



Article

Factors Influencing the Use of Digital Marketing by Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises during COVID-19

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the factors that influence the use of digital marketing by SMEs in Medellín during COVID-19, proposing five factors that influence the use of these digital tools by 120 SMEs in Medellín, Colombia. The research was carried out under an exploratory factorial analysis, with a quantitative approach and an exploratory-descriptive scope. For data analysis, the levels of association between the constructs of the conceptual model and the intention to use these virtual tools were estimated, using Cramer's V coefficient. The results identify the benefits perceived by customers, the perceived advantages of using digital tools, and business optimization as the key factors in predicting their acceptance and use. It is concluded that the most used digital marketing strategies are the content and web sites of Instagram and Facebook. As the main implications, the study contributes to understanding the behavior of companies regarding technological change which could help to identify needs and successful strategies that ensure the continuity and sustainability of this business sector. As limitations, the hypotheses were tested in a single context, so it is necessary to compare these results in developed countries to contribute to a global approach. In addition, only marketing professionals who held operational positions were surveyed, so future managers and leaders of the marketing area should be included in the studies.

Keywords: adoption models; digital marketing; Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)



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1. Introduction

The development of digital tools has impacted the economy and its dynamics. Users, for instance, share important information on social media and use digital technologies to find the services and goods they need. This has resulted in a behavioral change not only among consumers but also among firms providing services and products [1]. According to [2], digital marketing is a great example of the different applications of technological developments. It is defined as a form of marketing through which goods and services are promoted using internet-based digital tools. As in traditional marketing, goods and services are delivered through a predefined supply chain; however, in digital marketing, this supply chain consists of tools and methods that allow for the performance online transactions through internet connections [3]. Therefore, digital marketing channels refer to internet-based systems capable of simultaneously creating, promoting, and delivering value from producers to consumers via digital networks [4].

In today's knowledge society, the current technological revolution, in which many of the transactions between consumers and firms occur, is not limited to large firms dedicated to developing technologies or those providing digital and internet services, but it is also aimed at Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) offering goods and services, which

represent an important part of the economy. SMEs, in fact, can greatly benefit from this revolution because digitization is positively related to the growth, performance, and competitiveness of these type of firms [5].

According to [6], digital marketing is the best way for firms to commercialize their products and services. In addition, these authors explain that the methods traditionally used to sell a brand have significantly changed due to the technological advances. Despite this, digital marketing is not yet widely employed by SMEs, which makes them less competitive than other firms that are structured following the new forms of business based on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the internet.

As stated by [7], the business sector is of great importance to both developing and developed economies because it comprises firms that are attractive given their innovation and entrepreneurial characteristics. The impact of SMEs on the economy is a well-known fact within the context of the development of today's society, as they not only contribute to the economy but also provide great social benefits. According to [8], SMEs contribute to the achievement of the fundamental goals of any country's economy, thus becoming the backbone of socioeconomic progress. Therefore, since SMEs face great challenges to become sustainable, they must be dynamic to survive on the market. The stability of their economy, thus, depends on how they can adjust to the social and technological transformations driven by the market trends [9].

In the face of the quarantine generated by the COVID-19 outbreak, the changes in consumption of people around the world changed significantly. Thus, there is evidence of an increase in online shopping transactions in response to the restriction measures imposed and the call to stay at home [10]. The massive upheaval of the pandemic will have impacts on digital marketing that are difficult to foresee, but surely influence new marketing practices, thinking, and basics. For this reason, digital marketing can represent an opportunity for organizations to attract new customers, considering the changing opinions, principles, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of good and bad experiences related to the outbreak [11].

Digital marketing and social media offer SMEs opportunities to attract new customers or target audiences and to reach existing customers more efficiently [12]. Moreover, the use of digital tools may allow SMEs to achieve a higher performance and efficiency in communicating with their customers, as well as to improve their growth and competitiveness in the market. In view of the above, this study aims to identify the factors influencing the use of digital marketing by SMEs in Medellín, Colombia, and to contribute to understanding organizations' behavior regarding the adoption of new technologies.

To approach this study, quantitative research with an exploratory-descriptive scope is proposed. On the one hand, an exploratory factor analysis AFE is proposed with the purpose of obtaining a base structure of the theoretical model to be presented. On the other hand, a confirmatory factor analysis with the idea of validating the measurement scales used together with each of the constructs and the instrument in general. For data processing, we propose the quantification of the levels of association through Cramer's V coefficient to the constructs of the conceptual model to explain the use of digital marketing by small and medium enterprises during COVID-19.

