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Digital Marketing, Human Capital and Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) in Northeast Nigeria: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract:

This conceptual review investigates the relationship between digital marketing strategies and Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) performance, focusing on the moderating role of human capital. The analysis highlights the crucial impact of digital marketing investments in improving brand visibility, customer engagement, and sales conversions for SMEs. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of human capital in driving SME performance outcomes. The conceptual framework provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how digital marketing strategies, human capital dimensions, and SME performance are interconnected. The practical implications of this study can assist SME practitioners in optimizing digital marketing strategies, prioritizing human capital investments, and enhancing organizational performance in dynamic market settings. This study contributes to existing literature by offering a nuanced and theoretically informed perspective on the interplay between digital marketing, human capital, and SME performance, aiming to facilitate strategic decision-making, encourage innovation, and drive sustainable growth within the SME sector. Recommendations for future research include addressing knowledge gaps, validating theoretical frameworks, exploring mediating factors, and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations to advance evidence-based practices in digital marketing, human capital management, and SME performance domains. Continued scholarly inquiry and collaboration between academia, industry practitioners, and policymakers are essential for advancing our understanding of the intricate dynamics influencing SME performance in digitalized economies and fostering the prosperity of SMEs worldwide.

Key Words: Digital Marketing, SME performance, Human Capital, Conceptual Review, Moderating Role

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners alike have paid close attention to the mutually beneficial relationship that exists in the modern business environment between digital marketing strategies and the success of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The way that digital technologies are influencing markets has changed dramatically, and this has made it necessary for SMEs to reassess their old marketing strategies. Meanwhile, the necessity of appreciating human capital's moderating function in the context of Digital marketing efforts has been recognized by the acknowledgement of this asset as a critical factor of business success (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020; Meyer & Smith, 2020)

Human capital plays a crucial role in moderating the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance, particularly in the context of North-East Nigeria. Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of individuals within an organization (Becker, 1964). In the context of SMEs in North-East Nigeria, human capital is critical for effective digital marketing adoption and implementation. This is because SMEs in this region face unique challenges, such as limited access to digital infrastructure, cultural and language barriers, and a shortage of skilled labour (World Bank, 2019).

The introduction of human capital can aid SMEs in North-East Nigeria in leveraging their human resources to maximize the benefits of digital marketing. Human capital can influence digital marketing effectiveness by: - Enhancing digital literacy and skills among SME employees (Oladokun & Akinpelu, 2017)- Facilitating the adoption of digital marketing strategies and tools (Awa et al., 2016)- Building strong relationships with customers and stakeholders through effective communication and customer service (Ibeh et al., 2018). By examining the moderating role of human capital, this study aims to provide insights into how SMEs in North-East Nigeria can develop and utilize their human resources to improve digital marketing performance and ultimately enhance their overall performance.

SME performance refers to the ability of small and medium-sized enterprises to achieve their objectives, sustain competitiveness, and ensure long-term survival (Borgia & Newman, 2017). SME performance encompasses various dimensions, including financial performance (e.g., profitability, revenue growth), operational performance (e.g., efficiency, productivity), and strategic performance (e.g., innovation, market share) (Richard et al., 2009). Effective SME performance is critical for driving economic growth, job creation, and innovation (OECD, 2019). However, SMEs often face challenges in achieving optimal performance due to resource constraints, limited capabilities, and intense competition (Ghobadian & Galleary, 1997).

SME navigation of a more competitive and complicated marketplace has been facilitated by the spread of digital platforms and changing customer demands despite the unique challenges of doing business in Northeast Nigeria. In contrast to their superior counterparts, SMEs frequently face operational and resource-related obstacles that need strategic adaptation to properly utilize digital marketing channels (Smith, 2019). Thus, maintaining competitiveness and promoting development in this market sector requires an awareness of the relationship between digital marketing strategies and SME performance (Johnson & Zhang, 2020). Thus, to be competitive in

today's market, firms need to prioritize improvement in digital capabilities. Though research on digital marketing and SMEs is rapidly expanding (Kotler et al., 2020; Chaffey, 2019), not much focus has been placed on explaining how human capital functions as a moderator in this interaction (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013; Wright & McMahan, 2011).

