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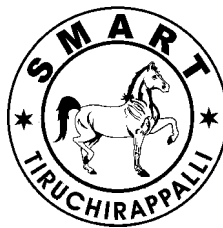
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ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN EMPOWERING MSMEs: ADOPTION PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE IMPACT

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Abstract

MSMEs, or micro, small, and medium-sized businesses, are a vital segment of the Indian economy, which greatly contributes to employment and GDP. Despite its dynamic nature, the sector has been slow to adopt digital marketing strategies, which are critical for survival and competitiveness in today's technology-driven marketplace. This research looks at the challenges of digital marketing adoption in Kerala MSMEs, emphasizing its impact on business performance and growth. By analyzing adopters and non-adopters, the research identified key factors influencing digital marketing adoption and suggested actionable recommendations for policymakers and business owners.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing Adoption, Kerala MSMEs, Business Performance, Inclusive Growth, Technology Integration*

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1. Introduction

The swift development of digital technology has transformed marketing tactics, allowing companies to expand their consumer base, increase reach and maximize operational effectiveness (**Chatterjee & Kar, 2020**). By providing affordable promotional tools, which include email campaigns, marketing on social networking sites, search engine optimization (SEO) and data-driven advertising, digital marketing offers MSMEs a big chance to compete on a level playing field with larger companies. With more than 63 million MSMEs operating in India, the sector is vital to the nation's economic growth, accounting for roughly 30% of GDP and creating significant job opportunities (**Jena & Thatte, 2018**). However, despite its potential, the adoption of digital marketing among MSMEs, remains relatively low due to several barriers, including financial constraints, lack of digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure and resistance to change.

Studies indicate that MSMEs, integrating digital marketing into their operations, experience notable improvements in brand visibility, sales performance and customer acquisition (**Shah & Murthi, 2021**). Digital platforms enable these enterprises to expand their market beyond geographical limitations, engage with consumers more effectively and gain valuable insights through analytics. Yet, many MSMEs, particularly in regions with limited technological exposure, struggle to transition from traditional marketing methods to digital platforms. The disparity in adoption rates highlights the need for an in-depth investigation into the forces, which affect implementation of marketing in digital form and the way it shapes business outcome. The present inquiry attempts to close the gap by exploring the extent to which MSMEs in Kerala utilize digital marketing tools, the challenges they face and the benefits they

derive. By analyzing both adopters and non-adopters, the research intends to provide actionable insights into how digital marketing can drive MSME growth, improve competitiveness and contribute to the broader goal of inclusive economic development. Additionally, this study explores the role of user-friendly technology, government support and sector-specific digital marketing strategies in enhancing MSME adoption rates. The findings could promote the shift in the MSME sector, that is empowered by digital technology, by providing insightful advice for researchers, business owners and policymakers.

2. Literature Review

Research on digital marketing adoption, reveals diverse factors influencing its implementation in MSMEs. **Alford and Page (2015)** highlight that technological advancements improve marketing efficiency but adoption varies significantly among small businesses. **Sultan and Sultan (2020)** emphasize the critical role of government support in fostering ICT adoption in SMEs while **Fauzi and Sheng (2020)** identify digitalization as a key driver for enhancing operational efficiency. Further research by **Dumitriu and Dan (2019)** and **Olah et al. (2019)** emphasizes how crucial it is to get past resource and expertise constraints in order to facilitate successful integration of digital marketing. **Chatterjee and Kar (2020)** highlight how social media marketing helps MSMEs engage with their customers and can lead to increased income. Similarly, **Gupta and Bose (2019)** identified financial constraints and digital illiteracy as major barriers to MSME digitalization, reinforcing the need for policy interventions. **Shah and Murthi (2021)** demonstrate that AI-driven marketing significantly improves competitiveness while **Rana and Kumar (2022)** provide empirical

evidence on the profitability boost from e-commerce adoption. **Putra and Santoso (2024)** highlight that successful digital transformation in SMEs depends on aligning digital strategies with organizational capabilities, leading to improved market reach and efficiency. **Wang and Kim (2023)** further emphasize that SMEs adopting data-driven marketing and automation, gain a competitive edge and higher revenue growth. Both studies reinforce the need for effective digital integration to enhance MSME performance, supporting the relevance of this research in Kerala's context. Additionally, **Verma and Singh (2023)** found that digital advertising strategies like influencer marketing and SEO, greatly enhance customer acquisition rates.

