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The Role of Social Media Marketing in Improving Marketing Performance: A Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence

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Abstract

This review synthesizes the existing body of scholarship on social media marketing activities and their bearing on the marketing performance of organizations. Its guiding premise is that a visible digital footprint carries little explanatory weight in its own right; what warrants analytical attention are the mechanisms through which published content, patterns of interaction, degrees of customization, responsiveness to emerging trends, and electronic word-of-mouth become connected to outcomes observed at the customer, brand, and firm levels. Attention is directed accordingly to the conditions under which such activity is converted into demonstrable marketing value, with marketing capabilities, market orientation, and customer engagement examined as the principal conduits of that conversion.

Keywords: social media marketing; marketing performance; marketing capabilities; customer engagement; eWOM; systematic review; PRISMA.

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إجراء مراجعة منهجية للأدبيات العلمية بهدف التعرف على الكيفية التي يمكن من خلالها أن تسهم أنشطة التسويق عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تعزيز الأداء التسويقي للمنظمات .وبدلاً من النظر إلى الوجود الرقمي بوصفه نتيجة بحد ذاته، تركز الدراسة على المسارات والآليات التي ترتبط من خلالها أبعاد التسويق عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، والمتمثلة في المحتوى، والتفاعل، والتخصيص، والاستجابة للاتجاهات الحديثة، والكلمة المنطوقة إلكترونياً، بالنتائج المتعلقة بالعملاء والعلامة التجارية والأداء التنظيمي .كما تتناول الدراسة دور القدرات التسويقية، والتوجه نحو السوق، ومشاركة العملاء في تحويل الأنشطة الرقمية إلى قيمة تسويقية قابلة للقياس، بما يسهم في فهم العلاقة بين ممارسات التسويق الرقمي وتحسين الأداء التسويقي للمنظمات.

1. Introduction

With the prevalence of social networking sites, a major change in today's marketing is underway. These digital ecosystems are no longer just promotional tools but are becoming more and more a complete environment in which brand communication, customer service, relational marketing, and market intelligence are all integrated. Social platforms are now a key part of a company's everyday tactical decision-making across sectors because they can track consumer sentiment and gather instant feedback faster than traditional media outlets. But having a digital footprint is not enough to ensure business success. The true effectiveness of these efforts depends on strategic decisions, firms' target audiences, value propositions, their ability to engage customers in online conversations, and how they use information gained from customer interactions. Similarly, existing research on social media marketing views it as a standalone marketing tool rather than a singular approach, requiring strategic

planning, cross-functional collaboration, and consistent monitoring and adjustment of social media marketing performance (Li et al., 2021; Felix et al., 2017)—the challenge is methodologically translating digital engagement into a robust measure of performance. Aggregate interactions - whether views, 'likes', or any other indicator - can be a good measure of reach but not necessarily of any bottom-line business gains, like revenue or client loyalty. Therefore, it's important to distinguish between true consumer changes and the business results shallow analytics deliver, and businesses should prioritize the latter. This analytical separation aligns with the idea that marketing is a complex phenomenon and not something that can be measured (Morgan, 2012).

Few studies examine the occurrence and evolution of these impacts. Some researchers suggest that the relationship between social media gains and corporate success is unmediated, while others propose intermediate variables that mediate the relationship, such as brand equity, marketing resources, and customer interactions. These differences support a key theoretical hypothesis: the effectiveness of digital marketing cannot be measured by the platforms themselves, but by the organization and the market environment in which it is used. This has implications for SMEs, as it is context-specific. These businesses operate in a highly constrained environment and need to justify their decision to invest in digital. With so few resources, these companies are under extreme pressure to prove the ROI of their digital investments. Creating a business presence on social media is not enough to ensure business benefits. Rather, returns that can be felt can only be achieved if there is solid operational competence, the ability to be agile and responsive to customers, analytical skills that can process customer data, and the ability to implement digital interactions that are integrated with the broader strategic aspect (Fikriah et al., 2024; Hartiani et al., 2025).

In light of these ongoing challenges, this systematic review aims to build an up-to-date, evidence-based foundation by examining empirical evidence linking social media marketing efforts to organizational performance and outcomes. The analysis breaks down the complex nature of digital practices and the metrics used to measure success—and, importantly, the transmission mechanisms that lead to those successes. To reflect the subtle nature of these dynamics, the study considers variations across sectors and markets and identifies key gaps in the existing scholarship to guide future research.

1.1 Research Problem

Although social media channels have been widely embraced, an inherent paradox remains: the actual impact of social media on firm performance is still not well understood empirically. This is vague because the methodology is inconsistent. Conceptualizations and measurements vary: some scholars use only one, others use only the other, some use neither, and others use some other mix of conceptualizations and measurements. This conceptual disintegration seriously limits knowledge accumulation, as Bartoloni and Ancillai (2024) note. So we have to do more than summarize what each student has learned. To delineate precisely the extent to which the limits of scholarly consensus and current theoretical controversy are set, it is necessary to examine the evidence carefully.

