



**Experiences, Uses and Challenges of Digital Marketing  
Strategies of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises for Brand  
Positioning and Success**

MSc in Entrepreneurship  
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## Abstract

The aim of the current study was to explore the processes and strategies of digital marketing employed by small and medium-sized fashion enterprises (SMEs) for brand positioning and success. The study addressed issues related to processes and strategies, implementation and execution of digital marketing strategies, market presence, measurement of success and the levels of awareness of artificial intelligence (AI) and its potential uses in digital marketing strategies for SMEs.

This study started from the recognition that digital marketing has changed the way of doing business, positioning itself as a crucial tool for SMEs in their modes of expansion and market penetration (Jones et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), which however face a number of challenges in implementing their strategies due to lack of budget, structure and professional knowledge in digital marketing (Dahnil et al., 2014; Hemann & Burbary, 2013).

A qualitative methodology design was chosen, which was carried out by developing semi-structured interviews with 10 entrepreneurs from Argentinian fashion SMEs, and the analysis was done by conducting a thematic analysis.

The findings highlighted several crucial aspects needing attention for strategic growth in SMEs. Firstly, there is a lack of professionalisation in the design and execution of digital marketing strategies, particularly in new product launches, often due to time limitations, lack of resources, or an overload of responsibilities. Secondly, while some enterprises consider profitability and financial sustainability, success is mainly understood as customer satisfaction and loyalty. Finally, the levels of awareness and use of AI tools are limited; most businesses employ only ChatGPT AI for basic tasks such as writing or brainstorming,

In conclusion the findings highlight the importance of capacity building and training in digital marketing and AI tools to improve the competitiveness, performance and efficiency of SMEs

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Overview of the Research Problem

Today's business world is characterised by a profound digital transformation that has been taking place since the emergence of the Internet (Gong & Ribiere, 2021), in a context where digital marketing has become a fundamental tool for SMEs. The latter, which generally face limitations of both economic and human resources, can use these tools to increase their visibility and reach and expand their business in a global market.

In the fashion industry, there is a particular relationship between its ventures and digital marketing because social networks such as Instagram or TikTok have revolutionised the way in which fashion brands interact with their customers (Alalwan et al., 2017; Guercini et al., 2018). It can be noted that today there is still a significant gap between the exploration of the potential of SMEs and large companies (Dilber Ulas, 2019). This huge gap between the two types of businesses has been narrowing over time thanks to the use of the internet and digital technology tools (Nabeel Rehman, 2021). This is why the rationale for this study lies in the need to provide a deep and complex understanding of the use or lack of use and reasons for the use of digital marketing in SMEs, a sector that represents a significant share in terms of production and employability in local economies.

In this sense, this study aims to explore not only the benefits of digital marketing but also the limitations and challenges SMEs face in its implementation (Hemann & Burbary, 2013; Jadhav et al., 2023).

## 1.2. Research Question

The present study aimed to locate its main research question by following the trajectory of research that has asked about the strategies, innovation, performance and uses of digital marketing. What are the key processes and digital marketing strategies employed by small and medium-sized fashion businesses for brand positioning, and

how do these strategies contribute to the overall success and market presence of these brands?

This research question leads to a series of sub-questions that are organised into two main thematic groups that the study addresses. First, the focus is on the processes and strategies implemented for brand positioning, the challenges faced in the execution of digital marketing strategies, and the ways and indicators to measure success. Secondly, the study explores the levels of knowledge of AI tools, ways of integrating these technologies into the management of their brands and in the design and execution of digital marketing strategies and their impact on the levels of efficiency and productivity of the companies.

### 1.3. Dissertation structure

**Chapter one:** the overview of the research problem and its rationale is presented, followed by the main research question and the sub-themes that follow from it, and concluding with the structure of the dissertation.

**Chapter two:** this second chapter contains the literature review conducted for the research. It includes three main core areas, Applications and Effects of Digital Marketing in SMEs, the Intersections of Digital Marketing, Communication and Fashion and the Uses of AI in the Design and Management of Digital Marketing Strategies.

**Chapter three:** it presents the methodological design used for the research, which details the research paradigm, Philosophical Assumptions, the research setting, the demographic configuration of the participants, the materials used in the study, the procedure implemented and the ethical considerations of the study.

**Chapter four:** in this chapter the results of the study and their subsequent analysis are reported. It details the analytical strategy, which consisted of a thematic analysis organised into five main themes which are Organisational structure and decision-making style; Business Orientation; Digital Marketing Strategies; Understanding of brand success and Levels of awareness and use of AI tools.

**Chapter five:** this chapter discusses the results of the study in light of the findings of the literature review. The discussion is organised into three main discussion cores which are Characterisation of the type of organisation, organisational structure and business orientation, Difficulties and challenges in implementing Digital Marketing Strategies for Small and Medium Enterprises and Levels of knowledge and use of the AI tool.

**Chapter six:** finally, the last section presents the final conclusions of the research and a series of recommendations on how these SMEs could address some of the problems identified. It also suggests some possible research scopes, and reflects on methodological flaws, practical implications, and directions for the future research.

## 2. Literature Review

At present, digital marketing has been defined as an essential goal for SMEs that operate in today's business environment since it allows businesses to increase their visibility, attract more clients, and develop. With the advancing evolution in the digital platform, there are always advantages as well as some risks in using and applying digital marketing to support the goals and objectives of SMEs. The literature review highlights the complexities of digital marketing for SMEs, as well as the spectrum of issues that define the use and usability of this business method. Additionally, it digs further into the integration of digital marketing with the fashion domain and the idea of digital clothing and explores the revolutionary influence of AI in the designing and planning of digital marketing initiatives. Based on the literature to be reviewed in this quest, this academic paper seeks to offer a clear synthesis of the state of knowledge on this topic to advance knowledge and understanding of the effect of how SMEs can leverage digital marketing to thrive in an ever-evolving digital economy.

### 2.1. The Applications and Effects of Digital Marketing and Its Strategies in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

In the modern dynamic world of business, digital marketing has changed the dimension in which organizations and firms engage their customers or the public in marketing their products or services. The organizational use of DM tools has, therefore, emerged as a critical survival tool for SMEs, enabling them to expand and reach out to an enormous marketplace for their products and services (Jones et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

Digital marketing may be described as the process of using the Internet and technology to communicate about a specific product or service through the use of Internet media, including but not limited to websites, social media platforms, e-mails, apps, and online advertisements (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). It consists of all the procedures and mechanisms of carrying out its practices, such as content, hunt engine optimization

(SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, social media, email, and influencer marketing, among others (Kannan & Li, 2017 Kingsnorth, 2019).

Therefore, digital marketing is most effective for the development of SMEs while posing some challenges as well. On the one hand, the development of effective digital communication strategies presents several challenges for SMEs own lack of resources, small budget, and a lack of digital marketing knowledge (Dahnil et al., 2014; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). They could potentially have a shortage of skills, manpower, and funds to adapt to the fast-changing technology and innovations (Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). Digital marketing, on the other hand, provides SMEs with an opportunity to level the playing ground and be able to compete with the large corporations of the world and be able to market their products and services to the world at large at relatively cheaper costs (Hanaysha, 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020). The availability of digital marketing tools and/or platforms has facilitated SMEs to develop specifically tailored campaigns and can directly communicate with the customers while monitoring the marketing campaigns' efficacy in real time.

The application of digital marketing by SMEs requires a closer look. Given the fact that consumers today are already connected and some of their decisions are informed by marketing information available from online platforms, SME marketing that lacks the implementation of digital marketing is considered to be lagging behind its competitors in the market (Järvinen et al., 2012; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Digital marketing offers many advantages, beginning with raising brand and company recognition. In this way, by extending the visibility of SMEs through various types of media platforms, SMEs are trying to achieve better targeting of potential customers and brand recognition (Odoom et al., 2017; Hemann & Burbary, 2013 ). It is important that businesses achieve this visibility since it offers SMEs a chance to be seen within a crowded marketplace and get the attention of the market.

Customer involvement generation and their consistent patronage are still another great strength of digital marketing. These include social media, the email marketing method, and websites, which are affordable means for SMEs to communicate directly with their customers in a bid to create value and collect feedback (Arpaci, 2021; Alalwan et al., 2017). It is very useful in determining the interest of customers in the products you are selling or planning to sell, as well as in developing customer loyalty that assists the business in gaining repeat customers and reviews on the products that the business is selling.

However, it is known that a range of digital marketing approaches can be used for the promotion of sales and revenue outcomes. With proper strategies for internet promotion and marketing, SMEs can be able to attract potential customers and, thereafter, be able to convert them to leads, thereby improving the sales and profitability of the SMEs (Jadhav et al., 2023; Järvinen & Karjaluo, 2015). For instance, strategies like search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, and content marketing help SMEs get in touch with and influence their target market more easily, enhancing their conversion probability.

Furthermore, competitiveness and market fluidity, especially in relation to customer trends, are key problems in an SME business. The consumers are channeling their purchasing preferences and behaviors to the digital realm, and thus, the organizations willing to take up the mantle of digital marketing, the SMEs can be ready, relevant, and robust in their relevant markets (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). It also benefits SMEs to be adaptable so that they can indeed be in line with competitors, be prepared, and react proficiently to trends and customer needs in the market.

First of all, digital marketing is more aligned with the overarching concept of Digitalisation, whereby technology is incorporated within different spheres of enterprises' activities (Malesev & Cherry, 2021; Kraus et al., 2019). The SMEs that embrace digital marketing initiatives are poised to benefit from new innovations like AI, AR, and the use of data analytics to improve the intelligibility of their marketing outreach as well as gain a competitive edge (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Huang & Rust, 2021).

## Digital Marketing Channels and Strategies for SMEs

By embracing the digital realm, SMEs have at their disposal numerous marketing channels and approaches to engage customers and business audiences, establish their presence, and communicate their products or services to achieve business goals and marketing aims. The website is the foundation on which all the detailed and careful planning and organizing of the entire digital marketing campaign is built. Quite similar to a physical store, on the internet, a website acts as the place where a business is located, and potential customers can gather information about it and the products or services it offers as well as engage in other various internet marketing activities (Purwanto et al., 2020; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Often, SEO is a key strategy employed in attempts to make the website more desirable and relevant to search engine services. In turn, it will attract organic traffic in the form of potential customers to an SME.

It has also been noted that social media sites have become vital strategies for SMEs to gain visibility, and numerous multimedia advertising opportunities. As Alalwan et al. (2017) Hemann & Burbary (2013) rightly noted, today, it is easy for these SMEs to target and, communicate, and engage their audiences through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc by sharing quality contents. Content marketing strategies, as well as influencer marketing, advertising, and other promotions, can help SMEs get through to the segments of their target customers.