While existing studies focus primarily on digital marketing in developed economies, there is limited research on its adoption within Indian MSMEs. Further, digital marketing's effect on MSMEs' performance, particularly in emerging markets, remains underexplored. The intent of this research is to plug these gaps by examining the factors affecting adoption and evaluating its effects on the growth and efficiency of businesses.

3. Statement of the Problem

Digital marketing has revolutionized traditional marketing paradigms, empowering consumers with unprecedented choices and access to information. However, MSMEs in India, especially in Kerala, face significant barriers to adopting these practices. Limited awareness, resource constraints and inadequate infrastructure, have resulted in low technology penetration within the sector. Addressing these challenges is essential to bridge the gap between the potential and actual benefits of digital marketing for MSMEs, enabling them to compete effectively in the digital age.

4. Need of the Study

The study is essential as it addresses the critical need for MSMEs, particularly in Kerala, to adopt digital marketing practices amidst increasing competitive pressures and rapid digital transformation. Despite their significant contribution to employment and GDP, MSMEs face issues like non-availability of resources, digital illiteracy and resistance to change, which hinder their ability to leverage digital tools effectively. Understanding these barriers and the benefits of digital marketing adoption, is imperative for boosting sales, customer engagement and excellence in operations, thereby driving inclusive economic growth. By concentrating on MSMEs in Kerala, insights can be offered to policymakers to create focused programs to encourage digitization in this industry and hence the study.

5. Objectives of the Study

The key goal of this research is to investigate the determinants, that impact MSMEs in Kerala's adoption of digital marketing strategies and evaluate the effects of these strategies on their overall business performance. It looks at how using digital tools can improve important performance indicators, including customer engagement, operational effectiveness and sales growth. By examining the experiences of both adopters and non-adopters, the study aims to pinpoint the difficulties MSMEs encounter while incorporating digital marketing and the possible advantages they may have. The study's ultimate goal is to offer useful insights, that can support MSMEs in leveraging digital marketing, for sustainable growth and competitiveness.

6. Hypotheses of the Study

H1: There is no significant difference in overall performance among micro, small and medium enterprises.

H2: There is no significant relationship between perceived ease of use and digital marketing performance

7 Research Methodology

7.1 Sample Selection

To guarantee thorough representation of MSMEs throughout Kerala, the study used a stratified random sample technique. The MSMEs were stratified, based on their size (micro, small and medium enterprises) and categorized into adopters and non-adopters of digital marketing. This approach ensured that all key segments of the MSME sector were adequately represented, capturing the diversity in their adoption levels and performance outcomes. Stratification was based on size of enterprises, geographic distribution and industry representation. The sample comprised 300 MSMEs, with equal representation from each size category. Geographic distribution was urban area at 40%, semi urban area at 35% and rural area at 25%.

7.2 Sources of Data

The study employed both primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data were compiled via structured surveys and questionnaires, administered to 300 MSMEs across Kerala, with respondents including business owners and managers from micro, small and medium enterprises, representing diverse industries such as food processing, textiles, IT and handicrafts. Data collection was conducted via in-person interviews, email surveys and online forms, ensuring balanced geographic representation from urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Secondary data were sourced from reliable references, including government reports such as the MSME Census and Annual Reports of the Ministry of MSMEs, as well as academic research papers, industry publications and websites. This dual approach provided robust

and reliable data, enabling a thorough understanding of digital promotion strategy's adoption and its implications for MSMEs in Kerala.

7.3 Period of Study

For thorough data gathering and analysis, the study covered the period from January to June 2024.