1.2 Review Questions

This review does not guarantee that all online social media activities have the same effect. Instead, it considers the factors and processes that explain why some practices relate to some outcomes while others do not. This is not simply a comparison of individual studies, but a focus on understanding patterns of relationships between digital practices, organizational capacities, and customer responses.

• What are the marketing and organizational implications of these activities in empirical research? What are the mediating or contextual mechanisms of the influence of social media marketing on performance?

How similar are the findings of the research on the impact of content, interactivity, customization, trendiness, and electronic word-of-mouth?
What are the gaps in methodology and context for future research, especially in Arab and Iraqi contexts?

1.3 Study Objectives

To collate empirical evidence relating to the relationship between social media marketing and marketing performance.
To categorize the dimensions of social media marketing and outcomes applied in the literature. The review examines social platform practices that are easy to implement and observable outcomes for customers or in marketing performance, in two complementary ways. The review spans from those levels up to and including engagement, marketing capabilities, brand equity, and other mechanisms that could account for the relationship.
To make comparisons of converging and diverging results from different contexts and sectors. To develop a conceptual toolbox and propose future research directions that can be put to the test in the markets in the Arab and Iraqi regions.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research integrates three lenses (not explicitly discussed in previous studies) relevant to analyzing organizational social media behaviors, consumer receptivity, and downstream performance measures. To practitioners, this synthesis is a helpful heuristic to help them differentiate between engagement tactics and real market intelligence, and between relational capital and continued commercial success.

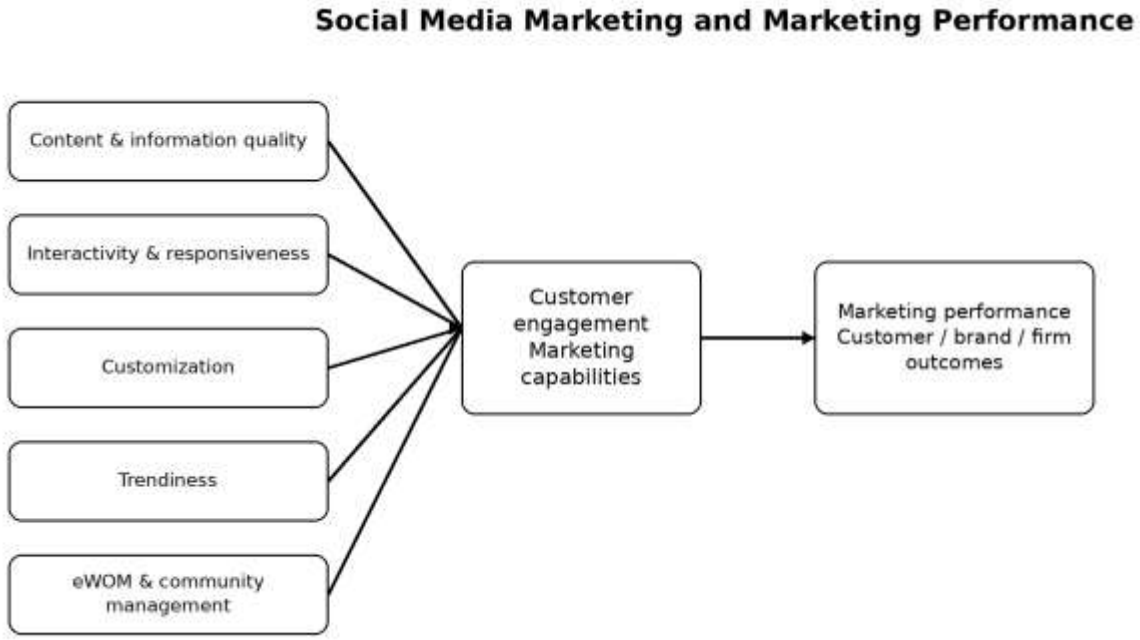


Figure 1. The connection between marketing performance and social media marketing.Conceptual relationships between social media marketing and marketing performance.
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2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Marketing as a Strategy and Capability

For this research, social media marketing is defined as deliberately designing digital ecosystems to communicate with the market, disseminate information, manage consumer conversations, and use behavioral data. This is in contrast to "ad hoc" platform usage that is not explicitly mission-oriented, cross-functional, or aligned, and ongoing performance review, and aligns with the strategic approaches suggested by Felix et al. (2017) and Li et al. (2021). From a resource/capability perspective, if social media is so easily accessible, then just having an account doesn't give a company a sustainable competitive advantage. Rather, strategic value is produced in the compounding of digital infrastructure and company assets: unique market knowledge, dedicated human expertise, sophisticated analytical skills and existing frameworks for organizational learning and agile responding. Instead of believing that the observed differences in firm performance are a result of platform adoption, it is more likely to be a reflection of the way firms mobilize and reconfigure their digital resources, and this is in line with the principles of the RBV and the dynamic capabilities approach (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2007).

2.2 Content and Information Quality

Content quality refers to the correctness, comprehensibility, usefulness, relevance, and timeliness of published information. Content isn't just for transferring information – it can ease the minds of consumers and encourage action or further information. The focus should be on the value added by content and not solely on the number of publications, as shown by Kulikovskaja et al. (2023), which relates to various patterns of customer engagement and their resulting outcomes.