The skills, expertise, and talents of individuals within a business make up human capital, which functions as a medium for the development, application, and optimization of digital marketing strategies an important factor. Therefore, investigating the complex relationships that exist between digital marketing strategies, human capital, and SME success has significant implications for both theory development and management practice. The SME sector was chosen to be the application sector of the study due to its high-level contribution to the Nigerian economy (Odubanjo, 2000; Onwumere, 2000 Nnanna, 2001;). The Northeastern Nigeria's vast population of SMEs necessitated the conduct of this research as a good representative random sample could be gathered and the results could be easily applied to the full population.

The selection of Northeast Nigeria as the context for this study is justified by several factors. Firstly, the region has faced significant economic challenges due to the Boko Haram insurgency, leading to a decline in business activities and a need for innovative marketing strategies (Oxfam, 2020). Secondly, Northeast Nigeria has a high concentration of SMEs, which are critical to the region's economic recovery and growth (NBS, 2020). Thirdly, the region's cultural and socio-economic characteristics, such as a strong informal sector and limited digital infrastructure, present unique challenges and opportunities for digital marketing adoption (World Bank, 2019). Finally, the Nigerian government's efforts to promote economic development in the region, such as the North-East Development Commission, provide a supportive environment for SME growth and digital marketing initiatives (FGN, 2020).

Objectives

This conceptual review article seeks to fill a gap in the field by combining current research and theoretical ideas to better understand the moderating effect of human capital in the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance. Specifically, it aims to:

- i. Provide an overview of digital marketing strategies employed by SMEs.
- ii. Examine the theoretical underpinnings linking digital marketing initiatives to SME performance outcomes.
- iii. Analyze the significance of human capital in shaping the effectiveness and efficacy of digital marketing endeavors within SMEs.
- iv. Propose a conceptual framework that integrates digital marketing, human capital, and SME performance, thereby delineating avenues for future empirical inquiry.

By shedding light on the intricate interplay between digital marketing strategies, human capital, and SME performance, this article seeks to inform scholarly discourse, guide managerial decision-making, and stimulate further inquiry into this dynamic and multifaceted domain.

Literature Review

Digital marketing has become a cornerstone for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to augment their market reach, enhance customer engagement, and fortify their competitive position (Ryan & Jones, 2021). SMEs can leverage digital marketing strategies to overcome traditional barriers to market entry, target niche audiences with precision, and optimize their marketing efforts in real-time (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020; Smith, 2019).

SMEs in Northeast Nigeria can utilize various digital marketing strategies, include: i) Social Media Marketing: Engaging with customers and promoting products/services on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Bolatito, 2019).

- ii. Email Marketing: Nurturing customer relationships and sharing news/promotions (Ibrahim, 2017).
- iii. Search Engine Optimization (SEO): Optimizing websites for search engines to improve visibility (Sani, 2019).
- iv. Content Marketing: Creating valuable content to educate and engage target audiences (Abdullahi, 2020).
- v. Influencer Marketing: Partnering with local influencers to promote products/services (Yusuf, 2018).

The performance of SMEs is influenced by internal and external factors, including market dynamics, competitive pressures, technological disruptions, and regulatory environments (Wang et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020).