Many SMEs have professed performing email marketing as a type of online marketing for their targeted audiences because it has functions for lead nurturing and communicating with the existent customers, as well as to introduce promotions or new products (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Kingsnorth, 2019). Email marketing can be used to deliver highly targeted messages to customers, aiming to improve consumer engagement and conversion rates; incorporating email marketing into an SME's marketing plans can benefit an organization.

Platform advertising includes the likes of Google ads or social media advertising, which enable SMEs to select specific consumer audiences based on their keyword search, the



activities they are involved in, or their age or gender, among others (Arpaci, 2021; Kannan & Li, 2017). Such exposed attempts of PPC as a sophisticated campaign tool offer SMEs a way to reach audiences that are actively looking for the business's products or services by directly placing ads on the websites with the intended traffic.

Informational marketing, which focuses on producing content that is valuable, informative, and systematically distributed in various forms, such as blogs, videos, and infographics, is on the rise in SMEs (Odoom et al., 2017; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). In this light, this paper aims to highlight how SMEs can use information and content marketing principles to acquire and engage customers, build brand recognition and recognition, assert domain expertise, and maintain customer relations at all stages of the buyer funnel.

Both remarketing and retargeting are effective and highly effective ways of including ads that are more specific to individuals who have visited the SME's website or have shown an interest in the products or services, as earlier shown in the following literature. Since these leads are developed and the brand is continuously in the SME's sight, remarketing and retargeting will boost the possibility of conversions and sales.

Last but not least, a strategic approach to digital marketing, which implies an omnichannel and integration of all channels that an SME uses, can provide a significant boost to its efforts. This way, SMEs can provide potential customers with continuously coherent experiences through access points of multiple marketing disciplines (digital and traditional) (Arpaci, 2021; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). When used in unison, this approach can prove valuable for SMEs seeking to get as much mileage as possible out of their marketing campaigns while hammering home their messaging and delivering singularly coherent experiences to the audiences that matter most to them.

## Benefits and Impact of Digital Marketing on SMEs

The use of digital marketing has, at the same time, acted as a breakthrough for SMEs since it has provided a number of significant advantages and repercussions on their operations and organizational performance. The use of the internet to promote their products and services, it has been established that digital marketing gives SMEs a better chance to establish a brand and visibility. Markets can expand their online presence through various platforms, including social media, search engine optimization, and content marketing (Odoom et al., 2017; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). There are various benefits that the SME can enjoy out of having such an improved standing, and these benefits are not limited to the arrival of potential customers.

Customer interaction creation and relationship development with customers is another strength of digital marketing for SMEs. Higher interactions: Social media overview, Interaction means direct ways through which businesses speak to the customers or hear from them in their own consoling (Arpaci, 2021; Alalwan et al., 2017). Social media networking involves users actively, while emails can be personalized based on the customers' previous visits to the SME's website, and live customer support creates customer loyalty or advocacy and, thus, sales and revenue in return (Jadhav et al., 2023; Järvinen & Karjaluo, 2015).

Moreover, digital marketing and advertising techniques are more data-oriented, and hence, SMEs can identify the success rate of the ad campaigns almost immediately. Marketing automation systems and key performance indicators (KPIs) will help to understand customers' actions as well as the ROI of campaigns (Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). While targeting B2B customers, the availability and usage of such data help SMEs to minimize unsuitable strategies, use their resources more effectively, and generate high ROI on the money spent on their marketing campaigns.

Finally, digital marketing strategies can be effective and helpful when implemented appropriately for the intended purpose of increasing the sales and revenue of SME businesses. Through advertisement of targeted services, enhancing SME's website

visibility, and engaging customers, SMEs would achieve prospective customer attraction and conversion, thereby increasing their overall profitability (Jadhav et al., 2023; Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015). As society shifts from traditional print media towards digital solutions, especially when they make purchase decisions, using digital solutions is highly beneficial for SMEs that adopt it and secure their position for the long term.

## Challenges and Barriers to Digital Marketing Adoption by SMEs

Nevertheless, scrapes and initial obstacles of digital marketing minimize the favourable prospects of businesses as SMEs face numerous challenges and barriers while implementing digital marketing strategies. This is one of the key challenges since most of the SMEs lack skilled human resources and might have poor knowledge about EM (Dahnil et al., 2014; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). Small business proprietors, particularly those that own SMEs, do not hire individuals or have the capability to follow the ever-changing digital trends and access the latest trends and effective practices in the field. Such knowledge limitations may hamper their ability to create and implement the appropriate DM strategic initiatives that, in turn, will negatively affect their performance.

Another crucial factor that affects the use of digital marketing among SMEs includes limited resources in terms of finance and human capital, which may hinder their efforts to embrace digital marketing (Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). Hence, even though different digital marketing channels may not cut as deep into the organization's wallet as traditional marketing would, they still entail time, effort, and capital. Some of the challenges that SMEs experience include a lack of adequate funds to fund their digital marketing initiatives, an inability to acquire talented employees, or the expense of acquiring several tools and technologies. Such a deficiency of resources can hamper a firm's efficiency in the competitive realm of information technology.

Adopting and integrating new technologies and adapting to evolving customer needs presents a great challenge to SMEs (DaSilva et al., 2017). Digital marketing is an evolving subfield where there are new media, techniques, and ideals to apply almost all the time.

The effectiveness of digital marketing will always change to meet the emerging trends, with SMEs struggling to keep up with opportunities and when to make their change, leading to lost opportunities or poor digital campaigns.

Another factor that hampers the adoption of digital marketing strategies, aside from planning, is the quantitative measurement of ROI and qualitative evaluation of digital marketing initiatives, which can prove to be challenging for SMEs (Dineley, 2016; Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). Digital marketing is also known for generating a large amount of useful data and analytics information for marketers; however, what can be a much more difficult task is to understand and distill them into usable insights. The use of website analytics can lead to issues such as a lack of well-defined goals and objectives, misty conversion attribution, and difficulty in deciphering the contribution of digital marketing to lasting and sustainable business development in the case of SMEs.

Moreover, the complexity of executing digital marketing strategies and the necessity for accurate coordination of the projects and campaigns in the various platforms (Paid Search, social media, Website, Email, etc.) might be some of the issues SMEs will encounter (Arpaci, 2021). Some of the challenges of integrated marketing communication are as follows: It is costly to create a single and consistent image of a brand across several forms of digital media, and coordination of marketing campaigns across different media may be time-consuming and may need to involve qualified personnel in the process.

Besides, other factors like archival and legal concerns may pose a challenge to SMEs' compliance with data privacy laws, advertisement regulations, and consumer protection policies (Hanaysha, 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020). These factors and the compliance with the regulations that govern them can be a challenging process for individuals and organizations, especially when the entities belong to the SME class and do not have the capacity to hire expert legal consultants.

As shown above, digital marketing brings many opportunities for SMEs; however, recognizing and tackling these threats and obstacles is a prerequisite for proper implementation. These challenges may require SMEs to employ tactics like collaborating with digital marketing agencies or consultants, providing more training to enhance the marketing team's expertise, or focusing on cheaper and more effective digital marketing mediums.

### Overcoming Challenges and Best Practices for SME Digital Marketing

Finally, to mitigate the challenges and barriers facing the adoption of digital marketing tools among SMEs, they are required to employ a systematic and aggressive approach to overcome them. The first of the overall strategic approaches aimed at establishing digital marketing capabilities within the given company. There are several ways in which this can be done, as explained by Bruce et al. (2015) and Kingsnorth (2016), like through its training and development programs for its employees. Employing committed digital marketing personnel or enhancing server receptionists' capabilities can aid with knowledge deficits to guarantee that SMEs possess adequate knowledge of creating and implementing digital marketing strategies.

Another possibility that is available for SMEs is outsourcing knowledge from outside sources through an engagement with digital marketing agencies or consultants (Jones et al., 2015; Royle & Laing, 2014). Such specialized service providers can provide key suggestions and other essential and practical assistance in the areas of operations or functioning that are not well-developed or understood in SMEs. When it comes to efficiency and optimization, it is possible to find tactical solutions that allow SMEs to be at the top of their game, using best-in-class knowledge without having to employ their own specialists.

Digital and mainstream marketing communication are also other best practices that SMEs should conduct for reasons explained by the following literature (Arpaci, 2021; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). Integrated, cross-platform tactics that work online and offline can provide customers with a consistent message and experience from one method to

another as they engage with the brand multiple times. It will also assist SMEs in achieving the following objectives: the integration of different marketing channels, targeting clients along different demographic segments, and maintaining a coherent brand image.

Therefore, the key to digital marketing for SMEs is that the business should adapt customized strategies to the industry, target market, and business goals (Bruce et al., 2015; Odoom et al., 2017). Focusing on SMEs should not be generalized but should be considered in terms of the individual organization's environment, consumer demands, and competitor dynamics. By identifying these subtleties, it would be easier for SMEs to devise their digital marketing campaigns to reflect the target demographic, the various issues it may come across, and the prevalent business objectives.

Moreover, the evaluation and data-driven approach of digital marketing or promotional campaigns is an excellent practice for SME business organizations, and the constant measurement of their programs is another best practice, as stated by Kingsnorth (2016) and Chaffey & Ellis (2019). In this context, SMEs are in a position to make proper and relevant decisions designed with the support of the data accumulated during the monitoring of the responses in an effort to allocate resources in the most appropriate way and maximize the effectiveness of the digital marketing initiatives in question.

### Future Trends and Emerging Opportunities in Digital Marketing for SMEs

Regarding digital marketing the following can be stated that it is rather an emerging field and thus, the SMEs have to be prepared to look for newer tendencies and opportunities, which will allow meeting the needs of the client. Among the most important and dynamic directions that are viewed as critical for the future of marketing, some of the modern trends connected with the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning in the marketing field are subjects of increased attention and further investigation (Dwivedi and al., 2021; Huang and Rust, 2021).

As can be seen, AI and machine learning can be useful for enhancing selective aspects of digital marketing in SMEs. Concisely, such technologies may encompass the use of

predictive analytics; technology may be of great concern and of little importance to SMEs to be able to understand buying behaviour, patterns, and preferences of customers while buying. This allows the AI-powered solution to assist SMEs in better segmentation and targeting, where it can provide highly relevant content with higher engagement and campaign effectiveness (Kannan & Li, 2017; Kingsnorth, 2019).

Moreover, customer service and support solutions are emerging with the use of AI that incorporates chatbots and virtual assistants to help SMEs leverage cost-effective technologies to improve client experience and engagement (Ritz et al., 2023; Ismagilova et al., 2020). These technologies can deal with repeated inquiries, consult in real-time, and ensure a long-coherent multichannel consumer journey.

Another new trend observed in digital marketing is voice search and voice-related technologies (Purwanto et al., 2020; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). Since I studied the prevalence of smart speakers and virtual assistants, SMEs have to adapt to voice search queries. This entails enhancing the website content with voice search parameters besides building voice-enabled applications and investing in voice search ad marketing so that the consumers of their products or services can easily find them through the use of voice-based interaction.

