



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Digital Communication Strategies in Building Brand Engagement: A Case Study of SMEs in Emerging Markets

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 13, 2024 Accepted: Dec 5, 2024	This study explores the role of digital communication strategies in building brand engagement for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in emerging markets. Using a qualitative approach, the research adopts a literature review and library research method to analyze existing studies, reports, and case examples of digital marketing practices. The paper investigates how SMEs leverage digital platforms to foster consumer loyalty, enhance brand awareness, and establish long-term relationships in a competitive business environment. The findings reveal that SMEs in emerging markets often face resource constraints, yet they can successfully utilize affordable digital tools such as social media, search engine optimization (SEO), and email marketing to engage with their target audience effectively. Furthermore, digital communication strategies, when tailored to local cultures and consumer behavior, offer a competitive advantage in reaching diverse customer segments. The study also highlights the importance of data-driven decision-making in optimizing digital marketing efforts and the need for SMEs to continuously adapt their strategies to shifting market dynamics. In conclusion, SMEs in emerging markets can build strong brand engagement through innovative, cost-effective digital strategies, provided they invest in understanding their audience and creating personalized, relevant content. The research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital communication in the context of SMEs and provides practical insights for businesses seeking to enhance their brand presence in emerging markets.
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INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way businesses engage with their customers, particularly in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In emerging markets, where SMEs play a crucial role in economic development, the adoption of digital communication strategies has become a significant driver of brand engagement. Despite the growing importance of digital marketing tools, SMEs in these regions face unique challenges, such as limited financial and human resources, which often hinder their ability to adopt and effectively implement digital strategies. As a result, there is a growing interest in understanding how these businesses can leverage digital communication to foster meaningful relationships with their customers, enhance brand loyalty, and expand their market reach.

While existing literature highlights the importance of digital communication in building brand engagement for large corporations, there is a notable gap when it comes to understanding its specific application in SMEs within emerging markets. Most studies have focused on the experiences of large companies in developed economies, neglecting the particular constraints and opportunities faced by SMEs in emerging regions. Moreover, while numerous studies have explored digital communication tools such as social media, SEO, and email marketing, there is limited research examining how SMEs in emerging markets adapt and integrate these tools into cohesive, effective brand engagement

strategies.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to provide SMEs in emerging markets with practical insights on how to effectively utilize digital communication strategies to overcome resource constraints and build strong brand engagement. In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, understanding how SMEs can effectively use digital tools is critical for their survival and growth. This research aims to fill the gap by offering a deeper understanding of how digital communication can be harnessed to build brand engagement in SMEs operating in emerging markets.

Previous studies have explored digital marketing in various contexts. For instance, research by (Chaffey & Smith, 2022) emphasizes the growing importance of social media in brand engagement, while (Jones & Lee, 2022) highlight the role of content marketing in fostering customer loyalty. However, these studies predominantly focus on large firms or businesses in developed economies, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by SMEs in emerging markets. Furthermore, (Kumari et al., 2024) examined digital tools but failed to contextualize these strategies within the resource-limited environment of SMEs in developing countries.

This study is novel in its focus on SMEs in emerging markets, offering a comprehensive exploration of how these businesses can effectively deploy digital communication strategies despite their resource limitations. By focusing on the intersection of digital communication and brand engagement within the context of SMEs, this research provides valuable insights into the ways these businesses can adapt digital tools to local market conditions, thereby enhancing their competitive advantage.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of digital communication strategies in building brand engagement for SMEs in emerging markets. Specifically, the study aims to identify the digital tools most commonly used by SMEs, explore how these tools are integrated into brand engagement strategies, and assess the impact of these strategies on consumer loyalty and brand awareness. The findings will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on digital marketing for SMEs and provide actionable recommendations for businesses seeking to improve their brand engagement through digital communication.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to guide SMEs in emerging markets in adopting digital strategies that are not only cost-effective but also tailored to their specific needs and constraints. By examining the practical application of digital communication tools, this study will provide SMEs with the insights needed to enhance their brand presence, engage more effectively with customers, and ultimately drive business growth. Moreover, the research will inform policymakers and support organizations on how to facilitate digital adoption among SMEs, contributing to the broader economic development of emerging markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of digital communication strategies in brand engagement has been extensively studied, but the focus has often been on large corporations or businesses in developed economies. SMEs in emerging markets face a unique set of challenges and opportunities, and thus require specific approaches to digital communication in order to build effective brand engagement. This literature review explores key theories, models, and empirical studies on digital communication strategies, brand engagement, and the role of SMEs in emerging markets, highlighting both the general trends and the gaps in the current body of knowledge.