2.3 Interactivity and Responsiveness

Interactivity changes how an organization communicates, shifting from broadcasting to continuous conversation with users. This includes answering questions, responding to feedback/complaints, facilitating participation, and discussing issues to understand better market needs. Interactivity can be more valuable if it is not used only for formal responses, but also to provide information and learn to support marketing decisions.

2.4 Customization

Customization refers to tailoring messages or offers to the characteristics, likes/dislikes, and/or purchasing habits of a target segment. It is not only useful for providing different messages to different groups, however. It also relies on the availability of appropriate data, the ability to handle that data responsibly, and the customer's understanding that the message applies to them. Therefore, customizations can yield different outcomes across environments, data, and implementations.

2.5 Trendiness

According to this conceptualization, trendiness is the "systematic tracking of evolving digital topics, content formats and consumer preferences, and the calibrated reaction that keeps the core brand identity" (p. 2). While this agility helps ensure an organization's messaging stays relevant to its audience's interests, pursuing viral content without strategic intent is not a coherent strategy. Only when someone intentionally chooses a trend or element, and it shows definite relevance to the target audience and business goals and can easily fit into the brand portfolio, can it be used for substantive marketing value.

2.6 Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Community Management

Opinions, reviews, recommendations, and user experiences about a product or brand define electronic word of mouth. It's communication not produced by a company, but that happens, to a certain extent,

outside the company's control. Listening, responding, and learning from the conversation is key to digital community management, not complete control of the conversation. This form of communication is linked to relational response outcomes such as trust, loyalty, and engagement (Fetais et al., 2023).

2.7 Marketing Performance

However, a narrow interpretation of marketing performance as only profits would overlook the fact that the concept is multidimensional and comprises four elements: market efficiency, customer efficiency, brand efficiency, and operational efficiency. From this perspective, incorporating both fiscal and non-fiscal indicators is theoretically sound, provided each indicator remains semantically adequate relative to the desired goal. Methodologically, Morgan (2012) emphasizes the need for precision in these assessments, meaning that scientific assessments of performance require a well-defined unit of analysis and a conceptual separation among the nature of the resources, the nature of the activities, and the nature of the evaluation results.

2.8 Mediating Mechanisms: From Digital Activity to Performance

Recent studies indicate that translating digital engagement into strong performance is not always easy and is mediated by a complex process. The social ecosystem generates constant streams of behavioral signals, market intelligence, and interactive touchpoints that require specific organizational skills to interpret the data and act on it. This is an interpretive need, as Fikriah et al. (2024) note, stating that marketing competencies are a key factor in bridging this gap. More generally, customer engagement and brand equity are relevant sequential mediators that interact to create the causal pathway from initial social media activities to the strategic outcomes that follow.

3. Methodology

3.1 Review Design

This study aims to conduct a systematic review to integrate empirical evidence on social media marketing and marketing performance. The report followed the principles of PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021), including the formulation of a clear and concise review question, identification of sources of information, information selection criteria, and information extraction and synthesis.

3.2 Search Strategy

The search strategy was designed based on the groups of terms containing social media marketing and performance, capabilities, and engagement. These ranged from ‘social media marketing' to ‘marketing performance ', ‘marketing capabilities', ‘customer engagement', and ‘SME performance '. The terms were grouped to expand the results and then further refined by relevance to the review question. For the final submission version, record the databases, the search date, and the actual search text(s) used.

Table.1. Category and Criterion

Category	Criterion
Inclusion	Peer-reviewed study or reliable academic source; describes social media marketing or use skills; relates to a marketing or organizational outcome that can be interpreted; describes a

	method and findings; published in the English or Arabic language.
Exclusion	Studies that are not directly related to marketing; non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces; studies that focus on the use of personal platforms without reference to marketing; duplicate reports of the same study; studies that do not provide the necessary bibliographic or methodological information .

The results were coded systematically for comparison and to ease confusion over the terminology. There are other words to describe similar constructs and other constructs to describe similar terms. Therefore, the names of the variables were not used to categorize the variables, and only the underlying operational definition and empirical measure of the variables were used. Data extraction followed a set of standard coding cases, including year published, geographical and sectoral setting, methodological design, reported sample sizes, core variables, performance measures, and findings related to the research questions. Analytical synthesis involved not only documenting the impact in a specific direction, but also examining study design details, levels of analysis, and differences in measures to assess the consistency of the empirical evidence.

3.5 Synthesis Method

They tabulated thematically and compared them without assuming the studies were entirely homogeneous. These areas included relationships between SMM and performance, patterns of digital practice, mediating factors, and contextual influences on SMM and performance measurement. Because of differences in design, variables, and measures, I chose a qualitative synthesis, as I could not estimate a combined quantitative value.

3.6 Review Process Flow Diagram

The PRISMA flow diagram shows how the relevant records were found, screened, assessed for full text, and included in the study. It is important to be methodologically correct and to use the counts from the actual search process (including the removal of duplicate items and the reasons for excluding items), so that none of the hypothetical counts are entered. Therefore, fill in the final numbers based on the search log before formalization.

