investments in digital capabilities, high-quality content, and sustained customer relationships may be more strategically valuable than focusing solely on follower growth.

Likewise, marketers need to pay more attention to customer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, and influencers. Creating opportunities for authentic customer interactions, encouraging user-generated content,

and embracing data-driven marketing will build customer trust and improve the overall effectiveness of marketing efforts. Marketers can also take advantage of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and predictive analytics to offer more personalised customer experiences and inform marketing decisions.

Lastly, policymakers and SME support agencies/institutions could play an active role in facilitating digital transformations among SMEs. Providing training sessions, technological support, and digital infrastructure, among other measures, will enhance SMEs' digital capabilities and increase the likelihood of adopting digital technologies, particularly in developing and emerging economies.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis was based on publications retrieved through the selected databases and therefore may not capture relevant studies indexed elsewhere. Second, the findings are influenced by the search terms, eligibility criteria, and 2010–2025 publication window adopted in the review. Third, bibliometric findings depend on the availability and quality of bibliographic metadata, citation records, and indexing practices. Finally, the review synthesised 90 publications and therefore may not fully represent the breadth of social media marketing research in all SME contexts. Future reviews could broaden database coverage, extend the search period, and incorporate additional qualitative and quantitative synthesis approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field.

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