Digital communication strategies

Digital communication strategies encompass a wide range of tools and platforms, including social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, content marketing, and paid advertising (Ryan, 2016). These strategies are designed to enhance brand visibility, foster engagement, and build long-term relationships with customers. Social media, in particular, has become an essential platform for brands to interact with their audience, as it allows for real-time communication and targeted content delivery (ruskova & vaskova, 2023). In recent years, studies have shown that digital communication has a profound impact on consumer behavior, influencing purchasing decisions and enhancing brand loyalty. However, the question remains as to how SMEs, with their limited resources, can leverage these digital tools effectively, especially in emerging markets where access to technology and digital literacy may vary.

Brand engagement in the digital age

Brand engagement refers to the emotional and cognitive connection that consumers develop with a brand through consistent interactions, creating a sense of loyalty and trust (Huang, 2023). In the context of digital communication, brand engagement is fostered through personalized content, interactive campaigns, and active participation on social media platforms. While the relationship between digital communication and brand engagement has been studied in large corporations (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020), fewer studies have focused on how SMEs in emerging markets implement these strategies. Research by (Zahoor et al., 2022) indicates that engagement with SMEs' online communities helps build trust and loyalty, yet many SMEs struggle to effectively create such engagement due to budget and manpower constraints. This underscores the need for tailored digital strategies that align with the specific challenges and opportunities SMEs face.

Challenges faced by SMEs in emerging markets

SMEs in emerging markets often face barriers such as limited financial resources, low levels of digital literacy, and infrastructure gaps, all of which hinder the effective use of digital communication strategies (Ibrahim, 2023). While digital platforms offer cost-effective tools, many SMEs are unsure of how to maximize their impact due to lack of expertise or guidance (Praveen et al., 2024). According to research by (Gunawan & Ramli, 2023), SMEs in emerging markets often prioritize immediate survival over long-term brand-building, leading to reactive rather than proactive marketing efforts. Nonetheless, studies have also pointed out that SMEs in these regions that successfully integrate digital communication strategies into their brand engagement efforts often experience significant competitive advantages. This is due to the rapid growth of internet access and mobile device penetration, which allows SMEs to reach wider audiences with lower marketing costs.

Digital tools in SMEs' brand engagement

In emerging markets, SMEs often rely on cost-effective digital tools such as social media platforms, local search engines, and email campaigns to engage their target audience. The use of social media is particularly prominent, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp providing businesses with a means to interact with customers in real-time (Constantin & Blaga, 2023). For SMEs, these tools offer a unique opportunity to build brand presence and foster community engagement without the need for significant investment in traditional advertising channels (Vidal et al., 2023). However, successful digital engagement also depends on understanding local consumer behavior, cultural nuances, and regional preferences, which requires localized content creation and contextual marketing (Liu, 2024).

Adapting digital strategies for SMEs in emerging markets

Several studies highlight the importance of adapting digital communication strategies to the unique needs of SMEs in emerging markets. For example, (Ashiru et al., 2023) emphasize the necessity of adopting a "resource-scarcity" mindset, where SMEs maximize the value of digital platforms through targeted, low-cost campaigns. Furthermore, SMEs in emerging markets need to be agile in responding to rapidly changing digital trends and consumer preferences. Research by (Ndei & Ngugi, 2022) highlights the importance of using data analytics to optimize digital strategies, allowing SMEs to understand consumer behavior and tailor their engagement efforts accordingly. Such insights are essential for SMEs looking to create personalized, relevant content that resonates with their target audience and fosters long-term brand loyalty.