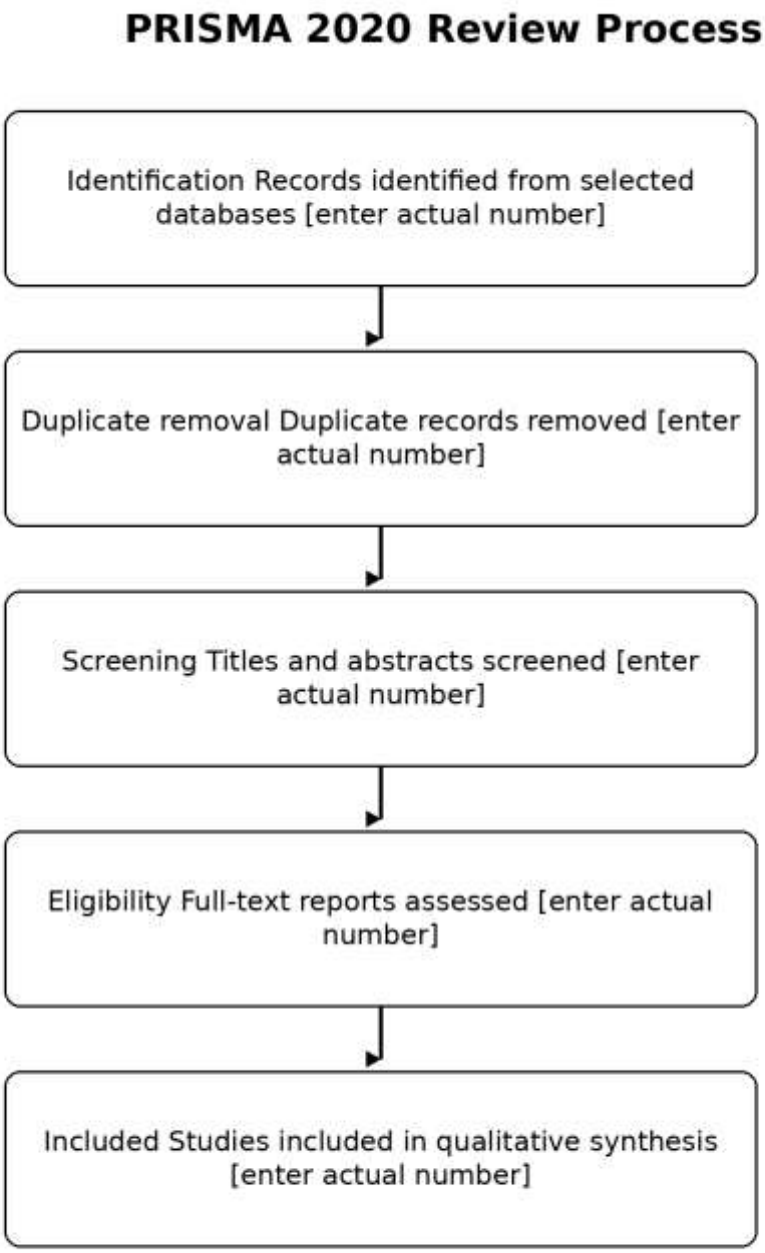


Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

Record identification	Duplicate removal	Initial screening	Full-text assessment	Final synthesis

4. Results

4.1 Overall Pattern of Evidence

The studies reviewed largely suggest that there is a link between social media marketing practices and performance outcomes, with the nature and intensity of this link among studies differing based on the type of social media, the scale of social media use, and the skills or competencies that the marketing organization has in its social media capabilities. Laradi et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of social media marketing skills, and for smaller businesses, marketing capabilities can play a pivotal role in harnessing platforms' potential to achieve results (Fikriah et al., 2024; Hartiani et al., 2025). Web presence alone doesn't seem to be the key; digital activity in marketing processes does.

Table 2. Marketing capabilities therefore emerge in several studies as an important explanatory link between platform use and performance.

Study	Design/context	Variables	Main finding
Li et al. (2021)	Strategic framework	Strategic conceptualization of SMM	SMM is a multi-component strategy rather than an isolated posting activity.
Bartoloni & Ancillai (2024)	Systematic review; 169 studies	SMM behavior, inputs, and outputs	Identified fragmentation in the literature and developed a framework linking inputs, contextual factors, and outcomes.
Laradi et al. (2024)	326 firms - Algeria; SEM	SMM capabilities, brand equity, firm performance	Found a positive effect of SMM capabilities on firm performance, with a role for brand equity.
So et al. (2024)	Longitudinal study; three waves	SMM, customer engagement, stickiness	Showed that relationships change over time and that engagement predicts stickiness longitudinally.
Kulikovskaja et al. (2023)	Survey + field study	Content type, engagement, marketing outcomes	Found that content types differ in their effects and that customer engagement plays a mediating role.
Fetais et al. (2023)	464 participants; PLS	SMM, community engagement, lovemark, loyalty	Showed effects of SMM on community engagement and lovemark, with pathways toward loyalty.
Fikriah et al. (2024)	230 MSMEs - Indonesia; PLS-SEM	Social media use, marketing capabilities, performance	Supported marketing capabilities as a mediator between use and performance.
Hartiani et al. (2025)	179 SMEs; SEM-PLS	Social media use, marketing capabilities, performance	Found a direct effect and a mediating role for marketing capabilities.
Ayokunmi et al. (2024)	370 SMEs - Nigeria; SmartPLS	Informativeness, interactivity, customization, trendiness, WOM	Informativeness and interactivity had significant effects, while the remaining dimensions showed limited effects.
Saudi SME study (2024)	451 managers/owners; PLS	External use, market orientation, performance	Reported a positive effect and partial mediation by market orientation.