The novelty of this study is that it collects the opinions of employees or marketing analysts of SMEs from the industrial, commercial, and service sectors on the use of digital marketing, helping to understand how these companies used these strategies to promote their products during the COVID-19 pandemic and how consumption changes during this time. The findings of this study also contribute to expanding the existing research and literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs and the way they engage with their customers through virtual means.

The research has the following structure: first, some background on digital marketing in small and medium-sized companies is described and the factors and hypotheses of the proposed model that explains the use of these virtual tools are presented. Then, the

developed methodology, the validity of the instrument and the hypothesis test are exposed, and, finally, a description of the results, their discussion, and conclusions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Digital Marketing in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Digital marketing is regarded as a set of strategies for firms to interact with customers through digital channels so that these latter can access their products and services. To this end, firms develop platforms or implement one or several innovation methodologies strategically supported on the internet [13]. This suggests that the current purchasing and cooperation processes between firms have substantially changed due to the emergence of these new digital tools. However, they still use advertising strategies and dissemination messages with elements typical of traditional marketing. For instance, firms such as Google have expanded the range of searches, thus giving organizations a competitive advantage to gradually attract customers without the need to invest large amounts of capital in sales and display tactics [14].

SMEs have proven to be the backbone of the economy in Southeast Asia, as stated by [15], since they contribute 60.34% to Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Additionally, Indonesia is known as one of the leading countries in product and service advertising through digital marketing and a country with a high dynamic capacity to create new and improved jobs. These results are attributed to the ability of local SMEs to develop businesses that significantly boost the national economy.

For [16], digital marketing helps to identify the key factors in a negotiation process. In addition, it considerably strengthens the use of digital platforms that call for fundamental changes in the nature of organizations by supporting their marketing strategies with new technologies and new ways of reaching customers to reduce their investment costs and project the popularity of the goods they offer in terms of productivity and quality. Digital marketing, therefore, ensures the effectiveness of the brand, which is reflected in high returns on investment, as it influences consumers by building bonds of trust and boosting creativity and originality to acquire their goods [17].

One of the main tools to effectively deploy communication strategies using digital marketing is social media. These platforms play a key role in managing transition from traditional to digital marketing, as they offer the possibility of real-time interaction and dynamism in transactions, which makes them attractive for consumers and strongly impacts SMEs in terms of acquiring new customer [18]. Likewise, innovation developments are relevant in the consolidation of SMEs that seek to grow stronger in the economy of a region. In this regard, [19] presents the use of innovative technologies in digital marketing channels as a success accelerator for organizations, in that it leads them to devise new business ideas that favour profitability, penetrate all markets, and overcome obstacles throughout their business growth.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, digital marketing continues to be little adopted and used among SMEs because they perceive some barriers in its implementation. According to [20], the size of a firm is a key factor influencing the adoption of technological channels that promote digital marketing. In general terms, small firms show the lowest level of adoption, while larger firms have the most resources and knowledge to be able to incorporate these tools [21]. Moreover, [14] identify, as possible obstacles to the adoption of digital marketing, the lack of specialized knowledge in ICTs, inadequate information on its use, and resistance to change. In addition, differing from larger firms that foster the implementation of digital marketing, small firms face greater challenges, such as limited time, financial, technical, and managerial resources [22]. Driven by the organizational culture, SMEs are also confronted with challenges to generate value to customers. Therefore, success stories must be shared to inspire managers to move towards technological transformation and encourage it among their employees [23].

2.2. Background on the Factors Influencing the Use of Digital Marketing

Various studies in the literature have developed models and methods to measure the impact of the use of digital marketing tools on SMEs and understand consumer behaviour during purchase processes through these tools [24]. For example, there are models that evaluate SMEs' acceptance of digital tools. As stated by [14], the factors driving the adoption of digital marketing are associated with top management persuasion, the benefits perceived by organizations, and customer relationship management. These authors came to this conclusion after analysing data from 200 SMEs in India using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

Digital marketing sales is also one of the most studied factors in the literature given the widespread interest in understanding the impact of digital tools on a firm's profitability. In the Asian context, for instance, [25] conclude that digital marketing not only has a positive impact on sales but also reduces overall marketing costs. It thus becomes a new and cheaper way of advertising in that it raises awareness among consumers faster than traditional marketing. Contrary to this, in a study conducted in India, the authors found that one of the barriers to technology adoption is the cost of incorporating digital tools in SMEs [26]. SMEs do not have specific resources allocated to technological evolution, which is why they fall behind digital trends [27].