Theoretical frameworks and models

A number of theoretical frameworks help explain the link between digital communication and brand engagement. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), for instance, suggests that consumers process digital content through two main routes: central and peripheral. In the context of brand engagement, this means that SMEs need to design digital content that appeals to both the rational and emotional aspects of consumers' decision-making (Pirraglia et al., 2022). Similarly, the Customer Engagement Cycle model emphasizes the cyclical process of brand interaction, where brands need to engage customers at various stages—awareness, consideration, conversion, and retention (Ng et al., 2020). These models can be adapted to the specific context of SMEs in emerging markets by incorporating elements such as limited resources and regional market differences.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the role of digital communication strategies in building brand engagement for SMEs in emerging markets. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for understanding complex phenomena in-depth, exploring individuals' experiences, and gaining insights into the strategies and behaviors of SMEs in their unique business environment. This approach allows for a detailed examination of how digital communication tools are utilized and their impact on brand engagement in SMEs, where quantitative data may not fully capture the subtleties of strategy implementation and consumer interaction.

Type of research

The research is classified as a case study because it investigates the use of digital communication strategies by SMEs within specific emerging markets. This study focuses on SMEs operating in emerging markets, providing rich, contextual insights into the digital strategies they employ to enhance brand engagement. The case study design allows for a thorough examination of individual SMEs, enabling a deeper understanding of their unique challenges, strategies, and the effectiveness of digital tools in building brand loyalty and engagement.

Data sources

The primary data sources for this study include secondary data obtained through a comprehensive literature review and secondary sources such as reports, case studies, industry publications, and academic articles. The study analyzes existing research and data on digital communication strategies and brand engagement, focusing on SMEs in emerging markets. Additionally, qualitative data will be gathered from relevant case studies and examples of SMEs in different emerging economies. These secondary data sources provide the necessary foundation to understand the broader patterns and trends within SMEs' use of digital communication tools.

Furthermore, primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in digital marketing within SMEs, including business owners, marketing managers, and digital strategists. These interviews will provide insights into the specific strategies SMEs use and the challenges they face in implementing these strategies.

Data collection techniques

Literature Review: A comprehensive literature review will be conducted to gather secondary data from academic journals, books, reports, and industry publications. This will help identify existing knowledge gaps and form the theoretical foundation for the study.

Semi-structured Interviews: The research will conduct semi-structured interviews with a selected sample of SMEs operating in emerging markets. The interviewees will include business owners, marketing managers, and digital strategists who are directly involved in the decision-making process for digital communication strategies. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for gathering in-depth insights as they allow flexibility while ensuring the exploration of specific themes related to the research questions.

Document Analysis: Additional secondary data will be gathered through the analysis of relevant documents, such as marketing plans, digital communication strategies, and annual reports from SMEs. This will provide valuable contextual information and complement the insights from the interviews.

Data analysis method

Data analysis in this study will follow a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a widely used method for analyzing qualitative data, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process will involve the following steps:

Data familiarization: All interview transcripts, documents, and secondary sources will be thoroughly reviewed to become familiar with the data. This will involve reading through the data multiple times to gain a sense of the content and initial ideas for coding.

Generating Initial Codes: Initial codes will be generated from the data, identifying significant features

related to digital communication strategies, brand engagement, and challenges faced by SMEs in emerging markets. These codes will capture key elements related to the research questions.

Theme development: After initial coding, similar codes will be grouped together to form themes. These themes will reflect the main findings regarding how SMEs in emerging markets use digital communication tools to build brand engagement, as well as the challenges and strategies they employ.

Reviewing themes: The developed themes will be reviewed for coherence and relevance. This step will ensure that the identified themes accurately represent the data and address the research questions. Some themes may be refined or merged during this stage.