Significant cross-study variation exists in how researchers operationalize measures of marketing success along the causal pathway. Some studies measure more proximal, micro-level results (e.g., consumer engagement, behavioral intention) whilst others measure more distal, firm-level results (e.g., sales, market share). These measurement variations over time and across levels of analysis create apparent inconsistencies across the empirical literature and highlight the methodological value of breaking performance indicators into measures at a finer-grained level than a single construct. In

terms of content strategy, the results of the synthesis found that strategic messaging was an antecedent factor that could cause engagement; however, this factor is only effective if it is derived from the informational utility of the content and not just from the amount of content that is posted. This is because content that satisfies consumers' information needs provides a consistent response. The study by Kulikovskaja et al. (2023) confirmed significant differences between engagement and conversion outcomes depending on the nature of the content, while Ayokunmi et al. (2024) emphasized the key role of informativeness in the SME context. For this reason, when assessing content effectiveness, one should first consider audience relevance and usefulness. Finally, content quality's best strategic value comes when it's tightly tied to an understanding and awareness of the needs of a target audience. Too many irrelevant posts may create the impression of engagement but add no real value. Value-driven content that's relevant and interesting to consumers drives engagement and builds brand value over time.

Interactivity is repeatedly used as a key component, reflecting the conversational nature of social platforms. When organizations use messages, comments, and customer feedback to learn and improve their responses, they become more than numbers on an analytics dashboard. However, evidence across the lifespan suggests that engagement patterns are not consistent over time, and that the quality and development of the relationship are more informative than a single cross-sectional snapshot (So et al., 2024).

Responsiveness is a behavior that renders interactivity. However, consumers don't consider only channel availability; they also consider how fast, how large, and how useful the company is when it responds, and simply counting comments by volume obscures these relational aspects. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of customization and trend responsiveness is different from one empirical case to another. Both personalization and trend-setting can increase resonance and brand salience, but making good use of both is dependent on data quality, resources, and context – so there is no prescribed order here. When it comes to trend responsiveness, it's not enough to go viral – some connection to the brand and audience psychographics is required to achieve a lasting presence. Customization follows the same conditional logic, with data quality as the condition. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), though, operates through a different mechanism: it is generated through decentralized consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communication, in addition to firm-initiated communication. Although organizations can encourage reviews and build active communities, they have no inherent control over user-generated discourse. Thus, the strategic effect of eWOM can be achieved through relational antecedents (such as trust, engagement, and loyalty) that, in turn, moderate lagged financial outcomes (Fetais et al., 2023; Kulikovskaja et al., 2023). Moreover, digital community management goes beyond one-to-one interactions between the firm and the customer to orchestrate interactions among customers. Organic user interactions are essential early-warning indicators of preliminary user satisfaction, operational issues, and market preferences. Therefore, community monitoring is more than a communication and sharing mechanism; it is a strategic intelligence asset.

New research indicates that technology isn't always a good indicator of marketing value. Information from platforms must be interpreted and acted on through organizations' skills and routines to adjust their offers, messages, or market strategies. This is corroborated by research by Studystudiesah (2024) and Hartiani et al. (2025), which shows that marketing ability is important. Therefore, social media can be viewed as a data and communication source, and value capture relies on organizational capacities.

A sequential marketing performance approach helps explain why digital doesn't always translate into financial outcomes. The literature does not explicitly state 'content publishing to revenue' as a direct translation but rather a time series of transitions between the steps. Initial impacts usually emerge in the proximal, micro-level indicators of attention and engagement that then develop into psychological outcomes such as trust and attachment and then behavior, such as intent to purchase, and finally,

distal, firm-level outcomes such as customer retention and sales volume. Operationalization sequences provide a strong theoretical account of differences in empirical results—most differences stem from measuring variables at different points along the causal chain. As a result, the financial benefits of social media marketing (SMM) are not short-term; they take time to flow through customer and brand constructs. The pathway includes sequential mediators such as awareness, trust, loyalty, and brand equity. Some recent studies that lend support to this staged approach to the concept of customer engagement include the work of Laradi et al. (2024), who reported that brand equity is a mediator between SMM capabilities and overall performance; the research by Fetais et al. (2023), who showed that customer engagement sits between content strategies and brand attachment; and the research by Kulikovskaja et al. (2023), who reported that customer engagement is a significant factor between content strategies and downstream outcomes. Together, these reflections support the importance of a key methodological rule for evaluating the "short-term effectiveness" of digital content strategies.