When analysing the SME business sector and the use of digital marketing, another important factor is a firm's knowledge in this matter. The use of methods and tools for online trading is a critical factor in their success in the e-commerce market. Using appropriate methods allows them to be more visible in search engines and, thus, achieve better results in marketing activities [28]. However, SMEs do not seem to make the most of the full potential of the new digital tools, which is why they are not completely benefiting from the opportunities these tools offer. This has raised doubts as to whether SMEs have understood the changes in the nature of communication driven by digitization [16]. Regarding sales behaviour through digital platforms, various studies have presented quantitative methods and analyses using multiple linear regression to demonstrate the significant influence of digital marketing on online marketing and on consumer trust in the sales models of SMEs [29].

Other models that have been employed to understand SMEs' adoption of digital marketing include the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Do It Yourself (DIY) method. Both have been used to explore the motivations and factors influencing the adoption of technological tools [30,31]. In this regard, the results of the study by [32] provide insight into the digital marketing behaviour of small businesses, in that they find support to the idea that, besides technological benefits, perceived ease of use may also be a driver for SMEs managers who start adopting digital marketing strategies.

2.3. Digital Marketing in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has generated, among other things, the need to impose travel restrictions and an order to control the movement of people between places to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This, of course, has generated a strong impact on the world economy that has especially affected the business activities of small traders [33]. In this context, entrepreneurs have been forced to change the behavior and business strategy of their organizations. It is then where everything that entrepreneurs and consumers do is completely new, because in the words of [34], the business experiences a new phase that responds to the new normal period during the post-pandemic.

Digital marketing has been considered very important and relevant during the pandemic and during confinement, because people have been more exposed to this type of marketing largely thanks to the use of social networks through promotions, iterative games and user-generated content [35]. This is considering that there are many differences between customers before and after the COVID-19 outbreak. According to [10], before the pandemic, the customer experience had a positive effect based on the e-commerce platform,

while after the outbreak the positive effect occurs through the purchase of what is necessary under certain conditions that greatly value the supply chain.

Some sectors that have been greatly affected by the restrictions of each country have relied on digital marketing to support their main objective: to continue in the market. One of them has been, for example, the tourism sector, which has chosen to implement digital marketing strategies so that destinations continue to be marketed during the pandemic based on ads and digital videos on the official YouTube channels of the 40 most visited countries in the world. Among the strategies used are the dissemination of hope and inspiration, the brotherhood of man, longing and nostalgia in the phase of confinement and as a phase after confinement, welcoming back, safe destinations and restorative experience [36].

It is important to mention that in the literature there are some previous investigations in Colombia that empirically validate the adoption of digital marketing in the context of SMEs, such as: [37], studies with a specific focus on small and medium-sized companies such as the commercial sector [38] and related to companies in the textile sector such as the research by [39].

2.4. Research Model and Hypotheses

The factors we proposed below are derived from those identified in the literature and described in the previous section.

- Acceptance as a means of communication: considering what was stated by [12], SMEs' communication with customers and suppliers must be quick, timely, relevant, and effective, especially when carrying out marketing activities. Given the rise of free communication tools offered by digital marketing through social media such as Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Messenger, communication has become global and turn the audience into a single community [16]. Thus, this factor aims to measure SMEs' acceptance of digital marketing as a means of communication with consumers;
- Customers' perceived benefits: this factor seeks to measure the benefit perceived by customers when interacting with firms through digital marketing. In addition, it represents a possibility for organizations to segment and reach more target audiences [13]. Being able to chat live and discuss their problems, complaints, doubts, and other matters with a firm's representative allows consumers to build trust and accept its quality services [40];
- Market positioning: in their study, [41] found that 81% of SMEs in the commercial sector in Barranquilla, Colombia, use digital marketing to achieve a remarkable position in the market and, thus, be more competitive. Therefore, this factor aims to determine the contribution of these digital tools in the positioning of SMEs in Medellín and explain one of the reasons for their implementation;
- Business optimization: this factor refers to SMEs' perception regarding resource optimization when using digital marketing. According to [42], digital marketing demands fewer production resources, which is why investment costs are lower with respect to the economic benefits that internet-based tools and platforms can provide [43]. Moreover, the resources used to increase interaction on a firm's website (Click-Through Rate [CTR]) and build brand awareness among customers are associated with business optimization because they determine the return on the investment made in advertising [44]. Likewise, this factor measures optimization in the time required for the commercialization process;
- Perceived advantages of using digital tools: this refers to SMEs' perceived advantage over the competition when using the digital tools provided by digital marketing. According to [45], factors such as compatibility and relative advantage are considered to significantly influence the adoption of ICT tools. Moreover, SMEs can reach a broader market segment [46] and become global because potential consumers can be found all over the world [47].