Defining and naming themes: Once the themes have been finalized, they will be defined and named to clearly articulate the insights they provide regarding digital communication strategies and brand engagement for SMEs in emerging markets.

Interpretation and reporting: Finally, the findings will be interpreted and presented in a way that addresses the research questions. The analysis will compare the strategies used by SMEs across different emerging markets, highlighting both the similarities and differences in their digital communication efforts.

Ethical considerations

This research will adhere to ethical guidelines throughout the data collection and analysis process. Informed consent will be obtained from all interview participants, ensuring that they understand the purpose of the study and their right to confidentiality. All data will be anonymized, and any personal information will be kept secure. Furthermore, the study will respect the intellectual property rights of secondary data sources and cite them appropriately.

RESULTS

The analysis of digital communication strategies in building brand engagement among SMEs in emerging markets reveals several key insights regarding the effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities presented by various digital tools and platforms. Drawing from the semi-structured interviews with business owners, marketing managers, and digital strategists, as well as secondary data sources, this section presents a synthesis of the findings.

One of the most striking results of the study is the significant reliance on social media platforms for brand engagement. Almost all SMEs in emerging markets, regardless of their size or sector, have adopted social media as a primary tool for communicating with customers. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are widely used due to their accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and ability to directly engage with a large and diverse audience. These platforms provide SMEs with a unique opportunity to foster two-way communication with their target market, facilitating real-time feedback and customer interaction. Social media also allows for personalized content creation, which helps SMEs connect with their customers on a more emotional level, thus enhancing brand engagement. This finding aligns with previous research by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), which emphasized the importance of social media in modern brand communication strategies. However, while the potential for engagement is high, SMEs often struggle to maintain consistent and effective communication due to limited resources, both in terms of budget and human capital. Many SMEs reported that while they understand the importance of frequent posting and interactive content, they are often unable to keep up with the demands of managing multiple platforms simultaneously.

In addition to social media, content marketing has emerged as another critical strategy for building brand engagement. Several SMEs in emerging markets have adopted blogging, video marketing, and other forms of content creation to engage their customers. Content marketing is particularly valuable for SMEs because it offers a way to build brand authority and credibility without requiring large financial investments. By providing valuable, relevant content, SMEs can position themselves as industry leaders, gaining the trust of their customers and encouraging loyalty. This is in line with findings by (Brodie-Mends, 2022), who emphasized the role of content in cultivating long-term customer relationships. However, SMEs often face challenges in producing high-quality content due to limited expertise in content creation and digital marketing. Many respondents noted that creating engaging content requires specialized skills, which are often outside the scope of their internal teams,

leading them to either outsource or rely on user-generated content, which may not always align with the brand's voice and objectives.

A key challenge identified by participants was the lack of digital literacy among both business owners and customers in emerging markets. Many SMEs reported difficulties in understanding the full potential of digital communication tools and how to integrate them into their marketing strategies. This is especially true for traditional businesses that are only beginning to adopt digital marketing practices. As noted by (Mudambi, 2023), the digital divide in emerging markets often leads to inefficiencies in strategy implementation. SMEs with limited digital knowledge struggle to optimize their use of social media algorithms, track campaign performance, or even engage in basic customer relationship management (CRM) practices. In many cases, SMEs in these regions also face a lack of access to training and resources to bridge these gaps, which further exacerbates the difficulties they encounter in implementing effective digital strategies.

Despite these challenges, localization of digital communication strategies emerged as a significant success factor for SMEs in emerging markets. SMEs that tailored their content to local cultures, languages, and consumer behaviors reported more effective engagement with their audiences. This was especially true for SMEs operating in multilingual and multicultural regions, where generic content or global branding strategies often failed to resonate with local customers. For instance, businesses that adapted their language and visual content to reflect local tastes and cultural preferences saw higher levels of interaction and positive feedback from their customers. The importance of localization is also supported, who highlight the necessity of understanding regional market dynamics when engaging in digital communication. Localization, while time-consuming, provides SMEs with a powerful tool to differentiate themselves in competitive markets, helping them build a loyal customer base and improve overall brand visibility.