Table.3. The dimensions are a system, and what matters most can vary across contexts.

Dimension	Pattern of evidence	Implication
Content quality	Repeated support, especially when content is useful and relevant	Engagement, trust, marketing outcomes
Interactivity and responsiveness	Relatively strong support across multiple studies	Engagement, customer understanding, retention
Customization	Mixed findings	Depends on data and context
Trendiness	Mixed/indirect findings	Attention and relevance
eWOM and community management	Clear relational support; performance effect may be indirect	Trust, loyalty, engagement
Marketing capabilities	Strong recent support as a mediator	Converting use into execution and performance
Market orientation	Support as a mediator/complementary capability	Converting information into market response
Customer engagement	Recurring and dynamic mediator	Loyalty, stickiness, WOM
Brand equity	Outcome and mediator in some studies	Performance and loyalty

5. Discussion

The synthesized conclusions confirm the conceptualization of social media marketing (SMM) as a complex skill of the organization, and not just a communication channel. The model presented here aligns well with the model development by Li et al. (2021) and the large ensemble model synthesis by Bartoloni and Ancillai (2024). Performance differences between firms competing within the same digital ecosystems can be explained through an ability-driven approach, if firms implement focused content in interactive dialogue, constant market learning, and robust information-processing routines. In addition, the analysis of SMM functions shows a marked dimensional imbalance. In this context, informativeness and interactivity are the most important proximal outcomes and depend least on contextual and mediating factors, while the explanatory power of customization, trend responsiveness, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) depends strongly on contextual and

mediating factors. This structural difference reflects the logic of the concept of dynamic capabilities, which suggests that competitive advantage is created by an organization's ability to sense shifts in the environment, seize opportunities, and reconfigure bases of resources, and not just from the possession of "commoditized digital assets" (Teece, 2007). Lastly, although customer engagement is a critical link between the initial digital activities and the subsequent activities, it is not a time-independent relationship. So et al. (2024) showed that the relationship between perceived SMM activities, engagement, and platform stickiness is not static but evolves. Therefore, while a cross-sectional design provides a snapshot in time, a longitudinal design is necessary to capture the dynamic nature of consumer relationships

The first challenge for small enterprises is not just accessing the platform; it is using the communicative and informational returns of these ecosystems in an organization's way. However, if digital analytics is not linked to the major strategic initiatives of the product, pricing, customer service, and sales, then digital engagement will not deliver performance improvements. Therefore, the tools that enable social media ROI include sophisticated analytics, cross-functional collaboration, and institutionalized learning and agile action.

Furthermore, the synthesis suggests the importance of many facets of performance. Researchers should measure and stratify measures. Both platform-level constructs and customer-level constructs and outcomes are measured, with platform-level constructs measured across platform-level coor across customer-level constructs and outcomes. The tiers must be combined and not ignored as merely “digital” activities to maintain focus on what marketing is all about: the performance in the marketing mix (Morgan, 2012; [Check Author] & Ancillai, 2026).

This is not the case in the Arab geopolitical region, where empirical evidence is weak and limited in scope and diversity. Existing regional studies offer insights into market orientation and dynamic capabilities, but they are not specific enough to apply directly to Iraq. Future studies in Iraq should account for heterogeneity across industrial sectors, enterprise size, and methodology, and should integrate marketing perceptions and outcomes (e.g., number of leads converted, number of sales, etc.) with the data.

5.1 Proposed Integrative Framework

The organization's social media practices are proposed as the first step, followed by mechanisms and capabilities that translate practices into customer and brand reactions, and finally into marketing and organizational performance. The relationships presented may not be the same in every context; each could apply to a specific sector, firm size, maturity stage of digital interaction, level of competition, or stage of the customer journey. The framework is thus an explanatory rationale for future testing in different contexts.

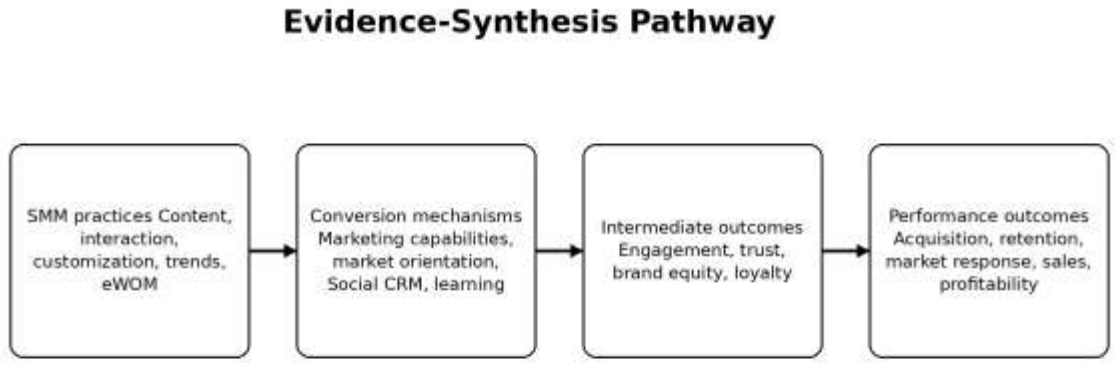


Figure 3. Evidence-synthesis pathway explaining how social media marketing may influence marketing performance.

