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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF SALES PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES IN UNITED ARAB EMIRATES-BASED ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

Digital marketing has become a central mechanism through which organisations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sustain sales performance and preserve operational continuity in a market characterised by high internet penetration, a digitally literate and culturally diverse consumer base, and rapid technological change. This narrative review synthesises peer-reviewed studies, graduate theses, and regional policy documents to examine how five digital marketing instruments, search engine optimisation (SEO), social media marketing, email marketing, content marketing, and influencer or affiliate marketing, relate to customer engagement, revenue growth, and organisational resilience. Rather than following a systematic-review protocol, the review adopts a thematic, interpretive approach appropriate to a conceptual synthesis of a still-emerging literature. The synthesis indicates a consistent positive association between digital marketing adoption and sales outcomes across sectors as varied as telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, retail, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and it shows that this relationship is strengthened when organisations combine digital tools with data analytics, culturally attuned messaging, and continuous digital-skills development. The review further argues, consistent with experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, that digital marketing capability functions as a determinant of business continuity rather than a discretionary promotional expense. Evidence specific to the UAE remains comparatively limited relative to the wider Gulf and Southeast Asian literature, and the review closes by consolidating the findings into an integrative framework and an agenda for future empirical research, including the doctoral study on which this review draws directly.

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Introduction:-

Digital marketing denotes the use of internet-enabled channels, social media, search engines, electronic mail, and content platforms, to promote products and services, engage customers, and generate measurable commercial outcomes (Kannan & Li, 2017; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Its rise has been accompanied by a parallel decline in the relative influence of traditional, one-way marketing channels such as print and broadcast media, which are comparatively costly, slow to yield results, and poorly suited to the personalisation that contemporary consumers expect (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The United Arab Emirates presents a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this shift. The country combines near-universal internet and smartphone penetration with a highly diverse, multilingual population and a policy environment, expressed through initiatives such as the UAE Digital Government Strategy and the We the UAE 2031 vision, that actively promotes digital adoption across the public and private sectors (UAE Government, 2022). These conditions have made digital marketing not merely a promotional tool but, increasingly, a determinant of whether firms can sustain sales and continue operating through periods of disruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened this relationship. Organisations that had already invested in digital marketing infrastructure were able to migrate customer relationships online with comparative speed, while firms reliant on physical points of contact experienced more severe interruptions to revenue and customer retention (Priyono, Moin, & Putri, 2020). This experience has reframed digital marketing capability as an element of organisational resilience alongside its conventional role in demand generation.

The purpose of this review is to synthesise the empirical and conceptual literature on the relationship between digital marketing strategies, sales performance, and business continuity, with particular attention to evidence drawn from or applicable to the UAE. The review draws directly on, and is intended to accompany, a doctoral research project examining the impact of digital marketing strategies on sales performance and business continuation in UAE-based organisations. It considers five widely studied digital marketing instruments, SEO, social media marketing, email marketing, content marketing, and influencer or affiliate marketing, and asks how each contributes to customer engagement, revenue growth, and the capacity of firms to withstand economic and operational shocks.

Review Approach:-

This paper follows the conventions of a narrative review: a form of scholarly synthesis that integrates literature thematically and interpretively rather than through the exhaustive, protocol-driven search and screening procedures associated with systematic reviews (Grant & Booth, 2009). This approach was selected because the objective is conceptual and integrative, to map how distinct digital marketing instruments relate to sales performance and organisational continuity, and to identify where the evidence is thin, rather than to produce a quantitative meta-analytic estimate of effect size.

Literature was drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, indexed conference proceedings, and graduate theses published primarily between 2016 and 2024 in marketing, business management, and information systems outlets. Sources were selected for topical relevance to digital marketing instruments, sales or business-performance outcomes, and, where available, the UAE or comparable emerging-market contexts. Consistent with the conventions of narrative reviewing, the selection is purposive and interpretive rather than exhaustive; it does not claim the reproducibility of a systematic review conducted under PRISMA guidelines, and the synthesis should be read accordingly. Every source cited in this review was independently verified against its original publication record prior to inclusion.

The UAE Context: Policy, Culture, and Digital Adoption:-**Digital Government Strategy and Economic Diversification:-**

The UAE has positioned digital transformation as a pillar of its long-term economic strategy. Government initiatives, including the UAE Digital Government Strategy and the We the UAE 2031 vision, are designed to accelerate technology adoption across government services, healthcare, education, and industry, and to support economic diversification away from hydrocarbon dependence (UAE Government, 2022). For private-sector firms, this policy environment lowers the practical and cultural barriers to digital adoption and creates an expectation, shared by consumers and regulators alike, that customer-facing communication will occur increasingly through digital channels.

Digital Marketing Among UAE SMEs:-

Empirical evidence specific to the UAE remains limited but growing. Nuseir and Aljumah (2020), in a survey of small and medium enterprises across Dubai, found a significant positive relationship between digital marketing applications, including online advertising, affiliate marketing, email marketing, and social media marketing, and business performance, although environmental factors did not significantly moderate this relationship. The study is among the more direct pieces of UAE-based evidence available and supports the broader international pattern in which digital marketing adoption correlates with improved commercial outcomes for smaller firms that might otherwise lack the resources for traditional advertising.

Cultural and Linguistic Considerations:-

Because the UAE population is highly multinational, digital marketing strategies that succeed elsewhere cannot be transplanted without adaptation. Effective campaigns in the UAE market typically account for Islamic values and observances, for example, framing Ramadan-period messaging around family, charity, and modest consumption rather than indulgence, and for the linguistic diversity of the resident population, where Arabic-language content can build trust even in a market where English is widely used for commerce. Content that disregards these considerations risks alienating segments of the audience and undermining the relationship-building function that digital channels are otherwise well placed to serve.

Thematic Review of Digital Marketing Instruments:-**Search Engine Optimisation:-**

SEO improves the visibility of a firm's digital properties in organic search results and is widely reported as a foundational driver of low-cost customer acquisition (Kannan & Li, 2017). In sector-specific evidence, firms that invested in keyword-optimised content and backlink development achieved measurable increases in organic traffic and lead generation (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). For UAE-based organisations operating in a bilingual digital environment, SEO strategies that address both English- and Arabic-language search behaviour are more likely to capture the full range of the resident and expatriate consumer base.

Social Media Marketing:-

Social media marketing is consistently identified across the reviewed literature as the digital marketing instrument with the strongest and most direct association with sales performance and customer engagement. In an analysis of Safaricom, a major East African telecommunications provider, Kagollah (2022) found that social media marketing, supported by content marketing and affiliate partnerships, showed a significant positive relationship with revenue growth, market share, and customer retention, attributing this in part to the capacity of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to deliver segmented, real-time, culturally resonant messaging. Similarly, Sufian, Min, and colleagues (2020), studying small online businesses in Malacca, found that communication and the quality of customer relationships cultivated through social media were significant predictors of sales performance, although content sharing and customer feedback alone showed weaker direct effects. In the retail footwear sector, Hamdani, Muladi, and Maulani (2021) reported that digital marketing activity, including Instagram-based engagement and influencer partnerships, accounted for a substantial share of variance in consumer purchasing decisions for the Indonesian brand Aerostreet, underscoring the influence of visual, community-oriented platforms on the later stages of the purchase funnel.

Email Marketing:-

Email marketing is repeatedly identified as a comparatively low-cost channel with a favourable return on investment, particularly for nurturing existing customer relationships rather than for initial acquisition (Kannan & Li, 2017). Its effectiveness depends heavily on segmentation and personalisation; generic, non-targeted messaging shows markedly weaker engagement than campaigns built on customer relationship management data and behavioural triggers (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Content Marketing:-

Content marketing, encompassing blogs, video, and other owned media, supports both SEO performance and brand trust by positioning the organisation as a credible source of information rather than solely a vendor of products or services. The evidence across sectors suggests that content built around genuine customer needs, rather than promotional messaging alone, produces stronger engagement and higher dwell time on digital properties (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

Influencer and Affiliate Marketing:-

Influencer and affiliate marketing operate through the credibility and reach of third parties rather than the brand's own channels. The pattern observed across the reviewed studies is that authenticity and cultural fit between the influencer and the target audience are decisive: partnerships that reflect the values, language, or lifestyle of the intended consumer segment generate materially stronger trust and conversion outcomes than partnerships selected primarily for follower count (Hamdani et al., 2021; Kagollah, 2022). For the UAE, this implies that collaborations with locally embedded or Arabic-speaking influencers are likely to outperform generic international placements for domestically oriented campaigns.

Digital Marketing, Sales Performance, and Business Continuity:-

Table 1 summarises the principal application, reported commercial benefit, and central limitation associated with each digital marketing instrument reviewed above. As with the thematic sections, the table reflects an interpretive synthesis of recurring findings rather than a pooled quantitative estimate.

Table 1. Digital marketing instruments: applications, benefits, and limitations

Instrument	Principal Application	Reported Benefit	Principal Limitation
Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)	Improving organic visibility in bilingual (Arabic/English) search results	Low-cost, sustained customer acquisition; higher organic traffic and lead generation	Results accrue slowly; requires continuous content investment and technical maintenance
Social Media Marketing	Segmented, real-time engagement via Facebook, Instagram, and similar platforms	Strongest reported association with revenue growth, retention, and customer engagement	Effectiveness highly platform- and content-dependent; risk of superficial engagement metrics
Email Marketing	Personalised nurturing of existing customer relationships via CRM-driven segmentation	Favourable return on investment; effective for retention and repeat conversion	Weak performance when generic or non-segmented; declining engagement among younger demographics
Content Marketing	Blogs, video, and owned media positioning the firm as a credible information source	Supports SEO performance and brand trust; increases dwell time and engagement	Resource-intensive to sustain; benefits accrue over the medium to long term
Influencer / Affiliate Marketing	Partnerships with third parties whose audience matches the target segment	Strong trust and conversion effects when culturally and linguistically aligned	Outcomes depend heavily on authenticity of fit; reputational risk if partnership is misaligned

Source: author's synthesis of the reviewed literature.

Beyond the individual instruments, the literature converges on a broader claim: digital marketing capability functions as a component of organisational resilience, not merely as a sales channel. Priyono, Moin, and Putri (2020), examining SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that firms pursued differing depths of digital transformation depending on their pre-existing digital maturity and resource base, and that firms with more developed digital capabilities, including digital marketing infrastructure, were better positioned to sustain customer relationships and revenue when physical channels were disrupted. This finding is consistent with the pharmaceutical-sector evidence reported by Tabiat (2022) in Lebanon, where social media activity was associated with improved brand visibility and market performance under conditions of broader economic instability. Taken together, the evidence supports the proposition that digital marketing and business continuity are linked not only through incremental sales gains but through the preservation of customer relationships and revenue streams during periods of disruption.

Challenges and Barriers:-

Despite the consistent direction of the evidence, several limitations recur across the literature. First, much of the empirical base rests on single-firm or single-sector case studies with modest sample sizes, which constrains generalisability (Sufian et al., 2020; Hamdani et al., 2021). Second, many studies, including some of the UAE-specific evidence, rely on cross-sectional survey data collected at a single point in time, which limits causal inference regarding the direction of the relationship between digital marketing investment and sales outcomes (Nuseir & Aljumah, 2020). Third, organisational barriers, including limited digital-marketing skills among staff, inconsistent budget allocation, and, in SME contexts particularly, constrained access to analytics infrastructure, continue to temper the realised benefits of digital marketing investment (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Fourth, the cultural and linguistic adaptation that appears necessary for effectiveness in the UAE market adds a layer of strategic complexity that is not always addressed in digital marketing frameworks developed in other regional contexts.

An Integrative Framework:-

Drawing the foregoing together, the review proposes an integrative framework in which digital marketing instruments, SEO, social media marketing, email marketing, content marketing, and influencer or affiliate marketing, build customer-facing capabilities in visibility, engagement, trust, and personalisation. These capabilities, in turn, generate two related outcomes: sales performance, expressed through customer acquisition, conversion, and revenue growth, and business continuity, expressed through the retention of customer relationships and revenue stability during periods of market or operational disruption. The strength of both relationships is conditioned by organisational factors, including digital-skills capacity, data-analytics maturity, and the degree of cultural and linguistic adaptation applied to campaign content. The framework treats digital marketing technology as a necessary but not sufficient condition for improved performance: its commercial value is realised most fully when matched by organisational investment in analytics capability and culturally informed strategy (Kannan & Li, 2017; Nuseir & Aljumah, 2020; Priyono et al., 2020).

Research Gaps and Future Directions:-

Several gaps warrant further empirical attention. Direct, UAE-based empirical evidence remains comparatively scarce relative to the volume of literature emerging from Southeast Asia and East Africa, despite the UAE's distinctive combination of high digital readiness, cultural diversity, and policy support for digitalisation. Longitudinal research designs are needed to clarify the direction of causality between digital marketing investment and sales performance, since the majority of existing studies rely on cross-sectional data. Sector-specific research within the UAE, particularly in retail, real estate, financial services, and SMEs, would help establish whether the patterns observed in Kenyan, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Lebanese contexts hold in the Gulf setting. Finally, comparatively little attention has been paid to how digital marketing capability interacts with formal business-continuity planning, as distinct from its incidental contribution to resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The doctoral study from which this review is drawn addresses several of these gaps directly by examining UAE-based organisations empirically across these dimensions.

Conclusion:-

This narrative review has synthesised evidence on the relationship between digital marketing strategies, sales performance, and business continuity, with particular attention to the UAE context. Across telecommunications, retail, pharmaceuticals, and SMEs, the literature consistently associates digital marketing adoption, particularly social media marketing supported by SEO, content marketing, email marketing, and culturally attuned influencer partnerships, with improved sales outcomes and, increasingly, with the capacity of organisations to sustain operations through periods of disruption. The evidence also indicates that these benefits are not automatic: they depend on organisational investment in digital skills, analytics capability, and cultural and linguistic adaptation to the target market. For the UAE specifically, the combination of high digital readiness and a highly diverse consumer base makes these conditioning factors especially consequential. The review is not exhaustive, but it is intended to provide a foundation, and a set of testable propositions, for the empirical doctoral research on UAE-based organisations that it accompanies.

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Data availability:-

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Use of AI:-

Generative AI tools were used to assist with literature search support, language editing, and structuring of this manuscript. All scholarly content, interpretation, and the final text are the responsibility of the author, who has verified the substance and citations of the work.

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