7.4 Statistical Tools Used in the Study

Multiple statistical tools were used in the study, to properly analyse the data. The compilation of the core data was done by descriptive statistics, which also revealed patterns in performance metrics, including sales growth, customer engagement and operational efficiency. One-way ANOVA was applied, to identify significant differences in performance metrics across micro, small and medium enterprises while t-test was applied to compare the mean scores of adopters and non-adopters of digital marketing. Pearson correlation analysis was employed, to examine the relationship between perceived ease of use and performance outcomes, quantifying the strength and direction of associations. Additionally, post hoc tests, such as the Duncan Multiple Range Test, were employed to determine specific differences among the groups when significant variations were detected in the ANOVA results. All analyses were conducted, by using SPSS (Version 21), ensuring accurate and reliable findings to support the study's objectives.

8. Data Analysis and Interpretations

8.1 Impact on Digital Marketing Adoption

Table-1 reveals a considerable beneficial influence of digital marketing adoption on key performance indicators. **Sales Growth:** Digital marketing adopters reported an average score of **4.92** (on a 5-point scale), with a t-value of **18.45** and p-value of **0.000**, demonstrating

noticeable rise in sales. **Market Reach:** An average score of **4.81** highlighted an expanded customer base, with a t-value of **16.21** and p-value of **0.000**. **Customer Service:** Although improved customer service was observed, it was not statistically significant, with a mean score of **4.12** and p-value of **0.267**. **Internal Efficiency:** Enhanced operational efficiency had a mean score of **4.45**, supported by a t-value of **09.78** and p-value of **0.000**. These values demonstrated that digital marketing positively influenced sales, market reach and internal operations, particularly for MSMEs, that are early adopters.

8.2. Performance Comparison across MSMEs

Using one-way ANOVA (Table-2), differences in performance were evaluated across micro, small and medium enterprises: **Sales Performance:** Micro and small enterprises showed higher sales scores (**10.75** and **10.89**) compared to medium enterprises (**9.76**). The F-value of **4.12** and p-value of **0.038** indicated significant differences in sales performance. **Internal Efficiency:** Small enterprises had reported the highest efficiency score (**7.15**), followed by micro (**6.85**) and medium (**6.66**) enterprises. The F-value of **2.72** and p-value of **0.172** revealed no significant differences. **Procurement Costs:** Small enterprises reported the highest reduction in procurement costs (**10.15**), compared to micro (**9.69**) and medium (**9.32**) enterprises. The F-value of **3.10** and p-value of **0.118** indicated minimal differences. Overall, micro and small enterprises outperformed medium enterprises in sales metrics while efficiency and procurement improvements were consistent across sectors.

8.3 Correlation between ease of use and performance

Performance indicators and perceived ease of use were found to be positively correlated by

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 3), with correlation coefficient (r) at 0.163 and p-value at 0.000 for sales growth. Purchase Price: The correlation coefficient (r) was 0.213 and the p-value was zero. Correlation coefficient (r) at 0.187 and p-value at 0.000, demonstrated overall performance. These results revealed that user-friendly digital tools enhance MSME performance, particularly in procurement and overall operations. This analysis demonstrated that digital marketing adoption would yield significant benefits for MSMEs, particularly in sales and operational efficiency while highlighting the importance of ease of use in digital tools

8.4 Testing of Hypotheses

The metrics, that measure the effectiveness of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, were examined, using a one-way ANOVA to evaluate H1. The results revealed significant difference in sales performance across the three groups, with mean scores of 10.75 (micro), 10.89 (small) and 9.76 (medium) and an F-value of 4.12 ($p = 0.038$). In other words, smaller enterprises, particularly micro and small ones, reported better sales compared to medium enterprises. But for procurement costs and internal efficiency, the differences were not statistically significant (p-values of 0.118 and 0.172, respectively), indicating that these indicators were consistent across enterprise size. Similarly, overall performance showed no substantial difference ($F = 2.13$, $p = 0.324$). Based on these results, the null hypothesis was rejected for sales performance but accepted for internal efficiency, procurement costs and overall performance, highlighting that enterprise size did influence sales more prominently than other performance metrics.