Table. 4. Evidence-synthesis pathway explaining how social media marketing may influence marketing performance.

SMM practices	Conversion mechanisms	Intermediate outcomes	Performance outcomes
Content Interactivity Customization Trendiness eWOM	Marketing capabilities Market orientation Social CRM Learning	Engagement Trust Brand equity Loyalty	Customer acquisition/retention Market responsiveness Sales Effectiveness/profitability

6. Conclusions

The systematic synthesis shows that social media marketing (SMM) can deliver optimal performance dividends only within a comprehensive architecture that includes content strategy, interactive dialogue, organizational learning, and dynamic capabilities. This means that counting followers or posts does not really demonstrate commercial effectiveness. The key lies in converting digital interactions into actionable market intelligence, building relational capital, and improving decision-making. Empirical evidence also emphasizes the contextual contingency of SMM dimensions, as the influence of certain practices varies by context; therefore, no prescriptive or universal framework is valid. In theory, it is a paradigm shift in thinking about social platforms as just a way to communicate, and how to rethink and reimagine their use as a new and untouched organizational asset. Practitioners should be aware that platform metrics are not the only ones to consider in isolation; they must be correlated with other metrics related to customers, brands, and downstream dollars. Finally, as the present review shows, geographical and methodological lacunae are still present, which future work must address, and we must transcend them, particularly in the case of the Arab and Iraqi worlds, which are underrepresented.

7. Managerial Recommendations

Interpreting platform-level metrics requires great caution. But having a wide reach doesn't necessarily mean that you have a high number of conversions. Similarly, engagement rates don't always translate into short-term results; in this regard, an analytical dashboard for a consumer journey is most useful if it integrates an overview of the platform's analytics and specific phases of the customer lifecycle, and the organization's KPIs.

The synthesis also emphasizes the importance of investing in human capital and in the technological infrastructure. The value derived from digital tools depends on the core skills used: content orchestration, agile responsiveness, analysis of retrieved data, and systematic integration of consumer information into strategic decision-making. This capacity-building requirement is especially important forresource-poor SMEs without large digital departments.

Culturally, future research should use multiple-source and longitudinal designs. These methods can control for common method bias and establish temporal causal order in surveys based on a single respondent's perceptions. Using self-reported survey data alongside objective digital data (or existing operational data) may yield a more empirically sound and complete picture of the digital-to-performance transmission mechanism.

In addition, future research should carefully specify the unit of analysis before the study. The focus construct – it can be the consumers' perception of the brand initiatives, the firm's internal SMM capabilities, or actual, objective results of the firm – should be clearly specified. This methodological clarity also reduces conceptual overlap and improves comparability across studies. In the case of Iraq, an increased focus should be given to the creation of quality evidence that is contextually relevant

and supports the academic field, rather than theories and paradigms successfully imported from the West. This should be done with careful, thorough, and cultural adaptation of psychometrically validated scales, and by finding objective measures of performance – subject to data-sharing permissions – at three levels: Platform activity, Customer Response, and Marketing/Financial Results. Ongoing training on marketing and analytical skills, specifically in SMEs.

8. Limitations and Future Research Agenda

The main limitation of this systematic review is methodological differences across the included literature, which measured constructs differently and used different research designs. This variability precludes statistical comparisons of effect sizes and makes quantitative meta-analysis impossible. Furthermore, the analysis is based on the primary studies, which differ in the extent of their reporting. It also includes analyses of studies with different reporting depth. To comply with PRISMA reporting requirements, the manuscript should include the results of the search (databases searched, date, Boolean strings, and number of records screened and eliminated from the final manuscript).

Restrictions are not only verbal; the empirical evidence base and the epistemological quality of a systematic review have intrinsic limitations. Thus, these boundaries need to be clearly and explicitly set aside so that the results and conclusions can be critically discussed and distinguishing between results that can be considered substantiated and those that should be interpreted with caution. Future work should test the proposed 5 dimensions empirically by stratifying samples by province and industrial sector in Iraq.

Finally, this research is not only a compilation of isolated studies in chronological order; it also combines and analyzes the data. The overall concept is to present a single pathway between the digital practices, “digital responses” of consumers, and organizational “digital capacities” and performance indicators, which makes the empirical differences stemming from context and method more understandable. Importantly, the synthesis is assertive about both the digital and substantive aspects. Followers may measure engagement count, views, comments, etc., but that doesn't always indicate the actual effectiveness of marketing. The analytical boundary will help conceptualists and academics, and practitioners, select performance indicators that suit their investigative and strategic objectives.