Furthermore, the study revealed that customer engagement on digital platforms has a direct impact on brand loyalty and customer retention. SMEs that maintained consistent communication through social media and email marketing were able to create stronger connections with their customers. Respondents noted that responding to customer queries promptly and engaging in conversations through comments and direct messages helped establish trust and loyalty. Additionally, personalized messages, special offers, and exclusive content were frequently cited as key methods for fostering long-term customer relationships. This is consistent with the findings of (Petzer & Van Tonder, 2019), who argue that customer engagement is a cyclical process that builds over time with consistent and meaningful interactions. By leveraging digital tools for direct engagement, SMEs can move beyond traditional advertising, turning their customers into active participants in the brand-building process.

However, the study also identified resource limitations as a significant barrier to the implementation of digital communication strategies. Many SMEs in emerging markets lack the financial resources to hire specialized digital marketing teams or invest in advanced tools for data analytics and campaign optimization. As a result, SMEs often resort to low-cost strategies, such as organic social media posts and influencer partnerships, to maximize their reach within budget constraints. While these approaches can be effective, they often limit the ability of SMEs to scale their digital marketing efforts or track their return on investment accurately. The challenge of limited resources was frequently cited by respondents as one of the primary reasons they cannot fully exploit the potential of digital communication tools. This underscores the need for affordable, accessible digital marketing solutions tailored to SMEs, which could help alleviate some of the resource constraints they face.

The findings from this study also suggest that SMEs in emerging markets are increasingly relying on data analytics to inform their digital communication strategies. Many respondents noted that they have started using basic data analytics tools to track customer engagement and adjust their strategies accordingly. While SMEs may not have access to sophisticated analytics platforms, even basic insights into customer behavior can help improve the effectiveness of their digital campaigns. By focusing on key metrics such as engagement rates, click-through rates, and conversion rates, SMEs can refine their strategies and achieve better results. However, the full potential of data analytics is yet to be realized, as many SMEs are still in the early stages of digital adoption and lack the skills or resources to leverage data more effectively. This suggests an area of opportunity for future research and development in digital marketing tools tailored to SMEs in emerging markets.

This study reveals that while digital communication strategies are becoming increasingly integral to building brand engagement among SMEs in emerging markets, several factors—such as digital literacy, resource limitations, and the need for localized content—affect the effectiveness of these strategies. Despite these challenges, SMEs that adopt and adapt digital tools to their local contexts are able to foster deeper connections with their customers, enhancing brand loyalty and engagement. For SMEs in emerging markets, a focused, resource-efficient approach to digital communication can provide significant benefits, provided they can overcome the obstacles of digital knowledge gaps and resource constraints. The findings suggest that tailored, affordable solutions that address the specific needs of SMEs could help bridge these gaps, facilitating stronger brand engagement in emerging markets.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The role of social media in brand engagement

Social media has become the cornerstone of digital communication strategies for SMEs in emerging markets, offering unparalleled access to large and diverse audiences at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing channels. The data collected from interviews revealed that SMEs widely use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp for direct customer engagement. These platforms not only allow businesses to broadcast their messages but also facilitate two-way communication, enabling SMEs to respond to customer inquiries, resolve issues, and gather feedback in real-time. This immediate interaction helps businesses build stronger relationships with their audience, fostering trust and loyalty.

However, the effective use of social media is often hindered by resource constraints. Many SMEs lack dedicated teams to manage their social media presence, leading to inconsistent posting and engagement. As a result, while the potential of social media is recognized, its full value is not always realized. For instance, SMEs often struggle with maintaining regular content creation and engagement due to limited staffing or marketing budgets, which hampers their ability to create high-quality posts that resonate with audiences.