The opportunities for incorporation of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) into digital marketing opportunities offer SMEs promising and innovative means to enhance the experience of customer engagement (Arpaci, 2021; Kannan & Li, 2017). AR and VR can be applied for product performances, fashion previews, promotional events, and more; they allow SMEs to complement their traditional marketing methods and catch their niche's attention in a rather unconventional and engaging manner.

In addition, the expansion of influencer marketing and User-generated content (UGC) can be equally beneficial and allow SMEs to harness social proof and real narrative (Odoom et al., 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020). When using the marketing approach of reaching out to influential people, SMEs can easily access existing groups and get a chance to post relevant content shared by their customers, hence achieving credibility.

For that reason, understanding consumers' behavior and tendencies when they consume content in the digital world becomes a key factor for SMEs to remain innovative. Incorporating new technologies, using analytic data-driven strategies, and creating customer-oriented experiences will be imperative to SMEs' continued success and overall growth as society continues to transition digitally.

## 2.2. The Intersections of Digital Marketing, Communication, and Fashion (Concept of Digital Fashion)

The fashion industry has evolved in the last ten years due to the adoption of the Internet and the approaches it offers to marketers. This analysis has testified that the new forms of marketing communication fostered through the web and the advancements of fashion technologies have birthed the relatively modern diplomacy of 'Digital Fashion.'

Thus, when defining the notion of digital fashion, it is important to indicate that it is a concept referring to the various ways digital technologies are employed within the fashion business and culture at large, namely, designing products, manufacturing, promoting, and consuming fashion (Kalkaska et al., 2019; Rocamora, 2017). Among the altered values, this integration has changed business models and created new opportunities for fashion branding to set a new paradigm for the customers.

It has also been seen that the use of digital marketing for fashion businesses has facilitated direct customer reach and has provided fresh and engaging ways for consumers to interact with brands and businesses (Guercini et al., 2018). Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest serve as an effective medium for establishing strong relations between fashion brands and the influencers of this generation (Alalwan et al., 2017; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). They include real-time interactions, user engagement, and the creation of virtual experiences that are in close correlation with virtual reality and real-life fashion experiences.

Digital marketing has also allowed fashion brands to get important feedback on customers by analysing consumption patterns and trends through social media



platforms (Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). By analysing consumer information, brands can devise and implement strategies, product offerings, ad placements or even promotions, and pricing and distribution decisions that match the target market (Järvinen & Karjaluo, 2015; Kingsnorth, 2019).

It is noteworthy to mention that the notion of using digital fashion not only encapsulates the notion of marketing and or/communication in fashion industries but also the processes of design and production in the industry. I understand that 3D modeling, AR, and VR have introduced a broader view of using new technologies in design for fashion for future generations by Ritz et al., (2023); Ismagilova et al. (2020). These technologies assist the designers in visualizing the parameters of the design to be made so that they do not require physical models to be run severally, which also exposes the effectiveness of the particular design.

However, that does not mean that the implementation of technology in communication and fashion digital marketing is without strife. Perhaps, one of the most crucial difficulties that must be addressed is the ability to manage the fast turnover of fashion trends and handle the speed of technology in the sphere of the online platform (Itani et al., 2017). The brands are pressured to modernize their practices as new platforms and tools for brand promotion are introduced to supply the means for such communication and ensure that these are integrated.

Further, the establishment of new modes of media communications that are intensified due to the higher availability of online content has also intensified competition and caused brand erosion (Hanaysha, 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Thus, fashion brands can only further their distinction by entailing extraordinary and persuasive narratives and sufficient brand interactions, influencer marketing, and UGC (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Odoom et al., 2017).

Additionally, the very nature of digital marketing within fashion has prompted questions about data privacy and protection, ownership of ideas and information, and proper utilization of consumer data (Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019).

Challenges such as Global fashion brands need to address these complexities without compromising on the levels of transparency and trust that the customers deserve.

Nonetheless, the future of new fashion is in the interconnection of digital effects, marketing schemes, and the media. Newer developments like the metaverse, NFTs, and the use of blockchain technology in authentication are yet to completely transform the fashion industry, giving designers another chance to interact with their clients, rarity, and uniqueness in clothing, and ownership experience (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Huang & Rust, 2021).

Thus, the socio-technical aspects of digital marketing, communication, and, most importantly, fashion have spurred the creation of the novel concept of digital fashion that has revolutionized fashion brands' operations, consumer interaction, and fashion experience-making. Among key strategic imperatives fashion brands need to pursue in order to thrive in the world of digital technologies, one can identify innovation or the ability to develop innovative approaches and solutions as one of the key factors.

### 2.3. The Uses of AI in Designing and Managing Digital Marketing Strategies

The addition of AI into the context of business and specifically into the marketing context has become one of the standard practices. Self-learning technologies have numerous benefits to these business entities, especially SMEs, whereby they can improve the efficiency of their marketing strategies, provide the means of addressing their clients directly, and, most importantly, provide a new outlook in analysing the trends and patterns that consumers display.

Another key aspect of artificial intelligence in the digital marketing discipline is predictive analytics and decision-making. AI means that new insights derived from analyses of interactions from websites, social media, purchase patterns, etc., can all be fed into the system, and complex patterns are going to be easier for an AI system to see compared to a human being (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Huang & Rust, 2021). To that end,

these insights are helpful in helping businesses make the right decisions on the marketing strategies to employ, fine-tuning the specific campaigns to run, and allocating resources where they are most useful.

Recommendation engines are yet another efficiency facilitator that digital marketing professionals have at their disposal with the use of AI. These strategies involve the use of customer information as well as previous activity patterns and customer preferences to recommend products or content (Kannan & Li, 2017; Kingsnorth, 2019). Whenever such elaborate details are pointed out, clients will be more inclined, have better chances of making the necessary conversions, and become loyal to the intended business scores.

In relation to AI, it still boosts various facets of the DM strategic plans, including advertisement placements, bidding, as well as content creation (Itani et al., 2017; Purwanto et al., 2020). The automation can also analyse and decide which outlets with potential viewers are most effective for creating the advertisement and adjust positioning or bid rates based on the outcomes. Furthermore, based on the details that AI gathers concerning the client's behaviour, the AI solution can assist in developing content such as social media posts, email newsletters, web copy, and much more as it creates content that is appealing to the clients.

In SEO, where Internet sites and other content on the web are optimized in order to make them easily accessible through search engines where users' intent is precisely satisfied, AI plays a very critical role, especially when businesses are trying to achieve their goals and get their intended rank in a given search results (Arpaci, 2021; Kannan & Li, 2017). Based on movement in search, intent of the users, and content of the web page, AI can suggest more optimization points and relevant keywords, Meta tags, and content tips for search engine optimization.

Other applications of AI in DM include image and video recognition, which has become common in marketing. Such technologies can classify, recognize, and tag aspects such as objects, people, and scenes, along with descriptions and metadata (2017, 2020 Odoom et al.; Ismagilova et al. ). With the help of this capability, companies can enhance

shares and discoverability of the visually-rich content, which, in turn, impacts improved user engagement and traffic to the business's relevant digital properties.

Yet, as much as the employment of AI in digital marketing is still in its nascent form, it is still fraught with difficulties. A major issue with AI applications is the ethical challenge of the general use of AI, including the prospect of incorporating bias and violating privacy (Kingsnorth, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). Generally, when algorithms are trained and applications built to perform specific tasks on AI platforms for users, the data used must be evenly, somewhat, and typically representative of the band of users. Also, data privacy must be respected, and organizations must follow guidelines and regulations provided by the government so that consumers can trust and have confidence in organizations/ businesses.

The other is within capability; specialized skills and assets are required for the application and management of integrated AI solutions (Bruce et al., 2015; Hanaysha, 2017). It is important to remember that, despite the advantages that can be accrued from implementing AI technologies, these may entail a high level of difficulty and involve high capital costs for the acquisition of infrastructure and training of staff, as well as recurrent expenses for maintenance. Small and medium-sized enterprises may need more resources available, which can restrict their opportunity to optimally benefit from using AI in their digital marketing initiatives.

Nevertheless, there is a probability of seeing the incorporation of AI in digital marketing efforts becoming more frequent as companies seek to level up and provide great value to their customers based on relevant data. This will also mean that through the right adoption of AI responsibly and strategically, the communications firms and, by extension, businesses can tap more opportunities, create value, improve marketing communication, and have deeper engagement with the target stakeholders in the complex and developing digital ecosystem.

## 2.4. Gaps in the literature

While digital marketing has been extensively researched, the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs remains an under-explored area, as most studies have focused on large firms and left a gap in the study and attention on how SMEs can effectively use these digital tools to improve their productivity and performance and compete on a more level playing field (Hemann & Burbary, 2013; Ismagilova et al., 2020).

On the other hand, while the positive impact of implementing digital marketing strategies on the visibility and engagement of brands with their customers is recognised, there are significant challenges for SMEs such as lack of financial resources, their organisational structures, shortage of training in these tools and specialised skills and difficulties in measuring the ROI of their brands that have not been addressed in detail. In this sense, a literature review that focuses on how SMEs can tackle such challenges would be productive to deepen the analysis and continue this line of research.

Furthermore, another area that requires further research, while recognising its recent and growing impact on various areas of social functioning, is the integration and incorporation of emerging digital technologies such as AI into digital marketing strategies for SMEs. While research has been investigating AI in various directions, there is a lack of studies that analyse the implementation of AI in SMEs and its potential ethical and practical challenges (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Huang & Rust, 2021). Also, how the 'digital fashion' paradigm is resonating in the context of SMEs and what challenges it brings for SMEs (Ritz et al., 2023).

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Introduction

In order to explore and understand digital marketing strategies in small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry in Argentina a qualitative methodology design was chosen, which was carried out by developing semi-structured interviews and the analysis was done by conducting a thematic analysis.

This methodological choice was appropriate as the enterprises are SMEs and what we are interested in knowing is how they understand and experience the role of digital marketing for their enterprises rather than systematising application modes and strategy techniques. In this sense, the study seeks to identify the processes, strategies and challenges faced by these enterprises to understand their levels of professionalism in managing their brands.

### 3.2. Research paradigm

According to Saunders et al. (2007) paradigms are a set of assumptions that shape a framework from which we understand the world, in this sense, following the authors, a paradigm is a way to examine social phenomena from a particular understanding.

Considering that the study aims to investigate the uses, challenges and experiences of small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry in the implementation of digital marketing strategies for the positioning of their brands, the interpretative paradigm provides us with a frame of reference from which we can construct scientific knowledge in a critical manner, recognising the place and subjectivities of the participants in the study.

In this regard, Saunders et al. (2007) defined this paradigm as "the way in which human beings attempt to make sense of the world around us. The concern one would have working within this paradigm would be to understand the fundamental meanings attributed to organisational life" (p. 113). In this sense, this paradigm allows us to put

the focus on reasons not seen at first glance in a traditional business analysis, but we can see the ways in which participants define and understand digital marketing. Their own notions of digital marketing assign roles and levels of importance that will then impact on strategies.