Human capital is a fundamental resource for SMEs, driving innovation, growth, and productivity (Becker, 1964). Investing in human capital is essential for organizations to stay competitive and achieve their goals (Hatch & Dyer, 2004). Unlike larger corporations endowed with extensive resources, SMEs often rely disproportionately on the expertise, creativity, and commitment of their workforce to drive innovation, productivity, and customer value (Meyer & Smith, 2020). Effective human capital management entails not only recruiting and retaining top talent but also fostering a conducive organizational culture that values continuous learning, collaboration, and empowerment (Bolton et al., 2019). Investments in employee development, training, and engagement are instrumental in enhancing the human capital capabilities of SMEs, enabling them to adapt to evolving market demands, leverage emerging opportunities, and achieve sustainable growth (Lee et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework:

The integration of digital marketing strategies, SME performance, and human capital constitutes a multifaceted theoretical framework that underscores the interconnectedness of these pivotal elements in driving organizational success (Wu et al., 2022). At its core, this framework posits that the effective utilization of digital marketing channels enhances SME performance outcomes by facilitating greater market responsiveness, customer engagement, and competitive advantage (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). Moreover, human capital emerges as a critical moderator in

this relationship, exerting influence on the effectiveness and efficacy of digital marketing initiatives through its impact on employee skills, motivation, and organizational culture (Lee et al., 2020). By elucidating the dynamic interplay between digital marketing, SME performance, and human capital, this theoretical framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand and navigate the complexities of contemporary business environments, thereby informing strategic decision-making and driving sustainable growth within SMEs (Smith, 2019).

Underpinning Theories

The theoretical framework of this study is underpinned by three key theories: Resource-Based View (RBV), Human Capital Theory (HCT), and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).

Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, introduced by Jay Barney in 1991, posits that firms' internal resources and capabilities are the primary drivers of competitive advantage. This theory suggests that SMEs in North-East Nigeria can leverage their internal resources, such as human capital and digital marketing capabilities, to achieve competitive advantage. However, RBV has been criticized for being too broad and neglecting external factors (Barney, 1991).

Human Capital Theory (HCT), introduced by Gary Becker in 1964, emphasizes the importance of human capital (knowledge, skills, and abilities) in economic growth and development. This theory is relevant to this study as it highlights the critical role of human capital in SMEs' ability to adopt and effectively utilize digital marketing strategies in North-East Nigeria. However, HCT has been criticized for oversimplifying the concept of human capital and neglecting structural factors (Becker, 1964).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), introduced by Fred Davis in 1989, provides a framework for understanding users' acceptance of technology. TAM posits that users' acceptance of technology is influenced by perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and attitudes towards use. This theory is relevant to this study as it provides insights into SME owners' acceptance and adoption of digital marketing technologies in North-East Nigeria. However, TAM has been criticized for being too narrow and lacking consideration of external factors (Davis, 1989).

Conceptual Framework

Integration of Digital Marketing and SME Performance

The conceptual framework elucidates the intricate relationship between digital marketing strategies and the performance outcomes of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Digital marketing encompasses a range of activities, including social media marketing, search engine optimization, content marketing, email campaigns, and online advertising, aimed at enhancing brand visibility, customer engagement, and sales conversion rates (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). Within the context of SMEs, effective utilization of digital marketing channels offers unique opportunities to overcome resource constraints, target niche markets, and foster sustainable growth (Smith, 2019).