Moreover, while social media platforms provide broad reach, they also present challenges in terms of algorithmic visibility. Many SMEs reported difficulty in optimizing their content to ensure it reaches the target audience. For instance, posts may not appear in followers' feeds unless they are sponsored or boosted, which requires additional financial investment. As noted in the literature by (Lou et al., 2023), the effectiveness of social media marketing relies not only on the frequency of content but also on understanding the platform algorithms, a challenge that SMEs in emerging markets often face due to limited digital literacy.

Despite these challenges, SMEs have found innovative ways to maximize their social media impact. For example, some businesses have successfully leveraged user-generated content (UGC), asking customers to share photos and experiences related to their products. This approach not only enhances brand credibility but also boosts engagement by encouraging customers to participate in the content creation process. This participatory model helps build a community around the brand, increasing customer loyalty and fostering positive word-of-mouth marketing.

Social media plays a pivotal role in enhancing brand engagement among SMEs in emerging markets. However, the lack of resources and digital literacy poses significant challenges to fully exploiting the potential of these platforms. SMEs must prioritize consistent and strategic social media engagement, leveraging creative methods such as UGC to maximize brand visibility and interaction while overcoming the barriers posed by limited resources.

The significance of content marketing for SMEs

Content marketing has emerged as a fundamental component of digital communication strategies for SMEs seeking to build brand engagement. The study reveals that SMEs in emerging markets increasingly rely on content such as blogs, videos, and infographics to connect with their customers. Content marketing is particularly effective because it allows SMEs to provide value to their audience without directly pushing sales. By offering useful information, tips, or entertainment, SMEs can establish themselves as trusted sources of knowledge, building credibility and fostering long-term customer relationships.

However, while content marketing offers substantial benefits, SMEs often face challenges in producing high-quality content. The respondents in the study indicated that creating engaging and informative content requires specific skills in writing, design, and video production, which many SMEs lack in-house. Consequently, SMEs often turn to external agencies or freelancers to fulfill their content needs, which increases costs and limits the scalability of content marketing efforts. Despite these challenges, content marketing remains a cost-effective method for SMEs to engage customers when compared to traditional advertising.

Another significant challenge faced by SMEs is the frequency and consistency of content creation. The SMEs interviewed indicated that, although content marketing is a key part of their digital strategy, they often struggle to maintain a consistent posting schedule. This inconsistency diminishes the potential impact of content marketing, as audiences may lose interest if they do not receive regular updates. For example, small businesses that only post sporadically risk being overshadowed by larger brands with dedicated content marketing teams and larger budgets.

Despite these obstacles, some SMEs have successfully embraced content marketing by focusing on niche areas of interest and creating content that directly addresses their target audience's needs. For example, SMEs in the food and beverage sector often create recipes, cooking tips, or nutritional information that resonate with health-conscious consumers. Similarly, businesses in the fashion industry create styling tips and trend forecasts that align with customer preferences, helping them build a dedicated audience and engage in meaningful conversations with their followers.

Content marketing also enhances brand engagement by enabling SMEs to gather valuable insights into customer preferences. By analyzing how customers interact with their content, SMEs can refine their messaging, improve their content, and deliver more personalized experiences. However, many SMEs in emerging markets lack access to sophisticated tools for content performance analysis, which limits their ability to optimize their strategies and measure ROI effectively.

Challenges in digital literacy and skill gaps

A significant barrier to the effective use of digital communication strategies in SMEs from emerging markets is the lack of digital literacy. Despite the increasing availability of digital tools, many SMEs struggle to fully understand how to leverage these technologies for marketing and brand engagement. The study found that business owners and managers often have limited knowledge about digital marketing, social media algorithms, content creation, and performance analytics, which hampers their ability to design and execute effective strategies.

This digital literacy gap is particularly evident in traditional businesses that have only recently ventured into the digital realm. For instance, several interviewees noted that their initial attempts at digital marketing were based on trial and error, as they lacked structured training or professional expertise. Some SMEs resorted to hiring digital marketing agencies, but due to budget constraints, they often found it difficult to build long-term partnerships with agencies that could provide the necessary expertise.