### 3.3. Philosophical Assumptions

#### Ontological Assumption

In this research, following Longhofer and Winchester (2016), the ontological assumption is that society is subjective, and that subjectivity is socially constructed. In this sense, the nature of reality is shaped by the experiences, notions and perceptions of the individuals who are part of the small and medium-sized fashion companies interviewed for this study. Even when these individuals share certain common repertoires that allow them to live in society, each interviewed enterprise constructs its own versions of reality based on specific circumstances, such as decisions that allowed it to stay in business, modes of interaction with its customers, production and sales, to name but a few examples. This is why this study starts from the ontological assumption of recognising the existence of multiple and diverse realities and aims to capture some of that diversity for a deeper understanding of digital marketing strategies in small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry.

#### Epistemological Assumption

In relation to the ontological assumption, the epistemological assumption is interpretivist, which considers that knowledge is constructed through the interactions between the researcher and the participants of the study. For this reason, I have opted for a qualitative methodological design, based on interviews as a method that allows the conversation between the parties to explore the processes and strategies employed by small and medium-sized fashion companies. In this sense, the research aims to find out the meanings and understandings, i.e. the role in the business strategy, about digital marketing strategies that the participants have for a comprehensive understanding of their business model. As part of the epistemological assumption, I acknowledge that all

knowledge production is subjective, recognising that my presence and perspective is influential in this study both in data collection and in interpretation and analysis. However, the acknowledgement of this epistemological assumption is an opportunity to gain and arrive at a deeper insight into digital marketing strategies for small and medium enterprises.

### Axiological Assumption

The main objective of this study is based on the interest of improving the understanding of digital marketing strategies in the context of small and medium enterprises in the fashion industry, therefore, the axiological assumption recognises that the researcher's values and biases are inherent in the research process. These values, of which I could mention the commitment to ethical practices, which are also regulated in research protocols developed by the National College of Ireland as a commitment to compliance, and respect for the views and pursuits of the interview participants are the main guidelines for the design and execution of this research. I should also mention that this study is also based on reflexivity as a practice that ensures that my own influence is critically questioned and examined and genuinely referenced in the reporting of the findings of this research.

### Methodological Assumption

To explore and examine the digital marketing experiences, processes and strategies implemented by small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry, this study adopts a qualitative approach, relying primarily on interviews as the central tool for data collection. As mentioned by Kvale (2007) the qualitative research interview is a professional conversation “which goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge” (p. 24).

The choice of a qualitative interview-based approach is related to the need for an in-depth exploration of the management and implementation experiences of small and medium-sized enterprises in specific contexts, in this case all enterprises based in



Argentina. However, the design is flexible, as it can be redesigned based on emerging discoveries during the process of conducting the research. The analysis of the data obtained is based on the interpretation and thematic coding, which is derived from the thematic blocks defined for the interview question guide. In this sense, the analysis and interpretation focus on the recognition of patterns and themes that reflect participants' experiences, perspectives and views on digital marketing strategies.

### 3.4. Setting

The interviews were conducted virtually, mostly via WhatsApp video call, as this was the option chosen by the participants. Only three of them were conducted via Google Meet. Although participants had the option to disable the video function, the interview was set up as a face-to-face conversation between the researcher and the participants. The conversation was guided by the questionnaire prepared for this study, with an average duration of between 20 and 30 minutes.

### 3.5. Participants

Below is a table summarising the most relevant demographic information of the interview participants:

Table 1: Demographic and Organizational Characteristics of Participants

Participants	Role	Age	Gender	Type of Organisation	Age of business (in years)	Number of employees	Enterprise as main activity
1	Owner/founder	35	F	One-person business	11	5	Yes
2	Owner/founder	34	F	One-person business	8	5	Yes

3	Owner/founder	33	F	One-person business	8	0	No
4	Owner/founder	25	M	One-person business	5	0	No
5	Owner/founder	35	F	One-person business	3	0	No
6	Owner/founder	34	F	One-person business	6	1	Yes
7	Owner/founder	34	F	One-person business	4	5 + 2 temporary	Yes
8	Owner/founder	30	M	One-person business	4	1 + 1 contractor	Yes
9	Owner/founder	45	F	One-person business	1	4 contractors	No
10	Owner/founder	30	M	One-person business	1	0	No

According to the information detailed above, the study included a total of 10 participants within there were seven females and three males, resulting in a gender distribution that is female-weighted. In terms of age, the average age of the participants was 33.5 years old, with an age range of 20 years, with the youngest participant being 25 years old and the oldest 45 years old.

All the participants are of Argentinean nationality, and founded and launched their brands in the country, which have a national marketing scope. In professional terms, all of them have a background in fashion and/or graphic or industrial design, having obtained their degrees in public and national universities in Argentina.

### 3.6. Materials

For the development of the research, the main material was an interview question guide to order the conversation and ensure coverage of all proposed topics. The complete Interview Guide can be found in the appendix section.

#### Interview guide

This guide was designed for interviews with entrepreneurs to cover an estimated 30–40-minute conversation with the aim of gathering information on the digital marketing strategies employed by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the fashion sector. The complete guide can be found in the appendix section.

The guide was organised along eight axes in order to cover all the aspects that arise from the research question.

1. **Organisational structure and type of organisation:** how the company is organised, decision making, number of employees.
2. **Foundation:** enquiry into the history of the company and its foundation, the key decisions that allowed them to stay in business, initial challenges.
3. **Processes and strategies:** details are asked about the specific digital marketing processes and strategies, the role these play in the growth of the brand.
4. **Implementation and execution:** the methods used and challenges in implementing and executing their digital marketing strategies.

5. **Measuring success:** KPIs used and the ways in which ventures measure and conceive success.

6. **Engagement and Consumer Experience:** asks whether digital marketing strategies affect consumer engagement.

7. **Market Presence:** reviews digital marketing strategies that contribute to market presence.

8. **Role of AI in their ventures:** we inquire about their knowledge and use of AI tools to enhance their business.

### 3.7. Procedure

The steps that were taken to carry out the research are presented below in chronological order.

#### **Step 1: Development of the Interview Guide**

##### **1. Creation of the interview questions and guide**

Based on the literature review a guide of questions was drawn up, which is divided into thematic groups, which cover the objectives that arise from the research question. The guide can be found in the appendix section.

#### **Step 2: Creation of the Participant Consent Form**

The complete Participation Consent Form can be found in the appendix section.

1. To ensure the National College of Ireland's standards of good procedure and ethics, this form was drawn up as a formal and detailed invitation to participate in the research.. The document was crucial in this regard as it sets out the ethical and methodological basis of the research, ensuring the transparency of the process, methods of analysis and data handling, storage, confidentiality and consent of participants. For this reason, it also details the purpose of the study

to facilitate understanding of the context and relevance of the study. In addition, the document places a strong emphasis on the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions.

### **Step 3: Search, Selection and Recruitment of Participants**

#### **1. Identification of potential participants**

A survey on Instagram was carried out and a list of 40 small and medium-sized clothing brands in Argentina was compiled, which were systematised in an excel document detailing their Instagram address and number of followers.

#### **2. Initial contact**

The brands were contacted via direct message, with a brief presentation of who I am and why I was conducting this study. The message explained the reasons why their brand was being contacted.

#### **3. Monitoring and dissemination of information**

Those who replied with the intention of finding out more about the proposal were asked for a contact email where a document was attached and sent detailing the objectives of the research, procedures and issues related to confidentiality, participants' rights and ethical dimensions of the research. The Participation Consent Form can be found in the appendix section.

### **Step 4: Scheduling and Preparation for Interviews**

#### **1. Arranging interviews**

Those who expressed their willingness to take part in the interviews were asked about their availability and preferences for the interviews. In order to make the interviews possible, as the researcher I adapted to their availability, as I was dedicating myself full time to the research process during the interviews.

#### **2. Offering participants a convenience platform**

Each of them was offered Google Meet or WhatsApp video call as tools for the conversation, and they were also asked about their preferences for other

platforms or applications to conduct the interview. Most of the interviewees opted for WhatsApp video call, and two of them for the call-only option.

## **Step 5: Conducting the interviews**

### **1. Preparation**

To conduct the interviews, I downloaded the WhatsApp desktop app with which I made the calls.

### **2. Introduction and validation of consent**

The reasons for the research were briefly explained again, and they were asked again if they agreed to participate in the research, and to remember that they had the right to withdraw from the interview without penalty or consequence. They were reminded that the audio of the conversation would be recorded for later analysis, and that the conversation was completely confidential and anonymous. Each of them received the consent form detailed above, which was signed and returned for storage for security reasons and good practice standards of the National College of Ireland's research procedure. All participants who agreed to the interview completed the interview successfully.

### **3. Development of the interview**

The interviews were conducted by using the 'Interview Guide' presented above, which is included in the appendix, but them allowing flexibility to explore emerging topics. The interviews were conducted in a question-answer format.

## **Step 6: Data recording and storage of information**

### **1. Recording**

All the interviews were recorded by using the "Voice memos" app, included in iPhone. The recording of each interview was named with the brand name and sent from the mobile phone to the email address provided by the National College of Ireland, from where they were downloaded to the computer.

### **2. Data storage**

The recordings were downloaded and stored on a secure, password-needed file on my personal computer.

## **Step 7: Transcription and Data Preparation**

### **1. Transcription**

Each recording was transcribed verbatim into a Word document. The transcriptions were made by me, as I consider that listening carefully to the recordings is a productive practice for the analysis and interpretation of the results. No app or transcription software was used, just listening and transcription.

### **2. Editing**

The raw recordings were edited to give them order, arranged in a question-answer format.

## **Step 8: Ethical Consideration**

### **1. Confidentiality and Anonymity**

The transcripts were re-read to ensure the omission of personal information from the participants if they had mentioned it, and the consent forms were securely stored in accordance with the National College of Ireland's standards.

## **Step 9: Analysis and processing of information**

### **1. Analytical reading**

Each word file was reread analytically. Highlighting the most important sentences of each question-answer. The analytical strategy is explained in this chapter under the subtitle 'analytical strategy'.

### 3.8. Ethical Considerations

All participants in the study were entirely voluntary and they have had the opportunity to abandon it at any stage. They were fully informed about the research's purpose, and their consent were obtained before data collection by signing a consent form. The collected information will be kept confidential, with results presented in an aggregated and anonymized format.

### 3.9. Reflection

Although a few challenges that were faced, the interviews were carried out smoothly. After the first and the second interview, I realized that the length was too long because the two first two participants expressed the need to finish the conversation earlier than planned. In this regard, I checked the guide out and I made a shorter version by prioritizing the most relevant questions by themes to make sure the essential data would be collected.