In order to assess H2, the association between perceived ease of use and other performance measures was ascertained, by

using Pearson's correlation coefficient. A remarkable positive association was noted between ease of use and sales performance ($r=0.163$, $p=0.000$), procurement cost reduction ($r=0.213$, $p=0.000$) and overall performance ($r=0.187$, $p=0.000$). These findings established that enterprises with user-friendly digital tools, helped them to achieve better results in these areas. Nevertheless, there was no discernible link between internal efficiency and ease of use ($r=0.075$, $p=0.132$). Thus, the null hypothesis was **rejected** for sales, procurement and overall performance, demonstrating the vitality of user-friendly digital means of communication in driving outcomes but **accepted** for internal efficiency, suggesting that other factors may play a more significant part in improving efficiency.

9. Findings of the Study

Internet marketing usage has been demonstrated to improve a number of MSMEs' performance metrics. By categorizing MSMEs into adopters and non-adopters, the study analyzed key measures of performance such as sales growth, operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. Adopters of digital marketing reported enhanced market reach and customer engagement, with an average increase in sales and a noticeable improvement in supplier coordination. However, the lack of digital tools or knowledge among non-adopters, limited their ability to benefit from these advancements, reinforcing the need for capacity building in the sector. The performance of micro, small and medium enterprises was assessed, by using the one-way ANOVA. The analysis highlighted significant differences in sales performance, where micro and small enterprises exhibited better results compared to medium enterprises. This variation is attributed to the more agile decision-making processes and lower organizational complexities of smaller firms,

which allow for quicker adaptation to digital tools. However, in terms of internal efficiency and procurement cost reduction, the differences were negligible, suggesting that these benefits are relatively uniform across the MSME spectrum when digital marketing is adopted. The relationship between the perceived ease of use of digital marketing tools and overall business performance was evaluated, by using Pearson's correlation coefficient. There was noticeable positive association, indicating that MSMEs with access to intuitive and user-friendly digital platforms, reported higher performance outcomes. This finding revealed the importance of simplifying digital interfaces, to encourage broader adoption among MSMEs with varying levels of digital literacy.

10. Suggestions

To enhance the widespread use of digital marketing among MSMEs, it is crucial to focus on improving digital literacy and providing targeted training programs, tailored to the requirements of micro, small and medium enterprises. Policymakers should collaborate with industry associations to offer financial incentives, subsidies or low-interest loans for investing in digital tools and infrastructure. Barriers, relating to perceived complexity, can also be addressed by making digital platforms simpler and making sure their interfaces are easy to use. Additionally, creating awareness campaigns to highlight the benefits of digital marketing and sharing success stories from early adopters, can motivate hesitant businesses to embrace these technologies. Strengthening public-private partnerships to provide technical support, fostering mentorship programs and implementing region-specific strategies, can further accelerate the digital transformation of MSMEs, ultimately contributing to their economic expansion and competitiveness in both indigenous and global markets.

11. Conclusion

This study examined the transformative potential of digital marketing for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Kerala, demonstrating its significant impact on enhancing sales performance, improving operational efficiency and expanding market reach. The findings revealed that MSMEs, adopting digital marketing strategies, particularly smaller enterprises, experienced notable advantages in sales growth and customer engagement. The study also demonstrated the critical role of perceived ease of use in maximizing the effectiveness of digital marketing tools, suggesting that user-friendly technologies can drive broader adoption among businesses with varying levels of digital literacy. Despite these positive outcomes, the study identified key barriers to adoption, including financial constraints, limited digital knowledge and infrastructural challenges. These obstacles often prevent MSMEs from fully leveraging digital marketing to achieve competitive advantage. The research stressed the necessity of targeted interventions by policymakers, such as digital training programs, financial support and the development of simplified digital platforms tailored to the needs of smaller enterprises. Strengthening public-private partnerships and fostering a culture of digital innovation could further bridge the adoption gap. Additionally, this study can lead to the academic discourse by filling gaps in research related to digital marketing adoption in emerging markets, providing empirical evidence on the sector-specific benefits for MSMEs in Kerala. The findings not only offer practical insights for business owners but also assist policymakers in crafting effective strategies to promote digitalization. Future research could expand on these insights by exploring long-term impacts, conducting comparative studies across regions

and assessing the role of highly sophisticated technologies like AI and e-commerce integration. Ultimately, by embracing digital marketing, MSMEs can significantly enhance their resilience, contribute to regional economic development and support the broader vision of inclusive growth.