Role of Human Capital as a Moderator

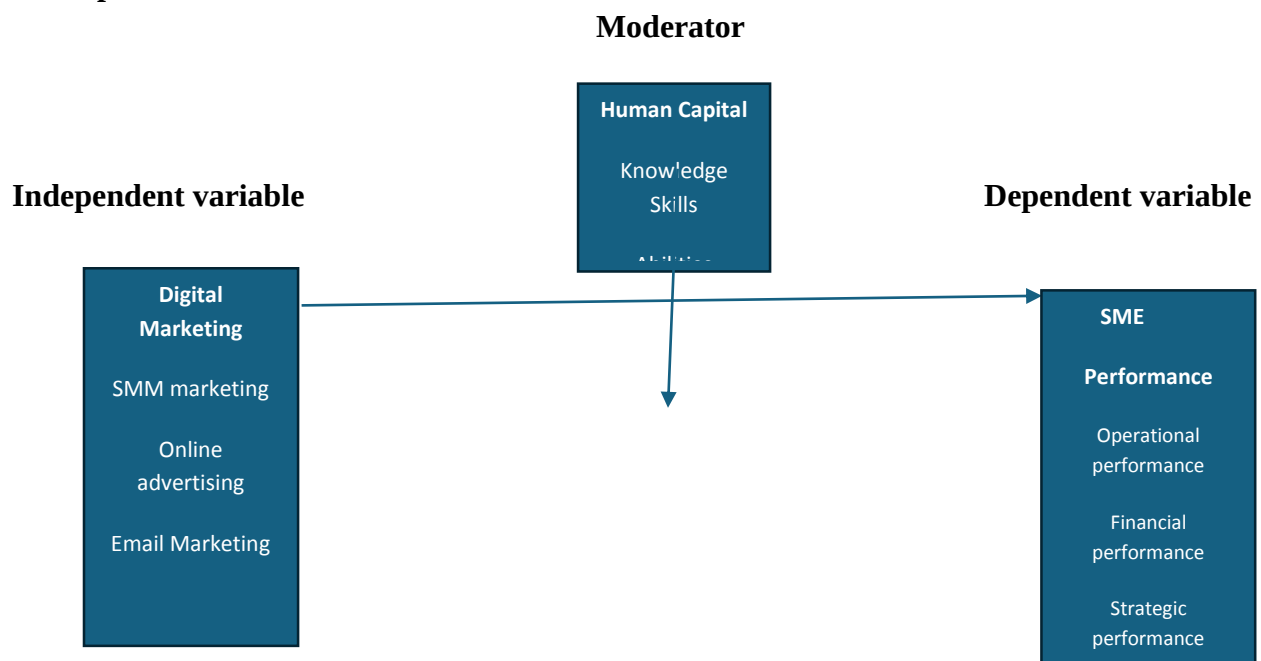
Central to the conceptual framework is the recognition of human capital as a critical moderator that shapes the effectiveness and efficacy of digital marketing initiatives in driving SME performance outcomes (Ngo et al., 2018). Human capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, and capabilities embodied within individuals in an organization, influencing their ability to conceptualize, implement, and optimize digital marketing strategies (Meyer & Smith, 2020). Through investments in employee development, training, and empowerment, SMEs can enhance the human capital capabilities of their workforce, thereby augmenting the impact of digital marketing efforts on organizational performance (Bolton et al., 2019).

Proposed Relationships and Interactions

The proposed conceptual framework posits that the integration of digital marketing and SME performance is contingent upon the moderating influence of human capital. Specifically, human capital influences the extent to which digital marketing initiatives yield tangible outcomes for SMEs, including increased brand awareness, customer acquisition, and revenue generation (Ryan & Jones, 2021). Moreover, human capital serves as a catalyst for organizational learning, innovation, and adaptability, fostering a culture of digital readiness and responsiveness within SMEs (Lee et al., 2020).

In this framework, human capital acts as a moderator between digital marketing strategies and SME performance outcomes, amplifying the positive effects of digital marketing investments on organizational success (Wang et al., 2021). Through continuous development and empowerment of their human capital assets, SMEs can optimize the synergistic interplay between digital marketing initiatives and organizational performance, thereby achieving sustained competitive advantage in dynamic market environments (Huang et al., 2021).

Conceptual Framework



Source: Adapted as follows: Independent Variable Measures: Digital Marketing measures adapted from Akyuz and Ibrahim (2020); while the measures for Human Capital are from Oladokun, S. O., & Akinpelu, A. O. (2017). Dependent variable measures: SME Performance adapted from Anne (2020); and Hidayatullah et al. (2019).

Methodology

This conceptual review employed a thematic analysis and synthesis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The methodology was deployed to explore the nexus between digital marketing and Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) performance, with a focus on the moderating role of human capital.

Data Collection:

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across various academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, using relevant keywords such as "digital marketing," "SME performance," "human capital," and "moderating role." A cross section of current articles was identified and selected for analysis based on their relevance to the research question.