8.1 Critical Assessment of Evidence Quality

- The quality of a synthesis's epistemology depends on the methodologies of the primary studies. Cross-sectional designs can identify current relationships and/or test theory in a single time period but cannot establish causal direction or temporal precedence. This aligns with So et al. (2024), whose longitudinal approach showed that the relationships between the variables of interest are dynamic. As a result, the cross-sectional results presented in this review provide only associative evidence or potential causal explanations, not definitive causal evidence.
- In addition, single-instrument, single-respondent survey design increases the possibility of Common Method Bias (CMB), which may increase the risk of survey error. Multi-source data collection, objective behavioral or archival financial measures, or temporal separation in measurement greatly strengthen empirical support. Data triangulation is not easy, but through the effective use of a multi-methodological approach, Kulikovskaja et al. (2023) show the strategic benefit of triangulating data to reduce "mono-method bias" and expand the evidentiary base.
- Another methodological difference concerns the unit of analysis. Some research is based on the consumers' perception of the brand's initiatives and others on the internal capacities of the organization or managerial routines. Although both approaches have theoretical merit,

merging these levels of analysis will not clarify our interpretation. We carefully partition customer-perceived digital activity, organizational capacity, and final customer- or firm-level outcomes to ensure that the concepts are usable.

- Regarding external validity, the compiled evidence spans sectors and markets but is not balanced. For example, it includes relationships between Luxury fashion companies and between a tour company and a micro-retailer. Consequently, different results reported in empirical research are not considered conflicts but rather contingent on context. However, future research could better interpret these findings by focusing on market characteristics, market conditions, and organizational maturity in relation to the use of digital platforms.
- Last but not least, the empirical knowledge should be deliberately used and translated into managerial practice. This starts with a clear vision of each digital platform's role in the customer journey, clear accountability for managing content and engaging consumers, and KPIs clearly aligned with organizational objectives.
- Because social media platforms are so accessible, SMEs may think it is easy to get a social media presence up and running at little or no extra cost; however, maintaining an effective social media presence can be costly. Producing content, being agile and responsive, analyzing data, managing reputation, and converting digital attention into financial transactions all require time, certain skills, and the development of interdependent processes within the company. Fikriah et al. (2024) and Hartiani et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of form use in achieving real outcomes through these capabilities.
- Therefore, it makes more sense to develop in-house resources and systems rather than build them across multiple networks. Rather than spreading across many channels with no clear strategy or feedback, focusing on 1 or 2 channels (those closest to sales and customer service) will yield more valuable market intelligence. This aligns with the dynamic capabilities paradigm, which argues that competitive advantage comes not only from resources but also from how those resources are orchestrated.
- Secondly, SMEs must have an operational performance measurement system. This can be added gradually and begin with the highest-level metrics such as reach and engagement; work down the funnel to metrics like inquiries and leads; and then conversion rates and other metrics that can make it to the bottom of the funnel, like repeat purchases and revenue generation (R&D depends on the available metrics). The intent is to develop simple analytical dashboards that provide an empirical link between digital activities and the organization's substantive outcomes.
- The literature used in the international context is important because it establishes a theoretical framework, but it cannot replace empirical research in the context of Iraq. Local features across trust dimensions vary greatly from those prevalent in global research—from organizations to payment processes to digital trust models to platforms and platform behaviors. Therefore, indigenous research in Iraq must begin by mapping and documenting corporate administrative accounts linked to social responsibility, distributed operational responsibility, and the methods by which digital inquiries are transferred to sales or service completion.
- The proposed conceptual framework is not accepted a priori as the "truth," but as an idea that must be empirically tested across different and heterogeneous commercial sectors, where rhetorical homogeneity is not assumed; therefore, studies should take a multi-method approach that triangulates marketing managers' perceptual measures with objective operational measures such as the number of inquiries, conversion efficiencies, repeat order rates, and sales revenue changes. This methodological approach will produce very localized

evidence that will be locally relevant and yet subject to rigor and able to be compared rigorously to the international evidence.

- However, platform marketing effectiveness is not indicated by how many people use it. The value of Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok can differ based on the viewers, the field of interest, and the target of use. Local studies can then compare platforms and content quality, response time, and interaction, and whether content is present or not.

  Applied studies in Diyala can then be conducted starting from a realistic description of the current practices, and then testing relationships between the most salient dimensions and marketing outcomes. It would be useful to compare sectors and firm sizes, since this would show differences that may not have been noticeable when all firms were lumped together. Proposition 1: Integrating social media marketing capabilities into the full range of marketing capabilities and using them in turn increases marketing performance compared with using social media marketing capabilities as a standalone capability. Mediation models can test these connections between platform use and performance through marketing capabilities, or through Social CRM.
- Proposition 2: The influence of the quality of the content on performance is indirect and partially mediated by customer engagement, customer trust, or brand equity. Models that assess only a direct path effect may thus underestimate the mechanism of influence. The relevance of SMM dimensions will differ across industries and across the customer journey. Informativeness and interactivity may matter more during search and inquiry, while community and eWOM may matter more after purchase and during loyalty development. Hypothesis 4: Organizational Digital Maturity (ODM) moderates the relationship between organizational SMM activities and performance. Companies that have analytics and response processes, as well as marketing and sales integration, are better equipped to turn engagement into results.

  Because the relationship between SMM, engagement, and retention is dynamic, researchers should use longitudinal designs or repeated observations rather than relying solely on cross-sectional studies.

9. References

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