12. Limitations of the Study

Despite offering insightful information about Kerala MSMEs' usage of digital marketing, the study suffered from certain shortcomings. First, the research primarily relied on self-reported data from MSME owners and managers, which could introduce bias due to subjective perceptions or inaccurate reporting. Secondly, the study's sample was limited to 300 MSMEs in Kerala, which limited the findings' applicability to other states or areas with distinct technological, cultural or economic settings. Third, the research focused on short-term impacts of digital marketing adoption, without exploring long-term outcomes or sustainability. Additionally, industry-specific elements, that could affect the successful digital marketing strategies, were not taken into consideration in this study. Lastly, while statistical tools provided robust analysis, certain qualitative insights, such as the psychological barriers to adoption or detailed customer perspectives, were beyond the scope of this research. These limitations offer avenues for further exploration in future studies.

13. Scope for further study

This study has prepared the groundwork for exploring digital marketing adoption among MSMEs but several areas remain open for further research. Future studies could conduct comparative analyses across different states or regions in India, to understand geographic and cultural influences on digital adoption. Sector specific research, focusing on industries such as textiles, food processing or IT, could provide

deeper insights into tailored strategies for digital marketing integration. Studies, that follow the long-term effects of digital marketing on MSME performance longitudinally, might provide insightful information. Latest technologies like Blockchain, Augmented Reality and Artificial Intelligence may improve MSME marketing strategies and also open up new possibilities. Actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers would also come from studies on how MSMEs' customers view digital marketing and how government regulations affect the industry's digitization.

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Table-1 Impact of Digital Marketing Adoption on Sales, Efficiency and Procurement Costs of MSMEs

Performance Indicator	Mean Score	t-value	p-value
Sales growth	4.92	18.45	0.000
Expanded Market Reach	4.81	16.21	0.000
Improved Customer service	4.12	01.12	0.262
Enhanced Internal Efficiency	4.45	09.78	0.000
Increased staff productivity	4.35	07.21	0.000
Reduced Procurement cost	3.91	01.98	0.098
Decreased Inventory Costs	4.43	06.95	0.000
Better supplier Coordination	4.56	10.12	0.000

Source: Primary survey data analysed using SPSS

Table-2 ANOVA Results for Differences in Sales, Internal Efficiency and Procurement Costs Across MSME Categories

Performance factor	Sector	Mean score	SD	F-Value	p-Value
Sales Performance	Micro Enterprises	10.75	2.25	4.12	0.038
	Small Enterprises	10.89	2.44		
	Medium enterprises	09.76	2.81		
Internal Efficiency	Micro Enterprises	06.85	1.62	2.72	0.172
	Small Enterprises	07.15	1.47		
	Medium Enterprises	06.66	1.55		
Procurement Cost of Production	Micro Enterprises	09.70	2.35	3.10	0.118
	Small Enterprises	10.15	2.27	2.13	0.324
	Medium Enterprises	09.32	2.09		
Overall Performance	Micro Enterprises	27.48	5.07		
	Small Enterprises	28.20	5.08		
	Medium Enterprises	26.84	5.03		

Source: Primary survey data analysed using SPSS

Table-3 Correlation between Perceived Ease of Use of Digital Marketing Tools and Key Performance Metrics of MSMEs

Performance Metric	Correlation Coefficient(r)	p-value
Sales growth	0.163	0.000
Internal efficiency	0.075	0.132
Procurement cost reduction	0.213	0.000
Overall performance	0.187	0.000

Source: Primary survey data analysed using SPSS