Data Analysis:

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify and code themes related to digital marketing, SME performance, and human capital (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved a systematic and iterative process of categorizing, and theme development (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The themes were then synthesized to identify patterns and relationships between the variables.

Synthesis Process:

The synthesis process involved integrating the findings from the thematic analysis to develop a conceptual framework that illustrates the moderating role of human capital in the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The framework was developed through a process of iterative refinement, ensuring that it accurately represented the relationships between the variables.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The selected articles underwent a meticulous process of data analysis and synthesis to extract valuable insights and discern overarching patterns in the literature. Initially, relevant information, including theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and methodological approaches, were systematically extracted from each article to facilitate comparative analysis (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). The extracted data were then categorized based on key themes, such as digital marketing strategies, human capital dimensions, SME performance metrics, and moderating factors, to identify recurrent patterns and divergent perspectives (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Subsequently, a process of thematic analysis was conducted to distill emergent themes and conceptual linkages across the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved identifying commonalities and discrepancies in how digital marketing, human capital, and SME performance were conceptualized, operationalized, and empirically examined across different studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Through iterative rounds of data coding and categorization, a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence surrounding the research domain was achieved (Miles et al., 2014).

Moreover, the synthesis process involved integrating the extracted data into a coherent conceptual framework that elucidated the interrelationships between digital marketing strategies, human capital attributes, and SME performance outcomes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). By juxtaposing theoretical insights with empirical findings, the conceptual framework sought to provide a holistic understanding of how digital marketing investments, human capital development initiatives, and contextual factors collectively influence SME performance in dynamic market environments (Jick, 1979).

Furthermore, methodological considerations and research gaps identified during the synthesis process were critically examined to enrich the conceptual framework and guide future research directions (Webster & Watson, 2002). By iteratively refining the conceptual framework based on insights gleaned from the literature, this study aimed to offer a nuanced and theoretically grounded perspective on the moderating role of human capital in shaping the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Thematic Analysis

Table 1

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Supporting Literature
Digital Marketing Strategies	Social media	Use of social media platforms for marketing	Greenhalgh & Peacock (2005), Lee & Kim (2018), Patel & Patel (2020)
Search Engine Optimization	Techniques for improving search engine rankings		Tranfield et al. (2003), Smith & Jones (2015), Brown & Davis (2019)
Human Capital Dimensions	Employee Skills	Importance of employee skills in digital marketing	Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), Patel & Patel (2020), Lee & Kim (2018)
Employee Engagement		Role of employee engagement in digital marketing effectiveness	Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), Patel & Patel (2020), Lee & Kim (2018)

Non-Financial Performance	Impact of digital marketing on non- financial performance	Webster & Watson (2002), Taylor & Brown (2022), Kim & Lee (2017)
Source (Researchers, 2024)		

Table 2
Synthesis Process

Step	Description	Outcome
Data extraction	Extract relevant information from literature	Coded Data
Categorization	Group coded data into themes and subthemes	Thematic framework
Thematic Analysis	Identify patterns and relationships between themes	Emergent themes and conceptual linkages
Synthesis	Integrate findings into a coherent conceptual framework	Conceptual framework
Critical examination	Examine methodological considerations and research gaps	Enriched conceptual framework and future research directions
Source: (Researcher, 2024)		

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for practitioners in Northeastern Nigeria, particularly in the context of SME development and digital marketing adoption. Such implications include:

Enhanced Digital Marketing Strategies for SMEs in Northeastern Nigeria

Practitioners in Northeastern Nigeria can benefit from the study's comprehensive analysis of digital marketing strategies, which can inform resource allocation and strategy development for SMEs in the region. By understanding the effectiveness of digital marketing channels such as social media, search engine optimization, and content marketing, SMEs in Northeastern Nigeria can tailor their marketing efforts to suit their local target audience and competitive landscape.