Secondly, I noticed that that open-ended questions make participants to give longer responses which is which is invaluable when we plan to do discourse analysis. The main issue that arises here is sometimes shortened the time 40available to go deeper in subsequent topic or even not being able to cover the minimum ones. I recommend balancing open-ended and direct questions to manage time effectively by allowing participants to express themselves and guarantee the data collection.

Finally, it must be said that scheduling interviews is a big challenge when you are short in time to conduct the study. In this regard, flexibility and efficient rescheduling is required. As I was working full time on the study, I had the chance to manage several participants requesting changes, but it is something to keep in mind if you are planning to start your research.



## 4. Findings and analysis

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed summary of the main results obtained from the 10 semi-structured interviews carried out to explore and understand the processes and strategies of digital marketing employed by small and medium-sized fashion enterprises (SMEs) for brand positioning and success. Five main themes arose from the data were grouped and characterised into Organisational structure and decision-making style; Business Orientation; Digital Marketing Strategies; Understanding of brand success and Levels of awareness and use of AI tools (See figure 1 for further information).

### 4.2. Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy for the analysis of the results is based on the development of a thematic analysis from the reading of the transcripts of the interviews conducted. After collecting qualitative data from the interviews, the objective was to identify, classify, analyse and report common patterns (themes) in the interviewees' responses.

#### 4.2.1. Data Collection

##### Sampling and Participants

Sampling: participants were chosen according to their relevance to the research question. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with owners and founders of small and medium-sized brands in the fashion industry in Argentina. Detailed demographic information on the participants can be found in the subtitle 'Participants' in this chapter.

##### Data Collection Method

Interviews: semi-structured interviews were conducted, as they allow for a flexible and in-depth exploration of the processes of digital marketing strategies in these ventures.

## Data Analysis

As mentioned by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) data analysis is central to credible qualitative research because the ability of researchers to understand, describe and interpret experiences and perceptions is crucial to uncover meanings in participar contexts. In this regard, for the analysis of the data collected, the six-phase framework for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in Using thematic analysis in psychology were followed, which offers a comprehensive and rigorous approach to conducting thematic analysis of qualitative information.

### *Phase 1: Familiarising with the data*

In this first step the interviews were transcribed, and a first reading of the transcripts was carried out. A series of initial notes were taken and compared with the notes made during the interviews. These notes were also compared with the classification of questions made for the interview guide. As a result of this first phase, a series of labels were defined for classification in thematic analysis.

### *Phase 2: Generating initial codes*

The first three codes that were created in this phase were marketing, social media and Artificial Intelligence with which the transcripts were roughly scanned to identify the paragraphs where the interviewees gave an answer or generated some idea around these themes.

### *Phase 3: Searching for Themes*

In this phase, the initial codes were placed in relation to three major themes defined for the analysis, which are Digital Marketing Strategies, Role of social networks for brand positioning and levels of knowledge and application of Artificial Intelligence tools.

### *Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes*

In this fourth phase, after a thorough and detailed reading of the interview transcripts, the three main themes of the analysis were reviewed and defined as the three main structuring axes of the data analysis.

#### *Phase 5: Defining and Naming the Themes*

In this phase, a detailed description of each theme was elaborated, with a clear description from which to group the selection of the most salient fragments of the transcripts according to the themes of the analysis.

#### *Phase 6: Reporting*

Phase six is basically the content of the discussion section. Based on the reading of the fragments grouped in each of the three main axes, the ways in which each interviewee defines and understands their practices in the management of their enterprises were analysed.

### **Example of a Theme Write-up**

Theme: Mission, Vision & Values

Theme's description: Main ideas and definitions that participants use to describe the direction of their enterprises.

Example extract: *"My brand has nothing defined (...) The brand was born out of a little madness of mine and that's how it happened, and that's how it continues to happen"* (Participant 4).

## **4.3. Key insights on Digital Marketing Structure of Entrepreneurships**

In this section a table is presented that summarise and condense the most relevant findings of the research. This table provide a clear and concise overview of the data

collected, giving an account of their levels of knowledge in digital marketing, AI tools and main sales channels.

Table 2: Participant's Digital Marketing Strategies, Sale Channels and Tools

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Experience in Digital Marketing</b>	<b>Digital Marketing team or contractor</b>	<b>New Product Launch Strategy</b>	<b>Use AI Tools</b>	<b>Attention to the KPIs</b>	<b>Sales channels</b>
1	No	Yes	No	No	No	Website
2	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Website + Physical Store
3	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Website
4	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Website
5	No	No	Yes	No	No	Website + Physical Store
6	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Website + Physical Store
7	No	Yes	No	No	No	Website + Physical Store
8	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Website + Physical Store
9	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Website
10	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Website

The table above shows an overview of their digital marketing structure, detailing whether the ventures have digital marketing experience, uses of AI tools and main sales

channels. These data are further elaborated by the thematic analysis in the following subtitle.

#### 4.4. Thematic Analysis of Digital Marketing Strategies: Insights from Interviews with SME Entrepreneurs in Argentina

As mentioned before, five main themes arose from the data were grouped and characterised into Organisational structure and decision-making style; Business Orientation; Digital Marketing Strategies; Understanding of brand success and Levels of awareness and use of AI tools. Within the Business Orientation and Digital Marketing Strategies, sub-themes are found. In this sense, Business Orientation is composed of the following sub-themes: Mission, Vision & Values, Decision to stay in Business and Growth Projection. The theme Digital Marketing Strategies has Digital Marketing Role; Role of social media for brand positioning and Launch strategy as sub-themes.



Figure 1: Structure of the themes and sub-themes emerging from the thematic analysis.

##### 4.4.1. Organisational structure and decision-making style

The interviewees were asked about how decisions are made in their organisation in order to understand how the brands interviewed operate.

Question	Participant	Response
How is your business organised? What is the organisation chart like?	2	<i>"I am the person who makes all the decisions. Yes, I am constantly getting advice from specialists. For example, in branding, I have relatives who advise me on marketing. Then I have a person who is external to my work team who assists me in the moulding of the venture, i.e. the designs that I propose, although I am a designer in the venture in the brand, I design the texture of the textiles and I also choose the type of garments that are going to be developed in a capsule format".</i>
How are the decision made?	9	<i>"In fact, I am the only one in the brand, but I do subcontract the production".</i>
	6	<i>"I am the only one who makes the decisions. It's very difficult for me to delegate so it's like I need to be in all areas".</i>

The quotes show in a condensed form how these entrepreneurs perceive their roles and manage their brands. Most occupy a central place as creative directors of the brands and the other tasks, such as digital marketing or social media management, as secondary.

Overall, what can be observed, also in relation to the number of employees that each brand employs showed in table 2, is that the enterprises are one-person businesses, and the employees they currently employ are external, doing specific and mostly temporary jobs.

#### 4.4.2. Business orientation

##### Mission, Vision & Values

Interviewees were asked about how they launched their ventures, and whether during the initial and gestation stage of their ideas, they defined the mission, vision and values of their brands as a strategy and future planning for their brands.

Question	Participant	Response
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In the process of thinking about the brand, was a mission, vision and values defined, or were they built after its launch?	1	<i>"I think there is a message and a very well-defined proposal, it's not something I have written down but over the years the public has remained very loyal, beyond the fact that the public is special because it happens only once, a bride only gets married once. I do see that the same profile has been maintained for years and the proposal is always aimed at the same thing".</i>
	2	<i>"I've always been looking for that and it has also been changing (...) I want people who wear my brand to be able to raise their self-esteem, to feel powerful, happy, to elevate the people who choose the brand. I started to think about that beyond generating a timeless product, without gender, for everyone and at the same time durable over time".</i>
	3	<i>"I think the mission of the brand is that anyone can wear an embroidered garment and that it's not just that your grandmother does it, to take away the stigma that embroidery is that your grandmother embroidered it and that's fine! But the question that someone who listens to metal can wear embroidery or someone who, I don't know, goes running, can wear it (...) That the versatility of the garments, for me, is my mission".</i>
	4	<i>"My brand has nothing defined (...) The brand was born out of a little madness of mine and that's how it happened, and that's how it continues to happen".</i>
	6	<i>"I launched the brand and that was it, it was all very casual. I made a product, I went out on the street with that product, people liked it and I had to find a name for it".</i>
	5	<i>"Some lines yes, as the brand took shape, I did some brainstorming on my own with a sheet of paper, for example, aesthetically I always said that I wanted everything to be full print, as if that would distinguish the brand, which means that the print would reach the whole garment".</i>

	8	<i>"I came with more conceptual interests, you saw that I have something like close values, something very national. Also something mystical, there's like a joke or something cheeky and then that the editions are limited, a support for example of the use of black and white in something very simple like a t-shirt and adapting these concepts in those".</i>
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Participant 1 was clear about her audience, and the product she marketed, which are wedding dresses with a design difference in the market in Argentina, yet the 'well-defined proposal' she talks about was not articulated in a mission, vision and values of the brand.

Participants 2 and 3 have defined aspects of their brands' mission, mission and values, which mandate a future and planning of the venture, yet they are not integrated into a business planning that can facilitate decision-making in that direction. For example, in the case of participant 2, the mission is an implicit one that consists of raising the self-esteem and happiness of their customers.

In the case of participants 4 and 6 there is an absence of these, which shows, beyond the productive performance and profitability of the brands at present, an absence of strategic direction and a functioning governed by spontaneity, flexibility and demand.

Finally, the last group of answers corresponds to participants 5 and 8, who focus on the type of product they make and how they have oriented it from the beginning. Both pay attention to the concept that their garments convey and the aesthetic dimension of the garments. Articulating these dimensions in a clear vision, mission and values would help strengthen the strategic direction and sustained growth of the brands.

## Decision to stay in business

The participants were asked about what they considered to be the key decisions that allowed them to stay in business. Beyond the particularities of each one, there is a



regularity identified that has to do with perseverance, creativity and reinvention. Below are the highlights of the responses obtained.

Question	Participant	Response
What were the key decision to stay in business?	1	<i>"I think that what has made me continue and do well today is perseverance in a style that in the world of design and more specifically in the world of fashion designers in Argentina, everyone does everything".</i>
	3	<i>"I think that constancy. Being constant, reinventing yourself and joining forces, more than anything else in collaborations, also helps a lot so that the project doesn't remain stuck as 'I am this, come and buy me'".</i>
	4	<i>"I guess it's about renewal and constantly looking for new things, but I wouldn't know what other decision to make. The best decision I made with the brand was to think of unique accessories that you can't get anywhere else and I think that's the strongest thing about the brand".</i>
	7	<i>"Key decisions? It could be to put a lot of effort and try not to let go when everything goes wrong, because it is like Argentina, where there are very strong crisis peaks".</i>
	9	<i>"I think the important thing for me was to have a conscious production, to produce according to demand and not to overstock myself, that helped me financially and to see what the public needs more than me imposing myself".</i>

In this response from participant 1 it can be seen how the distinctive design of its products defines the brand's value proposition; in a market characterised by similarity this particularity reinforces the brand's identity.