To identify the factors influencing the use of digital marketing by SMEs in Medellín and to know which SMEs are implementing it, we propose the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Firm's acceptance of digital marketing as a communication channel positively influences the benefits perceived by customers.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Firm's acceptance of digital marketing as a communication channel positively influences its positioning in the market.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The benefits perceived by customers positively influence the firm's positioning in the market.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The benefits perceived by customers positively influence the firm's business optimization processes.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): The benefits perceived by customers positively influence the perceived advantages of using digital tools.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Business optimization positively influences the firm's image in its environment and helps it to position itself in the market.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): The perceived advantages of using digital tools positively influence the firm's positioning in the market.

These hypotheses gave rise to the proposed research model, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

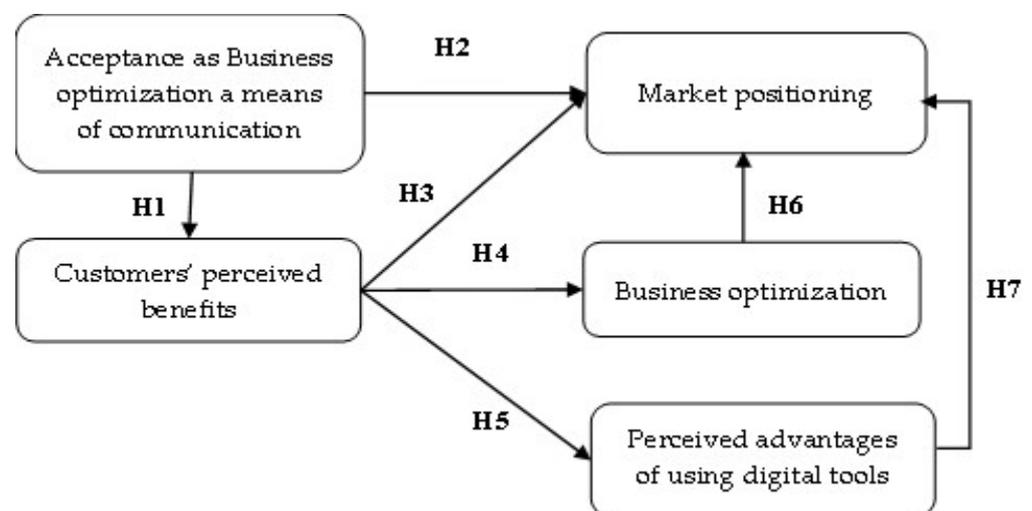


Figure 1. Research model proposed in this study to analyse the use of digital marketing by Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises.

3. Research Design

To achieve the objective of this study, which is to identify the factors influencing the use of digital marketing by SMEs in Medellín, we proposed a quantitative approach that used a non-experimental and cross-sectional design with a correlational–causal scope. The study focuses on SMEs since they represent 99.5% of the country's business network [48], making their analysis very important given the relevance of the business dynamics generated in the different sectors of the economy in which they participate. SMEs contribute around 30% of the GDP, as well as being responsible for 67% of the jobs in the country, also associated with 37% of the productive sector of the nation [49]. The study takes place in the city of

Medellin given that it is one of the most important cities in Colombia, in addition to being recognized as the only District of Science, Technology and Innovation in the country [50], so it becomes relevant to consider aspects of the digital transformation that the city has and, therefore, of the dynamics of the companies around the use of digital marketing as a performance tool.

Data were collected using non-probability sampling. The choice of the sample was made with the help of the Medellin Chamber of Commerce, taking companies from various sectors of the economy and that had at least one year of conformation, having a base group from which the data to be analyzed were obtained. A self-administered questionnaire was applied in paper format to 120 SMEs, including commercial, industrial, and service firms in Medellín, during the first quarter of 2020. Participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily and individually and were selected at convenience, that is, besides being easy to contact and reach out, they held operational positions related to the execution of marketing activities. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the selected sample.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Type of economic activity		
Industrial	68	56.6
Commercial	26	21.7
Services	26	21.7
Classification		
Small	102	85
Medium-sized	18	15
Business trajectory		
1–5 years	21	18
5–10 years	38	32
10–15 years	61	50
Knowledge of the existence of digital marketing		
Aware	113	94.2
Not aware	7	5.8
Most used digital marketing strategies		
Instagram and Facebook content	39	32.5
Advertising videos on YouTube	22	18.3
Website and webpage	35	29.2
E-mails	24	20

We designed the instrument's scales following the 5-point Likert scale, where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The Don't Know/No response option was not included in the questionnaire. The aim was to measure the relationship between SMEs' adoption of digital tools as a communication channel and the benefits perceived by their customers, as well as that between market positioning and business optimization because, according to [51], the use of technological tools can help SMEs reduce the costs associated with coordination, communication, and information processing and provide efficient services at lower costs. Similarly, [52] states that incorporating the technological component can offer businesses opportunities for commercial transformations and their optimization. Table 2 shows the constructs and variables employed in the questionnaire.

Regarding data processing, we verified the instrument's reliability and internal consistency in each construct of the proposed model. First, following what was stated by [53], we performed an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to obtain a base structure of the theoretical model to be developed. The EFA was selected to explore the content validity of the set of common factors or constructs proposed in the conceptual model that explain the responses to the questionnaire constructs. That is to say, the AFE allows us to define the variables that are highly correlated with each other since it analyzes the contribution of the original

variables (items) to each of the factors or latent variables (constructs) in terms of the validity and reliability of the model [54].

Table 2. Constructs and variables employed in the questionnaire.

Construct	Item	Variable
Acceptance as a means of communication	AC1	Digital marketing techniques allow the firm you work for to expand and open new opportunities in the market.
	AC2	Digital marketing can be used as a direct communication tool to interact with customers.
Customers' perceived benefits	CB1	In the firm you work for, digital marketing strategies could focus on a target audience and, thus, achieve greater market segmentation.
	CB2	Through digital marketing, the firm you work for has acquired more customers.
Business optimization	BO1	Digital marketing optimizes time, as everything is performed online.
	BO2	The firm you work for uses digital marketing because of its low cost.
	BO3	The firm you work for uses digital marketing because it is easy to use.
Market positioning	MP1	The firm you work for has achieved a better brand positioning in the market thanks to the implementation of digital marketing.
	MP2	Digital marketing is an efficient tool for SMEs to position themselves in the market.
Perceived advantages of using digital tools	PA1	Digital marketing allows SMEs to keep up with large firms.
	PA2	The firm you work for uses digital marketing because your competition does.

Subsequently, to validate the measurement scales employed, the constructs, and the instrument in general, we used a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), in which the Bartlett's test of sphericity (testing that the variables are not correlated), the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test (assessing the viability of the model), and the Cronbach's alpha (measuring the degree of reliability of each scale) were evaluated by calculating each of the specific sub-questionnaires for each factor [55]. These data were examined using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software. Finally, we developed certain hypotheses to [56], and analysed the relationships between the model variables, which were estimated using Cramér's V; this test of independence was used since it performs a deeper analysis of the connection of the variables data.

4. Analysis of Results

CFA is used to evaluate the validity and reliability of each variable (question). In this analysis, the hypotheses developed for each individual variable are contrasted; in addition, it verifies whether they measure what they intend to measure (validity). Once this criterion has been established, the level of accuracy with which such measure is obtained, i.e., its reliability, is validated [57].

4.1. Validity of the Measurement Scales

The results of the analysis of validity of the proposed measurement scales indicated convergence between their corresponding variables, as observed in Table 3. In this case, each standardized factor loading was above 0.7, a value recommended by [58]. Furthermore,

the average standardized factor loading was above 0.7 for all the constructs, which is in line with what was suggested by [59].

Table 3. Standardized factor loadings of the items.

Factor	Item	Standardized Factor Loading	Average Standardized Factor Loading
Acceptance as a means of communication	AC1	0.869	0.869
	AC2	0.869	
Customers’ perceived benefits	CB1	0.897	0.897
	CB2	0.897	
Business optimization	BO1	0.750	0.803
	BO2	0.784	
	BO3	0.875	
Market positioning	MP1	0.897	0.897
	MP2	0.897	
Perceived advantages of using digital tools	PA1	0.825	0.825
	PA2	0.825	

To perform the factor analysis and measure the adequacy of the sample, we applied the Bartlett’s test of sphericity, which verifies whether there is a correlation between the variables, and the KMO test, which should yield a value above 0.5 as indicated by [60]. Table 4 presents the coefficients obtained with the SPSS software. As observed, the coefficients of each construct meet the criteria above, which suggests that it is feasible to employ the data reduction technique, or in other words, to obtain the minimum explanatory elements (constructs) capable of identifying the factors that influence the use of digital marketing by SMEs.

Table 4. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett’s test of sphericity.

Factor	KMO Value	Bartlett’s Test Value	Meets Criteria
Acceptance as a means of communication	0.500	0.000	Yes
Customers’ perceived benefits	0.500	0.000	Yes
Business optimization	0.624	0.000	Yes
Market positioning	0.500	0.000	Yes
Perceived advantages of using digital tools	0.500	0.000	Yes

Furthermore, we assessed the reliability of the proposed measurement scales using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability [58]. Table 5 shows that, in all cases, this coefficient took values above or close to the recommended minimums (0.7 and 0.5, respectively) [59], which supports the internal reliability of the proposed constructs.

Table 5. Reliability coefficients.

Factor	Cronbach’s Alpha
Acceptance as a means of communication	0.878
Customers’ perceived benefits	0.905
Business optimization	0.844
Market positioning	0.892
Perceived advantages of using digital tools	0.810

We verified the discriminant validity of the proposed measurement scales following what was described by [61]: the confidence intervals for the correlation between the constructs are estimated and compared with the unit. According to Table 6, in any case, the

proposed intervals contain the value of 1, which confirms the discriminant validity of the proposed model.

Table 6. Confidence intervals for the correlation between each pair of variables.

	AC	CB	BO	MP	PA
AC	...				
CB	[0.273;0.592]	...			
BO	[0.244;0.567]	[0.445;0.718]	...		
MP	[0.271;0.576]	[0.432;0.730]	[0.393;0.674]	...	
PA	[0.214;0.566]	[0.499;0.749]	[0.371;0.657]	[0.427;0.685]	...

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

As part of the statistical analysis, the model was estimated considering the various proposed hypotheses, whose degree of association was measured using Cramér’s V. Table 7 shows the values obtained in the SPSS software for each of the hypotheses under analysis. As observed, they meet the association criteria indicated in the literature (coefficients > 0.3).

Table 7. Hypothesis testing between each pair of variables using Cramér’s V.

Hypothesis	Variable	Cramér’s V	Variable
H1	Acceptance as a means of communication	0.410	Customers’ perceived benefits
H2	Acceptance as a means of communication	0.353	Market positioning
H3	Customers’ perceived benefits	0.736	Market positioning
H4	Customers’ perceived benefits	0.599	Business optimization
H5	Customers’ perceived benefits	0.698	Perceived advantages of using digital tools
H6	Business optimization	0.667	Business optimization
H7	Perceived advantages of using digital tools	0.667	Business optimization

Moreover, the resulting Cramér’s V coefficients were extracted from the SPSS software and entered Table 8 in the form of crossed factors to assess the degree of association between the variables and contrast the hypotheses proposed in the model.

Table 8. Correlation statistic (Cramér’s V).

	AC	CB	BO	MP	PA
AC	1.000				
CB	0.410	1.000			
BO	0.355	0.599	1.000		
MP	0.353	0.736	0.667	1.000	
PA	0.376	0.698	0.487	0.667	1.000

Figure 2 presents a summary of the causal relationships reflected in the hypotheses. After these latter were contrasted, we observed that the strongest relationships corresponded to those in H3, H5, H6, and H7, with values of 0.736, 0.698, 0.667, and 0.667, respectively. Furthermore, Cramér’s V coefficients show that there is an association between the observable and latent variables in H1 and H4, with values of 0.410 and 0.599, respectively. The weakest relationship was found to be that in H2, with a value of 0.353.

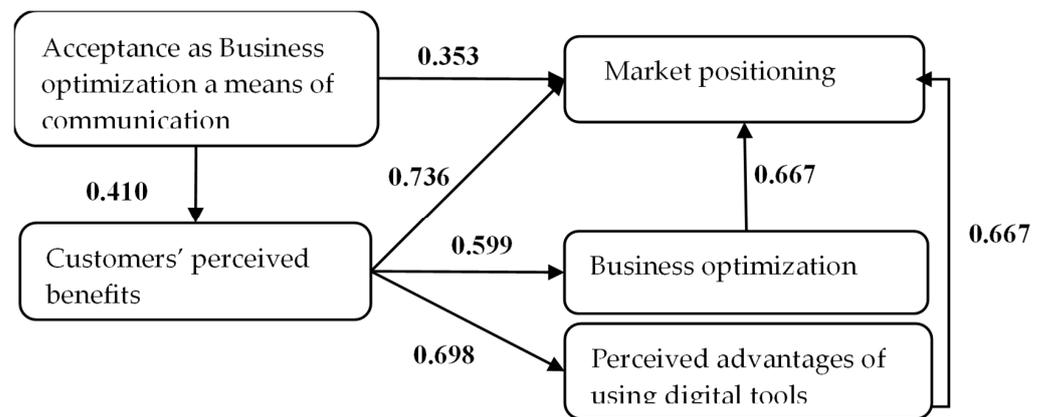


Figure 2. Adoption model proposed in this study, along with variables and correlational loadings (Cramér’s V).

Based on these findings, the hypotheses initially posed are confirmed. According to the literature, perceived benefit is considered a crucial factor influencing a firm’s adoption of ICTs: the greater the benefit perceived by SMEs, the higher their probability of adopting these technologies [62]. The results of this study, in turn, corroborate that business optimization and a firm’s perceived advantages are decisive elements when it comes to adopting digital marketing tools. Additionally, [63] reports that market positioning is one of the predominant factors influencing the adoption of ICTs by SMEs. From this, we may infer that SMEs’ decision to implement a business system is driven by their need to reduce costs, efficiently use scarce resources, keep up with competitors, provide a better customer service, improve the relationship with suppliers, access wider markets, and effectively influence the productive sector to which they belong. Acceptance as a means of communication was found to be the construct with the lowest degree of association with market positioning.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to understanding the behaviour of SMEs in Medellín regarding the use and adoption of digital marketing by identifying the factors influencing it. The results show that, with respect to H3 (0.736), the more benefits customers perceive, the better SMEs’ positioning in the market. In recent years, the world economy has experienced an upward trend in terms of the growth of goods and services. Therefore, firms must consider, in their operational planning, adopting skills and capacities that boost business success in global markets. In this regard, studies such as that of [64] present the case of China, a country that adequately manages each brand displayed on the web through digital marketing and positions goods worldwide, which compete everyday with local, regional, and national markets.

Moreover, the pandemic has provided organizations with a major impact that requires challenging their underlying core and ideological businesses and strategies. [65] explains that due to contingency, socially marginalized and locked professionals and academics have plenty of time to reflect on the importance and relevance of their lives and businesses. Similarly, marketers have also reflected on the benefits they can bestow on consumers and thus identify and generate positive evaluations of interest, satisfaction, and consumer loyalty [66].

Additionally, besides agreeing with our findings, the results reported by [67] also indicate that a firm’s positioning in the market is supported by the growing number of internet users. As a result, markets can be expanded through digital marketing, and businesses are positioned in highly dependent standards and with greater effectiveness in terms of customers and suppliers. It should be noted that market positioning allows firms to significantly improve their business models to further implement improvement plans

based on their experience of using modern technologies that unveil the audience's interest in a specific product or service.

As for H5 (0.698), the more benefits customers perceive, the more the firm perceived the advantages of using digital tools. In this respect, technological tools significantly enhance a firm's productivity. This result is in line with what was stated by [68], in that organizations prioritize innovative projects based on the digital tools that allow them to expand their customers' network from their scientific knowledge and specialized skills; this to define sustainable strategies that provide an added value to digital advertising from a personalized approach with technological effects that support research and beneficial results for users of digital marketing networks.

For example, content created on social networks such as Instagram with the aim of keeping citizens informed about the procedures, behaviors and ways to protect themselves in unique situations generated from the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in a digital marketing tool with the ability to reach many people for its ease of use and accessibility [69]. The same goes for Facebook to implement marketing strategies in publications, based on the interactive nature of social networks as a digital tool [35].

In this same vein, [70] states that the digital world has transformed the structure of businesses; consumption has skyrocketed due to the opportunities offered to users. This, therefore, suggests that having businesses operating through digital media is an advantage, as this is a novel and innovative strategy for the satisfaction of the end user. Likewise, digital advertising turns digital marketing into a substantial advantage for SMEs that have no resources to innovate in their processes and ways of reaching the audience.

Regarding H6 (0.667), the more the firm perceived advantages of using digital tools, the better their positioning in the market. This agrees with the results reported by [71] who stresses the importance of the perceived advantages of using digital tools (especially virtual platforms) to determine the function and conceptual foundations of a business in a competitive market. In addition, this author highlights the relevance of Industry 4.0 in digital marketing, where economy becomes a focus of modernization, through indicators of adaptation with respect to local, regional, national, and international contexts. Similarly, according to [72], the digital and traditional economies have set a trend in the current market conditions, thus contributing to the creation of new ways of acquiring products and services. Hence, a high-impact advantage is to enhance customer loyalty through services properly established in digital marketing.

With respect to the practical implications of the results of this research, there is no guideline for the use and adoption of digital marketing tools that can be applied to SMEs in any country. However, this study focuses on the case of SMEs in a developing country, which is relevant, since, according to [73], it is time to analyse the acceptance of the technology with which users from developing countries interact and understand a firm's behaviour regarding technological change. This could help to identify needs and successful strategies that ensure the continuity and sustainability of this business sector. Finally, [16] considers that SMEs do not keep pace with digital developments because of their lack of knowledge on their use and on the existence of digital marketing, which is why they do not fully benefit from their potential. This study, thus, shows the possible advantages that digital marketing could bring to SMEs.

Finally, in relation to the limitations, it is noted that: the study only focuses on SMEs in the city of Medellin, Colombia. Moreover, the research has a cross-sectional methodological design, therefore, more studies are needed to analyze other factors influencing the use of digital marketing during the pandemic and in post-COVID-19 or normal times. Such studies could be analyzed from an agent-based simulation and regression model to understand and analyze complex patterns related to digital marketing adoption and thus estimate adoption probabilities [74]. Thus, this study focused more on relating the factors associated with Digital Marketing usage, future work could focus on the adoption phenomenon in the context of SMEs using regression analysis to identify the key drivers. Other researchers

can extend these results in similar economies, but with higher adoption rates of digital marketing to identify applicable strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study proposed five factors influencing the use of digital marketing by SMEs in Medellín and proved that the customers' perceived benefits, perceived advantages of using digital tools, and business optimization are key to predict the acceptance and use of these tools. The results of this research also revealed that the digital marketing strategies most employed by the SMEs under study to communicate with their customers are Instagram and Facebook content (32.5%) and website and webpage (29.2%).

In addition to showing the advantages of implementing and adopting digital marketing (e.g., improving communication with customers and overall firm performance by making products and services accessible to potential consumers around the world), this research is timely because it can help SMEs during the current contingency time due to COVID-19 when customers cannot physically visit organizations and firm survival has been threatened. This hands-on opportunity can encourage SMEs to take an interest in using digital marketing to rank ahead of the competition and attract many customers.

Since around 13% of respondents in this study did not know about the existence of digital marketing, there is a clear need to inform businesses that are in their initiation or establishment stage on the use of digital marketing and to devise strategies that promote the advantages of using these technological tools. Alongside comparing the results of the model proposed in this research with those of other studies, we observed that the adoption of digital marketing in developing economies requires structuring individual models based on the unique characteristics of each region and type of firm. For this reason, this exercise cannot be limited to the implementation of successful models in contexts of developed countries having other social characteristics that may affect consumer behaviour and the traditional management approach of SME managers. The sample used in this study was limited to 120 employees from commercial, industrial, and service SMEs in Medellín, one of the main cities in Colombia. However, future works could also test the hypotheses in different contexts and compare their results with those obtained here to contribute to a holistic and global approach. They could delve into this matter using a larger sample size and considering developed countries and complement their analysis with the wide range of interview-based qualitative techniques, which could add up to the existing knowledge on digital marketing.

Moreover, the fact that only marketing professionals holding operational positions in the SMEs under study were surveyed could be considered another limitation because the final decision regarding the implementation and use of digital marketing in organizations often rests with their managers and area leaders, who were not included in this study, as they were hard to contact. Thus, future research could consider the characteristics of this population in the sample.

For SMEs to become sustainable, they must go through five stages: existence, survival, success, take-off, and resource maturity. In this context, another limitation of this research could be that the SMEs under study were in their initial stages. These stages, however, are crucial because it is there where the lowest rates of business survival are observed; hence, the adoption of digital marketing could become a support for organizations to achieve growth. Future studies should, thus, also consider including SMEs that are in other stages of growth and be able to establish relationships between factors such as business success and the use of digital tools.

This study did not distinguish between the different digital marketing tools and strategies available for SMEs but considered them as a single concept, since digital marketing is regarded as a technological method assumed to refer to the set of tools it can provide to organizations. Nevertheless, the questionnaire did include a question about the most used digital strategy or tool to promote the firm's products. In this regard, future research could

explore the adoption of digital marketing strategies and channels separately, as is the case of firms that only use social media to communicate with their customers.

The results of this study serve as the basis for several future studies in this area of study, in addition to empirically exposing SME strategies to promote their recovery and sustainability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, these findings show that SMEs do not apply the full potential of the new digital tools and therefore do not keep pace with digital advances, due to the lack of knowledge about the use of these tools.

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