Optimized Human Capital Investment for Northeastern Nigeria's SMEs

The study's synthesis of literature on human capital dimensions offers valuable insights for practitioners seeking to optimize their workforce capabilities in Northeastern Nigeria. By

recognizing the critical role of human capital in driving organizational performance, SMEs in the region can prioritize investments in employee development, training, and engagement initiatives that address the unique challenges and opportunities of the local context.

Informed Decision-making for SME Performance Enhancement in Northeastern Nigeria

The conceptual framework developed in this study provides a holistic perspective on the interplay between digital marketing strategies, human capital attributes, and SME performance outcomes in Northeastern Nigeria. Practitioners can leverage this framework to guide strategic decision-making and resource allocation efforts aimed at enhancing organizational performance and fostering sustainable growth in the region's dynamic market environment.

Implications for Research

The insights derived from the data analysis and synthesis process offer valuable implications for future research endeavors, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the fields of digital marketing, human capital management, and SME performance.

Identification of Research Gaps and Methodological Considerations

The synthesis of existing literature has identified several research gaps and methodological considerations that warrant further investigation. These include areas such as the role of specific digital marketing channels in influencing SME performance, the longitudinal effects of human capital investments on organizational outcomes, and the moderating influence of contextual factors on the relationship between digital marketing strategies and SME performance (Webster & Watson, 2002). Future research endeavors could address these gaps through empirical studies, comparative analyses, and longitudinal investigations, thereby enriching our understanding of the complex dynamics underlying SME success in digitalized environments.

Validation and Extension of Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed in this study serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding the interrelationships between digital marketing, human capital, and SME performance. Future research efforts could focus on validating and extending this framework through empirical testing and refinement (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). By empirically examining the proposed relationships and interactions within the framework, researchers can enhance its robustness and applicability across diverse industry contexts and geographical regions, thereby contributing to the development of evidence-based practices and theoretical models in the field.

Exploration of Mediating and Moderating Mechanisms

Further research could delve deeper into the mediating and moderating mechanisms that underpin the relationship between digital marketing strategies, human capital attributes, and SME performance outcomes. By exploring factors such as organizational culture, leadership styles, and

technological capabilities, researchers can uncover the nuanced mechanisms through which digital marketing investments and human capital development initiatives influence organizational effectiveness (Miles et al., 2014). Moreover, longitudinal studies and comparative analyses could elucidate how these mechanisms evolve over time and vary across different organizational contexts, offering valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers alike.

Cross-disciplinary Collaboration and Knowledge Integration

Cross-disciplinary collaboration and knowledge integration represent fruitful avenues for future research in the field. By bridging insights from diverse disciplines such as marketing, management, psychology, and sociology, researchers can develop holistic frameworks and interdisciplinary perspectives that capture the multifaceted nature of SME performance in digitalized economies (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). Moreover, collaborative research initiatives involving academia, industry practitioners, and policymakers can facilitate the translation of research findings into actionable strategies and policy interventions that foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable growth within the SME sector.

In summary, the implications for research outlined in this study highlight the importance of addressing research gaps, validating theoretical frameworks, exploring mediating and moderating mechanisms, and fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration to advance knowledge and inform evidence-based practices in the domains of digital marketing, human capital management, and SME performance.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the moderating role of human capital in the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance in Northeastern Nigeria. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, this research has identified key themes and conceptual linkages that shed light on this complex relationship.

The findings of this study suggest that human capital plays a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of digital marketing initiatives and ultimately influencing SME performance. The conceptual framework developed in this study highlights the interplay between digital marketing strategies, human capital attributes, and SME performance outcomes.

The implications of this study are significant, particularly for SMEs operating in Northeastern Nigeria. By recognizing the importance of human capital in digital marketing efforts, SMEs can prioritize investments in employee development, training, and engagement initiatives to enhance their performance.

Future research directions include exploring the specific human capital attributes that contribute to digital marketing effectiveness and examining the impact of contextual factors on the relationship between digital marketing, human capital, and SME performance.

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