In participants 3, 4 and 7 we clearly see how consistency combined with reinvention, resilience and differentiation have been key strategies for these entrepreneurs to keep their brands in business.

Finally, participant 9 is the only one, from the selection of quotations and from the other interviewees, who mentions his attention to the production levels of the brand, thus in a dimension linked to the profitability of the venture. Production and sales levels are determining factors for the profitability and profitability of small brands.

## Growth Projection

In relation to strategic planning, respondents were asked about their desires for future expansion and growth. This question is linked to their definitions of their brands' mission, vision and values. The relationship between mission, vision and values and strategic planning for business expansion and growth will be discussed and related in the next chapter.

Question	Participant	Response
Would you like to take your business to the next level, designing a structure that can produce on a large scale, market nationally or even import	3	<i>"Obviously the biggest wish would be for it to be a super schematic brand like: 'Ah your brand!' and they remember my brand, don't they? But I'm also a bit of a realist and I know that there is a lot of demand for new brands, I know who I'm competing with".</i>
	5	<i>"I would like it very much. Above all, to have something oiled up, a system that works. To have more or less set up the mechanism, because if it's on a scale like that it's already something that works, and to be able to be in another, more creative place, which I'd love to be".</i>
	7	<i>"Everything we are doing, even if it is on a small scale, is to prepare us for larger scales, the idea is to export, I have one foot in that, it seems to me that my product is more for abroad or for big cities".</i>
	6	<i>"I think the biggest challenge in terms of production is economics, having a good investment and being able to buy more quantity (...) Then there is reaching new clients, the most</i>

your product?		<i>popular, my brand is quite niche, it has not yet become a mass product”.</i>
	4	<i>“If you asked me today if I want the brand to grow and have more responsibilities, I would say no, because for the time being, since the brand started, it has been moving on its own and I can manage it well”.</i>
	8	<i>“I’m comfortable with what I’ve built so far but it would be like the next step”.</i>

Participants 3, 5 and 7 express a clear desire to take their ventures to the next level. Participant 3, however, mentions the competitiveness that should be approached, participant 5 highlights his desire to act as a direct creative brand manager and that the production mechanism is something that is well oiled, and participant 7, for his part, the desire to start exporting his products.

Participant 6 stressed that the biggest challenge for the brand's growth is to increase production levels and that the main barrier here is the economic one.

Participants 4 and 8 could be placed in another mindset of entrepreneurs who value more their current scales, which in the first years tend to be small. This mindset tends to be seen more clearly in areas where the value of craftsmanship is more important, and certain entrepreneurs feel that taking their ventures to larger levels means that their product loses that distinctive quality.

#### 4.4.3. Digital Marketing Strategies

##### Digital Marketing Role

In addition to the primary role they assign to social media, participants also define digital marketing in the same direction. Below are a number of responses that illustrate the role of digital marketing for these entrepreneurs.

Question	Participant	Response
What role does digital marketing play in the development of your brand?	8	<i>"It is very important. People from other countries or cities buy from me and that's good, I couldn't have done it without the internet. I'm trying to do well with the advertising campaign that I've been doing for a while and those things also work".</i>
	2	<i>"I think it plays an important role, all the initiatives I did on social media always had a positive impact. I would like to know more and spend more time thinking about it".</i>
	5	<i>"When I had a person in charge of digital marketing I noticed a lot of difference in sales or interactions on networks. So I can tell you that it plays a key role. Nowadays, as I'm more focused on production issues, I don't give it as much importance".</i>
	1	<i>"Digital marketing is super secondary. It's true that I'm finding a lot more repercussion in the last two months since I started advertising with a marketing agency, I'm finding more enquiries and visualisations, in that sense I see that it's very immediate how it works".</i>
About two months ago you told me that you hired a marketing team. Why was that decision?	1	<i>"That decision was because, as I had never advertised before, the followers were not increasing. I always noticed a lot of loyalty and interaction but it was very difficult to grow (...) there is also the desire for more people to get to know you and then, as a consequence, they may or may not choose me as a designer, but I do think it's good not to stop there and try to reach more people".</i>

The excerpt from participant 8 exemplifies what is happening with some entrepreneurs in terms of how they understand digital marketing strategies but position their results as productive.

What can be observed in participants 2 and 5 is a clear recognition of the impact of digital marketing actions. Even so, they assume that they do not dedicate the time it deserves because they are dedicated to other brand management tasks.

What can be seen here is that even defining digital marketing as secondary to his venture, she decided to invest in it to strengthen and expand his brand, which has been giving results.

However, even recognizing the importance of digital marketing for the growth of their brands, what was seen in the interviews is that most of them do not dedicate time to it because they are focused on other brand management tasks, or because of lack of resources that can cover the costs of a digital marketing professional.

### Role of social media for brand positioning

Based on the literature review that social networks are essential for small and medium-sized enterprises and market their products online, the participants were asked about it.

Question	Participant	Response
What is the role of social media for your venture?	3	<i>"In the beginning it was fundamental, most of my followers are all organic. Very few times I paid for advertising (...) I knew that Instagram, depending on the amount I paid for advertising, would take me to the people I was going to reach. Yes, maybe you get one or two sales, but I wanted my audience to be organic".</i>
	4	<i>"Social media is fundamental, the most important thing of all. My brand is managed solely through social networks; I don't use any media for advertising and that's the only thing on which everything is based".</i>
	5	<i>"Practically everything. Instagram basically (...) Well, it's through there, I don't have another channel".</i>

	8	<i>"For me it's the letter of introduction, it's very important, from how to put together to which photo to choose. I spend a lot of time on the internet and looking at things, it's very important".</i>
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What is quickly observed in these responses, and the same pattern appears in the responses of the other interviewees, is that social networks, mainly Instagram, play a central role in the management and promotion of brands. Some participants, for example 5, are totally dependent on their actions on Instagram. The need for strategic planning on social networks as part of the digital marketing guidelines will be addressed in the next chapter.

### Launch Strategy

As part of their digital marketing strategies, to delve deeper into the existence or absence of strategic thinking, participants were asked if they planned actions before starting to market a new product.

Question	Participant	Response
When launching a product, do you design and execute a launch strategy? Or do you simply add it to your product offering?	2	<i>"Nowadays I feel that it is my weakest point because it takes a long time to do that, it is a very important job and I am a little bit involved in everything and it is difficult for me. Nowadays I don't have a strategy that can tell you 'this is it', I feel vulnerable in that part all the time".</i>
	4	<i>"I don't plan at all. What I can plan is if I do a run of five new products, plan the photo shoot or the content I'm going to share but then I don't plan much else".</i>
	6	<i>"When it comes to launching it, I do plan how I would like to launch it, what the context is".</i>
	8	<i>"There's a kind of planning and I think about how many people you can reach in the sizes for example, that's what I start to think about a bit, this would be in pre-production and in post-production I'm trying to put together other strategies more like..."</i>

		<i>for example when you bring out a new piece you also sell what you had produced previously”.</i>
	7	<i>“The ideal is always to put together the strategy before launching it, but I often don't have the time. I'm often late, fashion is like everything for yesterday and you're always late”.</i>

In general, there is a lack of professional planning of product launch strategies. For example, participant 2 reports a perception of weakness in the absence of a strategy. On the other hand, participant 4 maintains that it does not plan any new product launches or marketing at all.

Participants 6 and 8 report on certain planning actions, which take into account the context in which the product is launched (participant 6) and pre- and post-production instances (participant 8).

Participant 7, on the other hand, shows what is reflected in some of the cases systematized in Table 2, where in these cases the reason for not planning is lack of time and a way of managing their organizations that makes them define and manage everything themselves.

#### 4.4.4. Understanding of brand success

Participants were asked how they measured or tracked the performance of their ventures, especially if they paid attention to the KPIs offered by social networks or their websites. The answers are systematized in Table 2. Along the same lines, they were asked what was and how they defined success for their ventures.

Question	Participant	Response
How do you measure	1	<i>“If I think of the word success, for me success is that the bride who leaves is happy to have chosen you (...) success for me is that a friend of another bride who recommended her because she had a spectacular experience comes to me”.</i>

the success of your branding efforts in the digital space?	8	<i>"I think that after a while you cross a line that is not so much about money but about maintaining a structure, right? (...) Sometimes I go out on the street and people wear the products and I think that's great. On Instagram to see my images is great, I think that for me that's what success is".</i>
	10	<i>"For me success has to do with people choosing to wear my brand, then increasing profits has to do with adjusting the management and production model of the business. But I don't measure success in economic terms".</i>
	6	<i>"Make ends meet and then quantity of products sold on a weekly or daily basis".</i>

Most of them defined success from a customer perspective, as can be seen in the responses of participants 1, 8 and 10, who understand it as their products being used by the market in which they are immersed. While this is a valid perspective, it is recurrent that small brands do not measure their performance only in economic terms, especially in the early years of their brands. Participant 6 is the only one who considered the dimension of the profitability of his venture associated with the idea of success and performance.

In summary, what can be observed is that while there is a focus on financial measures and operations, success is mostly linked to customer satisfaction and preferences, brand recognition and visibility. What we could define as subjective notions of success (customer preferences and recognition) and objective (sales and financial sustainability).

#### 4.4.5. Levels of awareness and use of AI tools

The last axis of analysis accounts for their levels of knowledge and use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to improve productivity and design digital marketing strategies, which appears as an incipient and emerging topic in the study relationship between SMEs and digital marketing.



Question	Participant	Response
Do you know AI tools for digital marketing? If so, do you use them for your digital marketing strategies?	2	<i>"I ask the Chat GTP: 'give me ten ideas for generating content' (...) I'll be honest, I've never started to do more evolved things for artificial intelligence. Maybe because I'm more focused on other things, I'm in marketing, production, it's all chaos".</i>
	3	<i>"What I use the most is Chat GPT, but to help me write, not so much to do everything for me but to help me".</i>
	9	<i>"If I must do any important programming dates it gives me ideas, where to go, what to do but to be honest I would love to be able to use a lot more of it because it would save me a lot of time".</i>
	4	<i>"I use them mostly for editing photos or videos. Not so much for specific questions like marketing campaigns or anything like that (...) Artificial intelligence can't finish what a human can do".</i>

Participants 2 and 3 use it simply for ideas to produce content or improve writing but have not explored its potential to optimize their tasks even when they are entrepreneurial profiles with an overload of work due to the type of organization they manage.

Participant 9, on the other hand, while using it in a similar direction to the previous ones, recognizes its potential to help save time and increase productivity.

The part 4 is interesting because it also synthesizes a way of perceiving the AI present in other participants, on the one hand they recognize its potential and declare to use it, but on the other hand they argue that human creativity, in this case to design digital marketing campaigns, is not substitutable.