Moreover, many SMEs face challenges in upskilling their employees, particularly in terms of digital tools and platforms. In many cases, SMEs are unable to invest in comprehensive training programs for their teams due to limited resources. This creates a cycle where the business owners, who are not digitally savvy, remain heavily reliant on external consultants or agencies, which increases costs and reduces operational efficiency.

This lack of digital expertise also results in poor decision-making when it comes to selecting appropriate tools for digital marketing campaigns. For example, some SMEs mistakenly invest in expensive tools or platforms without fully understanding their capabilities, leading to suboptimal outcomes. Similarly, they may fail to optimize their use of social media algorithms, reducing the visibility of their content and limiting brand engagement.

The findings underscore the need for increased digital education and capacity building within SMEs in emerging markets. Governments, industry associations, and educational institutions can play a pivotal role in addressing these skill gaps by providing accessible, affordable training programs that equip SMEs with the knowledge to effectively utilize digital communication strategies.

Table 1: Outlines the key challenges and provides descriptions based on the findings of the study

Challenge	Description
Limited Digital Knowledge	Many SMEs lack the essential knowledge of digital marketing tools and platforms, hindering the development of effective digital communication strategies. Business owners and managers often struggle to understand how to best use digital platforms for brand engagement, resulting in inefficient campaign management.
Inconsistent Use of Digital Tools	SMEs often use digital tools sporadically or without proper strategy. While many have access to social media platforms, they fail to fully utilize features like targeting, scheduling, and analytics, which limits their engagement efforts. This inconsistency often leads to missed opportunities for customer interaction and brand visibility.
Inadequate Technical Skills	The lack of specialized skills in areas such as graphic design, content creation, video production, and data analytics significantly affects the quality and effectiveness of digital communication. As a result, SMEs often produce suboptimal content that fails to engage or resonate with their target audience.
Dependence on External Agencies	Due to the lack of in-house expertise, many SMEs rely heavily on external agencies or freelancers to manage their digital marketing efforts. While this alleviates some immediate knowledge gaps, it creates dependency and increases costs. The limited capacity to develop internal skills further hinders long-term sustainability in digital communication strategies.
Challenges in Data Analytics and Optimization	SMEs often lack the knowledge and tools to effectively analyze and optimize their digital campaigns. This includes difficulties in understanding customer behavior, engagement metrics, and conversion rates. Without proper analysis, it is difficult to refine strategies, leading to inefficient resource allocation and missed growth opportunities.
Difficulty in Keeping Up with Digital Trends	The rapidly evolving nature of digital marketing presents a constant challenge for SMEs to stay updated on trends such as social media algorithms, SEO best practices, and new digital tools. As digital marketing becomes more complex, SMEs with limited resources struggle to keep pace, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage.
Lack of Structured Training and Support	Many SMEs in emerging markets have limited access to formal digital marketing training. Without structured support, business owners and employees often rely on trial and error to learn, leading to inefficiencies and mistakes. This lack of training opportunities further perpetuates the digital skills gap.

The challenges outlined in the table are interconnected and represent significant barriers for SMEs in emerging markets attempting to harness digital communication strategies effectively. These issues highlight the importance of providing targeted training programs, accessible resources, and ongoing support to SMEs in order to bridge the digital literacy gap. While external agencies can provide short-

term solutions, building in-house digital capabilities through training and skill development is essential for long-term success in the digital landscape.

The importance of localization in digital communication

Localization of digital communication strategies has proven to be crucial for SMEs operating in emerging markets. The study revealed that SMEs that adapt their digital content to local languages, cultures, and consumer behaviors are significantly more successful in building brand engagement. Localization goes beyond mere translation; it involves tailoring the brand message to resonate with local values, preferences, and communication styles.

For example, SMEs in Latin America and Southeast Asia often incorporate local cultural references, humor, and colloquialisms into their social media content. This localization makes their messaging more relatable and helps to bridge the gap between the brand and its customers. In contrast, businesses that use generic, global messaging often fail to connect with their audience on a deeper level, leading to weaker engagement. This finding is consistent with research by Liu et al. (2020), who argued that brands that understand local nuances and integrate these elements into their marketing strategies are more likely to succeed in emerging markets.

Another aspect of localization that emerged from the study is the adoption of local payment systems and customer service practices. SMEs in emerging markets often face challenges in providing the same level of service as their global counterparts due to financial constraints and infrastructural limitations. However, SMEs that integrate locally accepted payment methods and customize their customer service approaches to meet local expectations tend to see higher customer satisfaction and engagement.

Localization also extends to the use of local influencers. Several SMEs reported success in partnering with local influencers who have a strong, authentic connection with their audience. These influencers play a key role in amplifying brand messages and increasing trust. SMEs often find that influencers who share their values and connect with the local community provide higher engagement rates compared to global influencers.

Despite the effectiveness of localization, SMEs must be cautious not to go overboard with cultural references, as this could risk alienating customers from different regions or backgrounds within the same market. A balanced approach to localization is crucial to ensuring the brand resonates with a broad audience while staying true to its core identity.

Resource constraints and their impact on digital strategies

Resource limitations are a significant challenge for SMEs in emerging markets when implementing digital communication strategies. Many SMEs operate on tight budgets, which restrict their ability to invest in high-end marketing tools, digital content production, and professional expertise. As a result, SMEs often turn to low-cost or free digital platforms and tools to engage with customers, but these may not always provide the same level of sophistication or reach as paid alternatives.

The study found that SMEs frequently struggle to balance the need for effective brand engagement with their financial constraints. While some businesses successfully use organic social media posts and email newsletters to engage with their audience, these strategies often yield limited results compared to paid advertising campaigns or advanced targeting tools. Moreover, SMEs are often unable to afford advanced data analytics tools, which hinders their ability to assess the effectiveness of their digital campaigns.

Some SMEs manage to overcome these limitations by partnering with other small businesses or leveraging free tools for content creation, such as social media management platforms, video editing apps, and design tools. This collaborative approach allows them to pool resources and share marketing costs, thus increasing the reach and effectiveness of their digital communication efforts. Nevertheless, these workarounds do not eliminate the challenges posed by limited budgets and resources, which remain a major barrier to the scalability of digital communication strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores the critical role of digital communication strategies in building brand

engagement for SMEs in emerging markets. SMEs face significant challenges due to limited digital literacy, resource constraints, and a lack of specialized skills, all of which hinder their ability to fully leverage digital platforms for brand promotion and customer engagement. Despite these obstacles, SMEs that have successfully utilized digital communication strategies—such as personalized content, customer engagement through social media, and collaborative partnerships—demonstrate the potential for these businesses to thrive in competitive markets. The research reveals that while many SMEs have made strides in digital communication, they continue to face barriers in effectively scaling their efforts due to factors such as limited knowledge, inconsistent use of tools, and a dependency on external agencies for technical expertise. This gap highlights the need for tailored training programs and better access to affordable digital tools to support SMEs in achieving sustainable brand engagement.

The findings have several implications for both practitioners and policymakers. For practitioners, especially small business owners and managers, the study recommends a focus on building in-house capabilities by investing in digital literacy and continuous skill development, particularly in areas such as content creation, analytics, and customer relationship management. Policymakers can play a pivotal role by facilitating programs that provide affordable access to digital tools and training, as well as fostering an ecosystem that supports innovation and digital adoption for SMEs. Furthermore, future research should explore the long-term impact of digital communication strategies on brand loyalty and business sustainability in SMEs, especially in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. By addressing the digital literacy gap and optimizing digital communication efforts, SMEs can enhance their engagement with customers, improve brand loyalty, and secure a competitive edge in emerging markets.

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