Overall, what is observed is a pattern in the responses, which are systematized in Table 2, which shows that the level of knowledge of IA tools is minimal, and if there is any, its use is limited and basic.

## 4.5. Summary of findings

Firstly, the brands lack professional planning in their digital marketing strategies, especially in new product launches, which is mainly attributed to lack of time, resources or overload of responsibilities. This can be seen in the inconsistent implementation of these strategies and the decision-making style which is the same in ten out of ten participants.

Secondly, although some of them consider the profitability and financial sustainability of their ventures, success is mainly measured from the perspective of their customers, valuing customer satisfaction and loyalty. This is clearly shown in Figure 2 where the levels of attention to KPIs are variable and inconsistent. Specially, only five out of ten participants reported regular KPIs tracking but the other six relied more on subjective measures of success than financial metrics.

In organizational terms, the decision making, and organizational model is centralized, which leads its founders and managers to have multifaceted roles, which does not allow them to develop strategic planning. All of the ten participants claim to have a single-person decision-making and management structure. In this sense, it can be observed the lack of a clear establishment of a mission, vision and values for their brands. They also recognize that digital marketing, especially the use of social networks, is essential for brand positioning, but the implementation is diverse and unstructured, which can be defined as marketing actions but not as strategies.

Finally, the level of knowledge and use of IA tools is limited, as most of them use IA in a basic way, for example, in proofreading or writing texts or brainstorming sessions to generate content. Also, the only tool mostly mentioned is Chat GPT, and a perception in some of them that human creativity cannot be reemployed by IA, which limits its exploration and adoption for other types of tasks that would help to improve the productivity and performance of entrepreneurs.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter discussed the most important findings obtained from the analysis of the information collected through interviews with 10 entrepreneurs of small brands in the fashion industry in Argentina.

The discussion presented here critically reviews these results in the light of the theoretical and research contributions developed in the literature review chapter. Thus, here we present the ruptures and continuities with those contributions of the literature review for a more complex understanding of the relationship between digital marketing strategies and small and medium enterprises in the fashion industry.

In this sense, the chapter is organized into three main discussion cores which are Characterization of the type of organization, organizational structure and business orientation, Difficulties and challenges in the implementation of Digital Marketing Strategies for Small and Medium Enterprises and Levels of knowledge and use of AI tool.

### 5.2. Characterization of organization type, organizational structure and business orientation

All study participants are owners and founders of sole proprietorships, which have fewer than 5 employees, including contractors. This structure, as noted in the literature review, allows SMEs to adapt quickly to changes in the market due to their small organizational structure, although they face limitations and personal resources.

As shown in the systematization of the responses, although this structure facilitates flexibility and control of all decisions regarding the direction of the business, it also includes a significant overload on its owners, a situation that can be seen very clearly in their responses. This is why we can point out that although it is a competitive

advantage, dependence on a single person can limit growth and resilience (Dahnil et al., 2014; Hemann & Burbary, 2013).

What stands out in the findings of this research is that this dependence and overload of responsibility on the founder leads to a lack of diversification of skills, strategic planning and resources, clearly limiting the ability of ventures to expand.

Another aspect to consider about their business and organizational models is that most of them have not systematized or formalized their mission, vision and values, which is crucial to establish a business strategy planning (David & David, 2017). Many of them after being asked about their mission, vision and values, expressed an implicit but not formalized mission as a course to follow, which hinders the alignment of strategic decisions, which is crucial according to authors such as Pearce & Robinson (2013), who argue that a clear mission can guide daily operations and long-term strategies.

Likewise, there are others such as participants 4 and 6 who evidence a total absence of mission, vision and values, as they claim to have launched their brands casually and without planning which authors such as Johnson, Scholes & Whittington (2008) argue can lead to a lack of brand coherence and hinder sustained growth.

On the other hand, in terms of how these ventures perceive the success and performance of their brands, their answers are focused on customer satisfaction and brand growth in terms of recognition, which bases and guides their decisions mainly on the positive feedback and recommendations they get from their customers.

What is emphasized in the literature review is that while customer satisfaction and relationship building and development are crucial for every venture, a strategic planning must consider and include financial performance indicators that ensure business sustainability. Companies that do not balance these aspects may find it difficult to maintain their long-term viability (Kingsnorth, 2019; Alalwan et al., 2017).

A focus placed exclusively on customer satisfaction and brand recognition without financial evaluation can lead to paths that lead to the economic meltdown of our ventures. The literature review offers a more balanced view, suggesting that SMEs need to integrate financial indicators to effectively manage their performance (Arpaci, 2021; Alalwan et al., 2017). In the same direction, strategic management contributions argue that the success of a venture or business strategy requires a balance between qualitative and quantitative metrics (Jones et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). This is why SMEs must develop perspectives and skills that integrate and use data on financial performance along with customer feedback for strategic decision-making.

### 5.3. Difficulties and challenges in the implementation of Digital Marketing Strategies for Small and Medium Enterprises

The literature review points out that the role of digital marketing is crucial for the visibility, expansion and growth of SMEs (Jones et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). While entrepreneurs agree with this perspective, it can first be mentioned that digital marketing strategies vary among participants, as some consider it as secondary, while other participants report positive and significant impacts after having invested in social media advertising. For example, Participant 8 states that the ability to sell to people in other cities or countries would be impossible without the internet, which resonates with the idea that digital marketing expands the reach of brands (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Contributions reviewed in previous studies argue that the role of social media as essential channels for customer visibility and engagement (Alalwan et al., 2017; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). All of the entrepreneurs claim that social media plays a central role in the development and visibility of their brands, or, for example, respondent 4 who claims that it is 'fundamental, the most important thing of all', and that the entire management of their brand depends on Instagram. These testimonies not only reinforce the notion that social media is a marketing channel but also an integral management tool for small fashion brands.

Although the majority of them subtly mention Instagram as the main channel for promotion and sales, in general terms there is a clear absence of a strategy for advertising and brand growth on social media.

As mentioned by Kingsnorth (2019) omni-channel integration is fundamental to maximise the impact of digital marketing, enabling SMEs to communicate effectively with their customers and measure the effectiveness of their campaigns in real time, combining it with various digital channels and advanced strategies such as SEO, PPC and email marketing.

The research findings indicate a basic, unplanned and unprofessional implementation of digital marketing, which is in line with the literature where a lack of resources and digital marketing knowledge is pointed out (Dahnil et al., 2014; Hemann & Burbary, 2013). However, it is highly recommended an advanced and integrated approach to digital marketing strategies for small and medium-sized enterprises (Jones et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Also, while there is a recognition that digital marketing should be at the forefront of their business strategies, the overloaded responsibilities of those managing these ventures reduce it to a secondary role, which is a significant barrier to SME growth.

Enterprises should reorganise their structures to incorporate digital marketing in a professional manner, as lack of professionalism in the use of digital tools can result in missed opportunities and ineffectiveness in their business expansion efforts, which is why SMEs should invest in training and resources dedicated to advanced digital marketing to fully exploit its potential (Järvinen et al., 2012; Ismagilova et al., 2020).

One of the most relevant issues to consider in the interviews is the lack of strategic planning when launching new products, especially in ventures that are dedicated to the fashion industry in which launch strategies are central when introducing new products in the market (Jadhav et al., 2023; Järvinen & Karjaluo, 2015). In this regard, the literature suggests that careful planning and execution of digital marketing strategies are critical to the success of SMEs (Järvinen & Karjaluo, 2015; Kingsnorth, 2019).

However, most of the interviewees, such as Participant 2, admit a weakness in this area due to lack of time and resources, or even others argue that they only coordinate photo shoots and the production of some content to disseminate through social networks. Another group of participants mentioned that they have a partial planning, i.e. they do not develop a comprehensive launch strategy but they think of certain actions that consider the context in which the product will be launched.

Contrary to the literature, this lack of planning is identified as a trend among participants where improvisation and lack of professionalism often replaces strategy, which reduces their chances of growth and market penetration (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Hemann & Burbary, 2013).

The literature confirms what interviewees claim in terms of challenges in implementing digital marketing strategies, ranging from lack of financial and human resources, and limited understanding of digital marketing techniques (Dahnil et al., 2014; Kingsnorth, 2016). In the case of this study the main reasons are the lack of time of the entrepreneurs due to multiple management roles in the brands and the constant tension between cost and profit, but which confirms the need for specialised professional help in digital marketing.

Beyond the challenges identified in the interviews, the advantages of implementing digital marketing strategies for SMEs are significant, such as the ability to personalise communication with customers, measure campaign performance in real time and adjust strategies based on data are invaluable benefits (Arpaci, 2021; Jadhav et al., 2023). The results of this study confirm this, as many of the participants claim that the small actions they have taken have brought greater visibility and reach to their brands. This positive effect is consistent with literature suggesting that, although SMEs face structural disadvantages compared to large firms, digital marketing tools can level the playing field (Hanaysha, 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020).

## 5.4. Levels of awareness and use of AI tools

Although as noted by (Dwivedi et al. (2021) and Huang & Rust (2021) AI can provide significant competitive advantages by enabling advanced personalisation and data-driven decision making. Even recognising the importance of incorporating emerging digital technologies such as AI to optimise performance, raise productivity levels or develop digital marketing strategies, the use of these types of tools among participants is minimal, basically reducing their use to Chat GPT for content generation and improved copywriting.

In this sense, the low incorporation of AI tools mentioned in the findings of this research reveals a significant underutilisation of technologies that, as mentioned in the literature, can facilitate and offer substantial improvements in efficiency, productivity and personalisation in business growth strategies, which is clearly not being used in the surveyed ventures.

An interesting finding found in the analysis of the interviews is the perception that AI cannot replace human creativity in the creative process of digital marketing garments or campaigns, as mentioned by participant 4. This perception is consistent with the literature that acknowledges the current limits of AI, noting that, while it can automate tasks and provide valuable data, human creativity and intuition remain crucial to success in digital marketing (Kannan & Li, 2017; Kingsnorth, 2019).

The literature reviewed argues that much of the challenges in implementing AI tools in digital marketing have to do with the need for specialised skills, infrastructure costs and certain ethical concerns about privacy, bias and use of AI that are still under discussion (Bruce et al., 2015; Hanaysha, 2017; Chaffey & Ellis, 2019). These limitations and the lack of resources in these small ventures interviewed may explain why entrepreneurs are not using AI capabilities more productively.



The clear lack of knowledge and adoption of AI tools in these SMEs represents a critical limitation that must be addressed to keep their brands in business with future growth projection and expansion. For example, consulted authors such as Purwanto et al. (2020) and Itani et al. (2017) highlight how AI can facilitate ad placement, content personalisation and the creation of engaging marketing material.

For those that are familiar with or have minimal knowledge of AI tools, it is critical that they are trained and become better at embedding integration and usage, and for those that have almost no knowledge, it is critical that these companies become familiar with AI capabilities and consider AI integration to optimise their operations and marketing strategies in single-person organisational contexts.

## 5.5. Study limitations

The first limitation to be mentioned is that all the 10 participants are founders and owners of small clothing brands, none of them with more than 5 employees, so the study reflects on small ventures and not those with medium-sized structures. On the other hand, the study was initially intended to be about Irish, Spanish and Argentinean SMEs, but after several attempts I could not find any SMEs from Spain and Ireland willing to participate in the study, which is why it only focused on Argentina.

In this sense, perhaps the discussion around the ways in which digital marketing strategies are thought and executed, or even the levels of knowledge and use of AI tools, would have been more interesting, as I hypothesise that in medium-sized enterprises the role of digital marketing is more professionalised.

In terms of the literature review I consider that, after the interviews and their respective analysis, a sub-theme should have been included that looks at the ways in which SMEs can overcome or incorporate strategies to develop their digital marketing strategies with little organisational structure and resources.

## 5.6. Conclusion

To summarise, the lack of professionalisation in the design and execution of digital marketing strategies and the reduced adoption of artificial intelligence tools detailed in the findings of this study are crucial aspects that need to be addressed and resolved in order to develop strategic growth in small and medium-sized enterprises. This is why previous research argues that capacity building and training in these areas are essential to improve the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs.

To ensure sustainable, strategic and competitive growth, it is necessary for SMEs to balance their focus on customer satisfaction with an assessment and incorporation of financial data and venture profitability returns, adopt advanced digital marketing strategies and leverage emerging technologies such as AI.

## 6. Conclusion & Recommendations

In this research, based on interviews with 10 entrepreneurs, the processes and strategies of digital marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the fashion industry in Argentina for brand positioning, penetration, growth and commercial success.

From the analysis of their responses, several aspects to take into account when doing business in SME contexts were identified, such as the lack of professionalism in the design, planning and execution of digital marketing strategies. The latter is mainly due to a lack of budget that allows the SMEs interviewed to cover the costs of a digital marketing professional, and on the other hand organisational structures that focus on a single person who, even if he/she has some knowledge in digital marketing, does not have the time to develop such strategies.

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that while the mode of understanding success in these ventures is one that is exclusively focused on the customer experience, no systematic and professional attention is paid to KPIs, which limits these ventures in making strategic decisions. This low importance placed on KPIs also corresponds to the idea of success mentioned above, where almost all participants argued that the success and performance of their ventures was less about money and more about their brands being chosen and used by people in the market in which they operate.

Despite the significant growth and incorporation of AI tools to improve efficiency, personalisation or even plan and develop digital marketing strategies, the ventures interviewed underutilise the tools, limiting their use to tasks such as improving the writing of text pieces or brainstorming sessions for Instagram posts.

## 6.1. Recommendations

Based on the literature review, which details precisely the role of digital marketing for SMEs, and the analysis of the information collected, the following are a series of recommendations that could be used in the contexts of the ventures consulted for this study.

**1. Developing skills in digital marketing and AI tools:** It is crucial that these ventures can allocate time to training in digital marketing and AI strategies, considering that there are endless options of free online courses that would help their owners to strategically understand where to expand their ventures.

**2. Investment in digital marketing:** While they have stated that they will invest in marketing as long as they can afford it, they should include investment in marketing as one of their goals to help take their business to the next level.

**3. Develop digital marketing strategies in a professional manner:** It is essential that these ventures can incorporate digital marketing in a professional manner for strategic decision making. They should develop strategies in other social networks, optimise SEOs, ROI, to diversify audiences, strengthen the presence in the digital market and precisely measure the profitability of the brands.

**4. Incorporation of AI tools and adaptability:** taking into account that the current scenario is changing, it is recommended to explore AI tools that help to decompress the overload that the owners and founders themselves have, maintaining a predisposition towards innovation and incorporation of the technological changes that are taking place in the market.

## 6.2. Future research scopes

Although a number of issues could be raised from the results obtained from this research, three possible lines of research for future projects that want to continue investigating the relationship between SMEs and digital marketing strategies are presented below.

**1. Type of population to constitute the sample:** as mentioned in the subtitle limitations of the study, it is suggested to build a sample containing medium-sized enterprises to compare whether the role of digital marketing is managed in a more professional way than in small enterprises. Also, how to check if performance and profitability indicators are taken into account for strategic decision making.

**2. Use of IA in SMEs:** an interesting line of research is also to build a sample of SMEs where the selection criterion is whether or not they use IA tools, focusing on those that do. In this way, develop a study that focuses on what these tools are and how they are used by SMEs.

**3. Digital transformation and organisational structures:** taking into account that the 10 ventures consulted have single-person structures, a clear challenge of how SMEs can manage digital transformation that contribute to the performance and efficiency in the management of their organisations is visualised. That is, to study how digital technology can help overcome the challenges identified in these small organisational contexts in terms of resources and structure.

## 6.3. Methodological flaws, practical implications, and directions for the future research

**Methodological flaws:** the study sample was constructed with 10 entrepreneurs in the fashion sector in Argentina, which may not be representative, and may reflect individual experiences that do not allow us a generalised characterisation of the sector.

**Practical implications:** in terms of practical implications for the development of future research, it is recommended to expand the sample size to include a variety of companies, sectors and company sizes in order to have more representative results. Secondly, to include SMEs from different countries in order to compare experiences, ensuring a geographical diversification that brings us closer to more global results. And thirdly, to complement the information on the experiences extracted from the interviews with quantitative data that will allow for more comparative and complex analyses.

**Directions for the future research:** ensure small and medium-sized enterprises are part of the sample to assess variation in the implementation of digital marketing strategies. On the other hand, use random sampling methods in the selection of participants to sample different sizes and sectors of SMEs. Finally, to investigate how AI varies across different types of SMEs and how this variation impacts on their efficiency and effectiveness in designing and executing digital marketing strategies.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1. Interview Guide

#### Interview Guide

Estimated time: 30/40 min. approximately

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. As you probably know, I am carrying out research on the digital marketing strategies employed by small and medium-sized fashion enterprises for brand positioning. Your insights as an owner/CEO of an SME in the fashion sector are invaluable to me. The interview will focus on various aspects related to processes, strategies, consumer engagement, market presence, and the role of AI in digital marketing.

#### A. Organisation structure:

How is your business organised? What is the organisation chart like?

How would you describe the organisation of your business?

How are the decision made?

How many departments/teams does the enterprise have?

How often do you meet? How is the methodology for the meetings?

What is the role of the digital marketing in the business?

Are all the teams involved on the digital marketing strategy?

## B. Founding

When was the business founded?

What were the key decision to stay in business?

What were the main challenges for the launching of the business?

Was there a key area of the business that helped its growth and sustainability?

## B. Processes and Strategies:

Can you describe the specific processes your business employs in its brand positioning strategies?

What are the key components of your digital marketing strategy aimed at enhancing brand positioning?

## B. Implementation and Execution:

How does your business implement and execute its chosen digital marketing strategies for brand positioning?

Could you elaborate on any challenges you've faced in executing these strategies effectively?

## C. Measurement of Success:

How do you measure the success of your brand positioning efforts in the digital space?

Could you discuss any key performance indicators (KPIs) that your business commonly uses to evaluate the effectiveness of its digital marketing strategies?

D. Consumer Engagement and Experience:

In what ways do your digital marketing strategies impact consumer engagement with your brand?

How important is enhancing the consumer experience in your brand positioning process, and how does digital marketing contribute to this?

E. Market Presence:

How do the specific digital marketing strategies adopted by your business contribute to its market presence?

Can you provide examples of how your brand differentiates itself from competitors through digital channels?

F. Role of AI in Digital Marketing:

Are you aware about AI tools for Digital Marketing?

If you are so, do you use them for your digital marketing strategies?

When did your business start using them?

How was the process of getting them into the business?

Have you had to train your employees to start using them? How was that process?

How is your business integrating AI into its digital marketing strategies for brand positioning?

Could you discuss any specific AI tools or technologies you are using, and how they impact the efficiency and effectiveness of your marketing efforts?

Could you list the top 5 AI tools that your business uses?

Closing: Thank you once again for sharing your insights with me. Your input will greatly contribute to my research. If there is anything else you would like to add or discuss further, please feel free to do it so.

## 8.2. Participation Consent Form

### **Experiences, uses and challenges of Digital Marketing Strategies of Small and Medium-Sized Fashion E-commerce Businesses for Brand Positioning and Success**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

#### **WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT**

My name is Lucas Vialé, and I am doing research, to obtain my Masters's degree in Entrepreneurship at the National College of Ireland, about the processes and strategies of digital marketing employed by small and medium-sized fashion enterprises from Ireland and Spain for brand positioning and success.

### **WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?**

Participation involves an interview lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes, which will be recorded using the iPhone 13 voice recorder application. The interviews will be conducted at a convenient time and location or via Zoom Meetings. Questions will focus on your brand positioning strategies, common digital marketing approaches, and how you implement these strategies.

### **WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?**

The sample of the research will be built by choosing businesses from Ireland and Spain which have Instagram as the main business platform to advertise their products.

### **DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?**

Participation is voluntary and participants have the right to refuse participation, refuse to answer any question and withdraw at any time and stage without any consequence whatsoever.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?**

Participating in the research can be an opportunity to gain valuable insights into your own digital marketing practices through reflection and discussion and discover innovative marketing strategies employed by other fashion businesses.

Remember, participants have the right to refuse participation, refuse to answer any question and withdraw at any time and stage without any consequence whatsoever.

There are no risks identified for the development of this research.

### **WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?**

Interviews will be recorded only in audio without images and subsequently transcribed into text for analysis. In the case of interviews carried out via Zoom, image recording will not be enabled.

Participants will not be asked about their personal information and their enterprises, such as name, address or any other data that can identify them.

### **HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?**

Recordings and transcripts will be stored on password-protected devices, including an external drive, personal laptop, and a Google Drive account.

All data will be destroyed after a period of five years, as mandated by the National College of Ireland's research policy.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

The final document of the thesis will be available on the NCI Online Library website. You can check the website by clicking the following link: <https://norma.ncirl.ie/>

Data collected during the research may be used for further publications, such as academic papers and presentations. However, participant identities will be strictly protected, and no personal information will ever be revealed.

### **WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?**



**Lucas Hernán Viale**

*Researcher*

E-mail: **x23138432@student.ncirl.ie**

MSc in Entrepreneurship

National College of Ireland

Dublin, Ireland

**[THANK YOU]**

CONSENT

I understand my participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I acknowledge that my responses will be used for research purposes only and will remain confidential. I consent to participate in this study and understand that I can withdraw at any time without any penalty. By ticking 'Yes, I agree' below, I confirm that I agree to participate in the study.

☐ Yes, I agree.

☐ No, I do not agree.

Name:

Date and place: