Digital Marketing Adoption and Small and Medium Enterprises' Performance in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Purpose: *Small and Medium Enterprises play a significant role in economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa, and several scholars have reported that adopting digital marketing technologies improves their performance. Despite the large body of literature on digital technologies, this review found no recent review addressing adoption impacts, challenges, and a structured cross-country comparison; it therefore addresses this gap.*

Methodology: *ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online were searched for peer-reviewed studies published between 2022 and 2026, available in full text in English, excluding theses, conference papers, book chapters, and editorials. The review employed qualitative content analysis to synthesise evidence from 67 studies across ten African countries: Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan/South Sudan and Zambia.*

Findings: *Sixty per cent (60%) of the countries reported social media platforms as the primary digital tools used; 70% reported competitiveness and operational efficiency as the major gains attributed to adoption; and 70% reported infrastructure, connectivity, cost, and financial constraints as the major barriers to adoption.*

Research limitations/implications: *The review relied on secondary data, which does not provide empirical insights; an empirical study using primary data is suggested to test the hypotheses posed by the research questions. Practitioners should expand beyond social media to include business websites, e-commerce, and analytics tools, while governments should improve infrastructure to enhance digital adoption.*
Originality/value: *The review provides a structured, cross-country synthesis of contemporary digital marketing adoption, its performance effects, and adoption challenges across ten African countries.*

Keywords: *Digital Marketing Adoption, SME Performance, Sub-Saharan Africa, Systematic Review*

1. Introduction

The role of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) and their importance in the world's economy cannot be overemphasised. SMEs are among the main drivers of global economies, accounting for about 90% of businesses worldwide and contributing about 40% of GDP in emerging economies (World Bank, 2019). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the numbers are higher; they account for about 95% of all registered businesses and contribute to 50% of GDP (World Bank, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2023). In addition, a closer look at countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, shows that SMEs contribute about 70% of industrial jobs (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024). These statistics point to one thing: SMEs require utmost attention to guarantee sustainable growth.

Despite SMEs' economic importance, unfortunately, SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa grossly underperform, as evidenced by studies from Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, where an alarming 60% to 90% of SMEs do not survive beyond the fifth year, and the majority of those that survive are faced with stagnation, which results in an inability to scale up (Bindeeba et al., 2026; Kyalo, 2024; Mpungose et al., 2024; Mushi, 2024; Otugo et al., 2025). The consequences of the majority of SMEs failing will be hard felt, as they are a major driver of economic growth of countries in emerging economies. Just to note, some of the factors that have contributed to these mass failures across the African continent include, but are not limited to, limited financing, weak managerial capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and unstable markets (Bindeeba et al., 2026). Based on the aforementioned, several approaches have been adopted across different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to curb the rising SME failure, and one approach that has proven to improve SMEs' performance is the adoption of digital marketing tools, which has proven to significantly improve SMEs' growth in emerging economies (Bruce et al., 2023). Furthermore, different countries have recorded varying degrees of success due to the digital marketing strategies or tools adopted; for instance, in Nigeria, e-commerce adoption by SMEs improved profit operating margins (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025). In another study in Kenya, digital marketing strategies such as SEO, Pay-per-Click, and email improved customer engagement (Kithandi & Kithandi, 2024). A broader investigation into some other Sub-Saharan African countries uncovered that significant gains were also recorded in South Africa, Tanzania, and Ghana, where SMEs reported significant improvements in business growth, customer acquisition, customer retention, and profits (Deku et al., 2024; Mbura et al., 2024; van Deventer & Makhubela, 2025). However, the adoption of digital marketing tools by SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa has not been smooth sailing, and this was highlighted by Bruce et al. (2023), where they identified five challenges SMEs face in Sub-Saharan Africa that hinder adoption, including limited resources, financial challenges, limited marketing strategies, inadequate capabilities, and limited market reach. This review was not satisfied with the conclusion that adoption challenges were the same across Sub-Saharan Africa, hence the need for a deeper

investigation. The investigation uncovered adoption challenges that are peculiar to different countries; for example, in Ethiopia, barriers to adoption include privacy and security risks, high internet costs, and low literacy in the use of computing technologies (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023). On the other hand, barriers to adoption in South Africa include, but are not limited to, consumer acceptance of digital marketing, restricted e-commerce utilisation, and low digital literacy (Madondo & Zizipho, 2024). In Zimbabwe, some peculiar factors were reported as challenges to adoption, which are not present in other countries, including legal issues and a lack of information (Chigombe et al., 2022).

As expected, the significant role that SMEs play in economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa has attracted so many scholars to research factors and drivers that influence their performance. This has given rise to a large body of empirical studies and systematic reviews on the subject. Despite the large body of literature and systematic evidence on digital technologies and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), a thorough search of several online databases found no recent systematic review that isolates digital marketing adoption and its performance outcomes across multiple Sub-Saharan African (SSA) economies, with a structured cross-country comparison. For example, the study by Achieng and Malatji (2022) reviewed 44 articles on the digital transformation of SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa, but the review was not detailed; it was a scoping review that focused more on broad concepts relating to the subject. In addition, the review was done before 2022, raising questions about its relevance in a fast-changing technological world. The review focused on broad digital transformation rather than digital marketing adoption specifically, and did not include a structured cross-country comparison.

Furthermore, the systematic review by Oukouomi Noutchie (2025) on digital platforms and SMEs' potential had similarities with this current review; it focused on digital technologies and covered Sub-Saharan Africa. However, it covered only 3 Sub-Saharan countries: South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, thereby leaving the wider region unexamined, and did not specifically address digital marketing adoption. On the other hand, two recent reviews that focused on digital marketing did not cover Sub-Saharan Africa. The review by Elkhoudary et al. (2026) reviewed 38 studies on digital marketing capabilities in emerging economies, but it covered a global context, while Indarwati et al. (2025) reviewed 127 studies on digital marketing strategies in emerging and developed economies worldwide. Both studies did not include a structured cross-country comparison.

In conclusion, the aforementioned reviews reveal a gap in the literature that highlights the lack of a current systematic review that focuses specifically on digital marketing adoption, linking adoption to SME performance, spans a broad set of SSA countries, with an explicit cross-country comparative analysis of the tools used, performance impacts, and adoption challenges. Therefore, the current review addresses this gap by systematically analysing evidence from 67 studies across ten Sub-Saharan African countries: Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan/South Sudan and Zambia, organised around the tools SMEs adopt, their performance effects, the challenges encountered, and how these patterns differ across national contexts.

1.1 Objectives of the Systematic Review

The overall objective is to systematically review SMEs' performance and contemporary digital marketing adoption and challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, the review aims to:

I. Identify the contemporary digital marketing tools and channels adopted by SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa.
II. Examine how the adoption of these tools influences SME performance.
III. Identify the challenges SMEs encounter in adopting digital marketing.

IV. Compare how adoption patterns, performance outcomes, and challenges vary across the ten countries studied.

1.2 Research Questions

I. Which contemporary digital marketing tools do SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa adopt?
II. How does the adoption of contemporary digital marketing affect the performance of SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa?
III. What challenges do SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa face in adopting contemporary digital marketing?
IV. How do these tools, performance outcomes, and challenges differ across Sub-Saharan African national contexts?

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 describes the methods. Sections 3 and 4 present the findings and the discussion, respectively. Section 5 presents the conclusions and implications, while Section 6 outlines the limitations and suggests directions for future studies.

2. Methodology

This systematic review was designed and reported using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The current review adopted PRISMA because of its evidence-based 27-item checklist and the methodology flow diagram that promote transparency, completeness, and replicability in how studies are identified, screened, and synthesised (Page et al., 2021).

2.1 Eligibility Criteria

Studies included in the review had to meet the following criteria: examined the adoption or use of digital marketing and digital marketing sub-variables, including e-commerce and social media, by small and medium-sized enterprises; linked adoption to SME performance; were conducted in a Sub-Saharan African country; were published between 2022 and 2026; were peer-reviewed empirical journal articles; and were available in full text and open access in English. The following were excluded from the review: theses, dissertations, conference papers, book chapters, editorials, grey literature, studies conducted outside the Sub-Saharan African context, and studies published before 2022. Because the evidence base for each was thin and South Sudan formed part of Sudan until 2011, studies from Sudan and South Sudan were analysed together as a single country unit (Sudan/South Sudan), giving ten country units in total. All the eligibility restrictions were based on methodological reasons. The review is restricted to articles published after 2022 due to rapid changes in the technological and market environments, which ensure relevance and reduce the risk of reviewing obsolete technologies (Okoli, 2015; Snyder, 2019). In addition, the exclusion of conference papers, book chapters, editorials, and grey literature serves as a quality control measure that ensures the studies have gone through independent peer review (Okoli, 2015; Tranfield et al., 2003). Finally, inclusion required full-text open access so that each study's methods and findings could be completely extracted and verified, which is in line with PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

2.2 Information Sources and Search Strategy

2.2.1 Information Sources

The listed databases were used as the source of information: ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL).

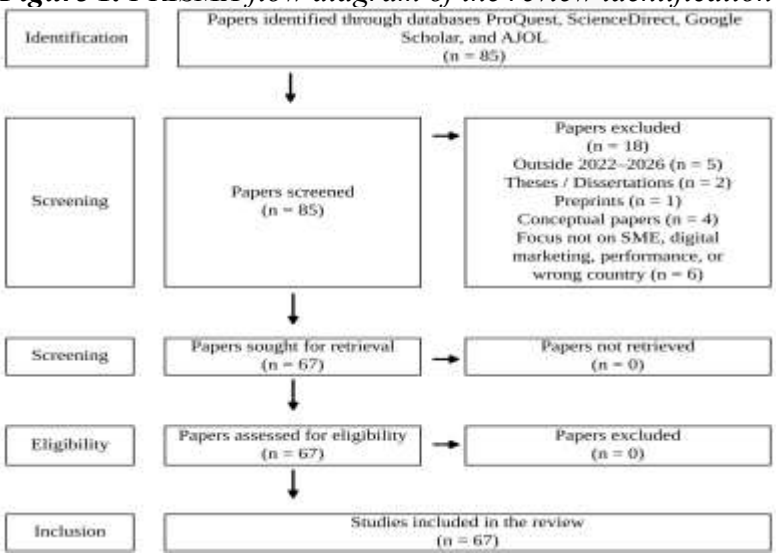
2.2.2 Search Strategy

The search strategy began by creating a list of keywords and phrases that cover the systematic review variables, concepts, and contexts, including: Digital Marketing, SME Performance, Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan, South Sudan, and Zambia. Thereafter, searches were conducted in ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). The database filters were set to English-language publications and excluded studies published before 2022. The search terms combined Boolean operators (OR with AND), wildcards, and phrase searching, for example: ("digital marketing" OR "social media marketing" OR "e-commerce" OR "e-marketing") AND ("SME" OR "SMEs" OR "small and medium enterprises" OR "MSME") AND ("performance" OR "growth" OR "competitiveness") AND (country names / "Sub-Saharan Africa"). The final search was conducted in March 2026, and all ten countries were included in the search; the outcome was 85 full-text articles that were later screened using the eligibility criteria.

2.3 Selection Process

The selection process involved 2 reviewers, who examined all 85 articles in stages. In the first stage, the reviewers read the titles and first page of the full-text articles. Through discussions guided by the eligibility criteria, they reached consensus to exclude the following papers: 5 papers were excluded because they predated 2022, 2 papers were excluded because they were theses and dissertations, and 1 paper was excluded because it was a preprint. Next, the reviewers read the abstracts of the 77 remaining full-text articles. Through discussions guided by the eligibility criteria, they reached a consensus to exclude the following papers: 4 papers were excluded because they were conceptual or review papers, 4 papers were excluded because they did not focus on SME or digital marketing adoption, and 2 papers were excluded because they are outside the Sub-Saharan African region. A total of 18 papers were excluded, and 67 were included in the review. The identification and selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *PRISMA flow diagram of the review identification and selection process*



Source: Authors' compilation (2026), adapted from Page et al. (2021)

2.4 Data Collection Process

The data collection process involved 2 reviewers, who initially collected the data independently, then reconciled their findings through discussions guided by the review's research questions, and produced a harmonised findings report. The reviewers employed a qualitative content analysis technique, in which a codebook was developed from the existing literature on 3 themes: Digital Marketing Impact, Digital Marketing Tools Adoption, and Challenges in Digital Adoption, aligning with the current review objectives. Then, for each country included in the review, the full-text articles were read, and once a theme was identified, it was recorded in the countries table, and its occurrences were counted.

2.5 Study Risk of Bias Assessment

The review assessed the risk of bias at 2 critical stages, and the first was to mitigate bias in the selected studies, which was addressed by creating transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria. The second risk was to mitigate researchers' bias in the analysis, which was addressed by developing a codebook that provides an operational definition for every single code before deep analysis begins. This prevents "cherry-picking" text to match a preferred outcome. Also, 2 reviewers independently coded a subset of the papers using the shared codebook, compared their coding, and resolved all discrepancies through discussion before coding the remaining papers. In addition, a formal critical-appraisal instrument (e.g., MMAT or CASP) was not applied; methodological quality was instead managed through the predefined eligibility criteria, the shared codebook, and dual independent coding.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings uncovered from the 67 studies included in the review across the 10 Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. The findings are organised around the review's four research questions: the contemporary digital marketing tools SMEs adopt (RQ1), the impact of these tools on SME performance (RQ2), the challenges encountered in adoption (RQ3), and cross-country differences in adoption patterns and outcomes (RQ4).

3.1 Research Question One: Contemporary Digital Marketing Tools Adopted by SSA SMEs

Four recurring categories of digital marketing tools used by SMEs were identified in the review, based on the technology or channel types SMEs use, which include social media platforms, mobile/messaging, web/e-commerce, and advanced/analytics tools. In the first category, six of the ten countries (60%) reported using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok to promote products and engage customers (Asamoah et al., 2022; Kyalo, 2024; Madondo & Zizipho, 2024; Mbura et al., 2024; Mugarura et al., 2024; Otugo et al., 2025; Sendawula et al., 2025). For the second category, also six of the ten countries (60%) reported using websites, e-commerce, email and search marketing, such as business websites, online marketplaces, e-procurement, and email and search-based marketing (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025; Bruce et al., 2023; Jama, 2024; Jama et al., 2024; Jeza & Lekhanya, 2022). For the third category, four of the ten countries (40%) reported using mobile and messaging tools, mobile money and broader digital finance, which are linked to high mobile penetration across the region (Bakashaba et al., 2024; Mafukidze & Chiutsi, 2025; Mushi, 2024; Mwongela & Sang, 2025). In the fourth and final category, three out of the ten countries (30%) reported the use of advanced, emerging and analytics tools, such as paid digital advertising, cloud services, artificial intelligence and data analytics tools, which were consistently described as being at the early stage of adoption (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024; Inwang et al., 2025; Karikari et al., 2025; Kinyua, 2025). Table 1 summarises the tool categories and their cross-country

distribution.

Table 1. *Contemporary digital marketing tools adopted by SSA SMEs (RQ1)*

Tool category	Countries (n/10)	%	Representative countries
Social media platforms	6/10	60%	Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda
Websites, e-commerce & email/search	6/10	60%	Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan/South Sudan, Uganda
Mobile & messaging / mobile money / digital finance	4/10	40%	Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe
Emerging & analytics tools	3/10	30%	Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria

Source: Authors' compilation from the reviewed studies (2026)

3.2 Research Question Two: Impact of Digital Marketing Tools on SME Performance

The review identified four recurring categories describing how digital marketing tools affect SME performance: competitiveness and operational efficiency; revenue and market growth; brand visibility and customer reach/engagement; and capability-mediated outcomes. For category one, seven of the ten countries (70%) reported that digital marketing tools improved competitiveness, operational efficiency, and decision making (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023; Awotunde et al., 2024; Khoza & Mkosana, 2025; Kikawa et al., 2022; Mwongela et al., 2025; Phiri & Silwimba, 2024). For the second category, six of the ten countries (60%) reported that digital marketing tools improved revenue, sales, market reach and market growth (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025; Bruce et al., 2023; Muraina & Samour, 2025; Mushi, 2024; Mwongela & Sang, 2025; Ng'wasa & Kipangula, 2025; Tembo et al., 2025). For the third category, six of the ten countries (60%) reported that digital marketing tools improved brand visibility, customer reach and engagement (Asamoah et al., 2022; Awotunde et al., 2024; Chigombe et al., 2022; Madondo & Zizipho, 2024; Mugarura et al., 2023b). For the fourth category, six of the ten countries (60%) reported that performance gains were found to be conditional, that is, capability-mediated by the SMEs' digital capability, skills, infrastructure, finance and strategic or organisational readiness (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024; Bindeeba et al., 2026; Chengula & Lyakurwa, 2025; Mpungose et al., 2024; Tsikirayi & Mupambireyi, 2023; Utonga et al., 2026). Table 2 summarises the performance themes.

Table 2. *Impact of digital marketing tools on SME performance (RQ2)*

Performance theme	Countries (n/10)	%	Representative countries
Competitiveness & operational efficiency	7/10	70%	Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia
Revenue, sales & market growth	6/10	60%	Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia
Brand visibility, customer reach & engagement	6/10	60%	Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe
Conditional / capability-mediated effects	6/10	60%	Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe

Source: Authors' compilation from the reviewed studies (2026)

3.3 Research Question Three: Challenges in Adopting Digital Technologies

The review identified four categories of digital adoption challenges faced by SMEs: Infrastructure, connectivity and cost; Financial constraints and resources; Trust, security, regulation and strategy; and Digital skills, literacy and awareness. Seven of the ten countries (70%) reported high data and device costs as major challenges that prevent SMEs from adopting digital technologies (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023; Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2025; Chengula & Lyakurwa, 2025; Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2024; Kikawa et al., 2022; Mataruka, 2024; Mpungose et al., 2025; Tsikirayi & Mupambireyi, 2023). The second category had a similar frequency to the first, and it also revealed that seven of the ten countries (70%) reported inadequate finance, limited marketing budgets and general resource scarcity, which restricted investment in digital tools and talent (Bakashaba et al., 2024; Bruce et al., 2023; Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2024; Kithandi & Kithandi, 2024; Mataruka et al., 2025; Mushi, 2024; Quaye et al., 2024). The next category revealed that six of the ten countries (60%) reported trust, regulatory, cybersecurity and privacy concerns, low consumer and firm trust, weak policy support, and organisational or strategic gaps, as challenges that prevent adoption (Anguyo & Adea, 2025; Ayii & Adea, 2025; Jama, 2024; Jama et al., 2024; Karikari et al., 2025; Kyalo, 2024; Madondo & Zizipho, 2024; Sendawula et al., 2025). The last category revealed that four of the ten countries (40%) reported limited digital skills, low ICT literacy and weak awareness as critical challenges that impede digital technologies adoption for SMEs (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024; Awotunde et al., 2024; Deku et al., 2024; Mpungose et al., 2024). Table 3 summarises the challenge themes.

Table 3. *Challenges in adopting digital technologies (RQ3)*

Challenge theme	Countries (n/10)	%	Representative countries
Infrastructure, connectivity & cost	7/10	70%	Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Financial constraints & resources	7/10	70%	Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Trust, security, regulation & strategy	6/10	60%	Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan/South Sudan, Uganda
Digital skills, literacy & awareness	4/10	40%	Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa

Source: Authors' compilation from the reviewed studies (2026)

3.4 Research Question Four: Cross-Country Differences in Adoption Patterns and Outcomes

The review identified, for each country, dominant tools, performance patterns, notable challenges, and the number of pieces of evidence reviewed. Table 4 presents the country-level comparison.

Table 4. *Cross-country comparison of adoption patterns and performance outcomes (RQ4)*

Country	Dominant tools	Performance pattern	Most notable challenge	No. of Articles
Nigeria	Social media, e-commerce, content/influencer	Positive: sales, competitiveness, engagement	Skills/awareness & infrastructure	9
South Africa	Social media, websites, e-commerce, f-commerce	Positive but capability-mediated	Digital capability, skills & strategy	9
Kenya	Social media, mobile, cloud/analytics	Positive: sales, brand & competitiveness	Skills, infrastructure & trust	8
Ghana	Social media, websites, and technology adoption	Positive: sales, brand, market access	Finance, skills & enabling support	8
Uganda	Social media, WhatsApp, e-commerce, digital finance	Positive: growth, efficiency & competitiveness	Connectivity, skills & finance	9
Tanzania	Mobile/WhatsApp, social media, YouTube/SMS	Positive: sales & reach; early DT stages	Infrastructure & finance	6
Sudan/ South Sudan	WhatsApp, social media, e-procurement	Positive; early/limited evidence	Conflict-affected infrastructure & finance	5
Ethiopia	Social media, websites/platforms	Positive, early-stage; capability-mediated	Infrastructure & literacy	5
Zimbabwe	Social media, mobile/mobile-money, e-business	Positive; emerging evidence	Infrastructure & economic volatility	5
Zambia	Social media, mobile, websites/e-commerce	Positive: sales & competitiveness	Cost/infrastructure & finance	3

Source: Authors' compilation from the reviewed studies (2026)

4. Discussion

The aim and objectives of this review are to understand how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are adopting contemporary digital marketing tools, how that adoption affects their performance, the challenges they face and how these patterns vary across national contexts. This section provides an interpretation of evidence obtained from the 67 included studies.

4.1 Contemporary Digital Marketing Tools Adopted by SSA SMEs

The studies reviewed revealed that the Sub-Saharan digital marketing landscape is broad in reach, but uneven in sophistication. Four categories of digital marketing tools were identified as recurring, ranging from universal to region-specific tools. This review posits that tool adoption is not random, but largely dependent on cost, accessibility and skills. This is why low-cost technologies are heavily adopted, and more advanced technologies are rarely

adopted.

4.1.1 Social Media Platforms

This review concludes that social media is the dominant tool adopted by SSA SMEs, as evidenced by the fact that six of the ten SSA countries included in the study show it is the most widely adopted tool by SMEs in those countries. Major platforms adopted are Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube and, increasingly, TikTok (Asamoah et al., 2022; Kyalo, 2024; Madondo & Zizipho, 2024; Mbura et al., 2024; Mugarura et al., 2024; Otugo et al., 2025; Sendawula et al., 2025). They are commonly used to advertise products, build communities and transact with customers, but usage differs from country to country, for example, in Nigeria, they are used by fashion SMEs, and some SMEs see it as an entry point to entrepreneurship (Etoma et al., 2026; Otugo et al., 2025; Sadamoro & Sadamoro, 2025). In Kenya, it is mostly adopted by youth-owned businesses, and social media engagement has had positive impacts on SMEs' performance (Kyalo, 2024; Muchori & Reid, 2025a). Furthermore, Ghanaian SMEs used it for advertising, SMEs in rural South Africa adopt social media as well, Ugandan SMEs claim social media adoption aids sustainable performance, and reports from Tanzania show adoption in the tourism sector (Asamoah et al., 2022; Madondo & Zizipho, 2024; Mbura et al., 2024; Sendawula et al., 2025).

4.1.2 Web-Based Technology: Websites, E-Commerce, Email and Search

This study uncovered another group of tools, which is a collection of web-based technology tools that include business websites, e-commerce and online marketplaces, e-procurement, and email and search marketing tools. This group of tools is widely adopted by SMEs but not as universal as social media. The review reveals that statistically, they are used in six of the ten countries included in the study. Adoption also differs from country to country and sector to sector. For instance, in Nigeria, Lagos fashion retailers use e-commerce platforms (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025), and reports from South Africa state that digital transformation supports SME growth (Jeza & Lekhanya, 2022). In addition, digital marketing channels, including websites, contribute to sustainable growth in Ghana (Bruce et al., 2023). Finally, e-commerce platforms are also widely adopted in Uganda (Arinaitwe, 2025). This review concludes that despite the positive impact of these channels, their widespread adoption is impeded because they require more money, technical skills, and infrastructure than social media.

4.1.3 Mobile Phone Technologies: Messaging, Mobile Money and Digital Finance

The review identified a unique category of digital marketing tools adopted by SSA SMEs that are driven by mobile phone penetration, and four countries in the review reveal a high rate of adoption of these tools. The tools mostly used are WhatsApp Business, SMS and MMS, mobile money and digital finance tools, and good examples are studies from Kenya and Tanzania reported that mobile technologies are the primary tools adopted by SMEs (Mushi, 2024; Mwongela & Sang, 2025). In another set of studies from Zimbabwe, researchers reported that mobile technologies, such as mobile money tools, strengthen SMEs' competitive advantage (Mafukidze & Chiutsi, 2025). Findings from Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe were corroborated by studies from Uganda, which reported the positive link between WhatsApp integration and improved SME performance (Mugarura et al., 2023a). This review opines that the dominant adoption of mobile tools by SMEs in these regions is largely hinged on the widespread penetration of low-cost mobile phones.

4.1.4 Emerging and Analytics Tools

This current review identified the fourth category of digital marketing tools adopted by SSA SMEs; these tools are characterised as emergent and advanced analytics technologies, usually at an early stage of adoption in the three countries, including Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana, where they were reported. Some of the reported emerging and analytics tools include content and influencer marketing, paid digital advertising, cloud services, artificial intelligence and data analytics (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024; Inwang et al., 2025; Karikari et al., 2025; Kinyua, 2025). For example, the use of advertising, analytics and social media was reported in Nigeria and Kenya (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024; Inwang et al., 2025; Kinyua, 2025). In addition, studies from Ghana show that some of the emerging digital technologies are being adopted for sustainable and sophisticated practices (Jibril & Amoah, 2026; Karikari et al., 2025).

4.2 Impact of Digital Marketing Tools on SME Performance

This review thoroughly investigated the effects of digital marketing tools adopted and their impact on SMEs' performance, and four recurring themes were observed. However, three of the themes described actual performance gains, while the fourth theme cautions that those gains might be dependent on other factors. This review argues that the fourth theme might be the most significant because it explains why the same tools are effective for some firms but are less effective for others.

4.2.1 Competitiveness and Operational Efficiency

Competitiveness is synonymous with competitive advantage, and, within the context of this study, it is the ability of an SME to deliver and sustain superior performance by using digital marketing tools in ways rival firms cannot imitate (Mafukidze & Chiutsi, 2025). On the other hand, operational efficiency is the ability of an SME to use digital marketing tools optimally to achieve desired outcomes, thereby minimising waste and maximising productivity without compromising quality (Lee & Johnson, 2013, as cited in Bindeeba et al., 2025). Seven of the ten SSA countries reviewed reported competitiveness and operational efficiency as key business outcomes attributed to the adoption of digital marketing. The following studies from different countries corroborated the claim that technology adoption, especially digital marketing tools, positively influences competitiveness and operational efficiency, as evidenced in Nigeria (Awotunde et al., 2024), Ethiopia (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023; Bekata & Kero, 2024), Uganda (Kikawa et al., 2022), Zambia (Phiri & Silwimba, 2024), Kenya (Kinyua, 2025; Mwongela et al., 2025) and South Africa (Khoza & Mkosana, 2025). This review concludes that the mere adoption of digital technologies reshapes the competitive capability of an SME, even in the face of modest returns on business growth.

4.2.2 Revenue, Profit and Sales

An SME's sales performance is usually measured by some of the following indicators, such as sales volume, revenue and other growth metrics (Otugo et al., 2025). Profitability, on the other hand, refers to the SME's ability to generate income that exceeds its expenses on a sustainable basis (Bwambale, 2026). The majority of the SSA countries reported measurable gains in revenue, profit, or sales driven by digital marketing. Retailers in Nigeria noted that shifting to e-commerce drove up their operating profitability (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025). Kenyan SMEs similarly saw their sales performance climb alongside digital adoption (Mwongela & Sang, 2025). Interestingly, the impact in Ghana shifted toward business sustainability rather than raw sales and profits (Bruce et al., 2023). This positive trend in sales and business growth reappears across Tanzania (Luhatanisa et al., 2023; Mushi, 2024; Ng'wasa & Kipangula, 2025), Uganda (Arinaitwe, 2025), and Zambia (Tembo et al., 2025). Given these widespread findings, digital tools are clearly a vital necessity for the survival of

SSA SMEs.

4.2.3 Brand Visibility, Customer Reach and Engagement

Brand awareness and brand visibility are often used interchangeably, but some schools of thought argue that they are distinct concepts. However, this review simply adopts the explanation that brand visibility is how often potential customers of an SME see the brand, which, in turn, influences brand recall through the frequency of exposure, and it is a good measure of customer reach, whereas customer engagement is the emotional, cognitive and behavioural involvement between an SME and its customers (Kithandi & Kithandi, 2024; Muraina & Samour, 2025). SMEs in Nigeria reported that digital channels helped in widening reach, increasing brand awareness, and deepening customer relationships (Anukwe et al., 2025; Awotunde et al., 2024). Unsurprisingly, similar accounts were observed in five other SSA countries reported by different studies: South Africa (Madondo & Zizipho, 2024), Kenya (Muchori & Reid, 2025a, 2025b), Ghana (Asamoah et al., 2022), Zimbabwe (Chigombe et al., 2022) and Uganda (Mugarura et al., 2023b). This review argues that there is a direct link between SMEs' brand visibility, which translates to engagement, which translates to sales, based on the findings of the reviewed studies.

4.2.4 Conditional and Capability-Mediated Effects: Organisational Readiness, Digital Capability, Infrastructure and Skills

Organisational readiness is the extent to which an SME is prepared to adopt and implement new innovations, has the available funds, skilled human capital, and possesses the right infrastructure, whereas digital capability refers to an SME's ability to use a wide range of technology-based tools to drive processes and develop new products (Fegada & Veres, 2024; Utonga et al., 2026). On the other hand, digital marketing capabilities are a group of marketing capabilities that SMEs require to use digital channels for marketing functions (Chinakidzwa & Phiri, 2020).

This review uncovered that these capabilities, coupled with specific skills and infrastructure, are mediating drivers of performance gains associated with the adoption of digital marketing tools. Notable findings include the report that SMEs in rural South Africa realise adoption gains only when appropriate strategies are employed (Mpungose et al., 2024). In addition, Kenyan digital marketing gains depend on the implementation approach (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024). Meanwhile, Tanzanian, Ugandan, Ghanaian and Zimbabwean studies tie performance gains to SMEs' readiness and resources (Bakashaba et al., 2024; Bindeeba et al., 2026; Chengula & Lyakurwa, 2025; Glover, 2026; Tsikirayi & Mupambireyi, 2023; Utonga et al., 2026). This review confidently concludes that performance gains associated with the adoption of digital marketing tools are heavily mediated by SMEs' capabilities, infrastructures and skills.

4.3 Challenges in Adopting Digital Technologies

The challenges SSA SMEs face provide a good explanation for why some countries' performance gains are mediated by specific capabilities. This review uncovered several challenges that constrain digital marketing adoption in Sub-Saharan Africa, but grouped them in layers: structural constraints that increase the cost of adoption, resource constraints that prevent investment, and human and governance constraints that impede the quality of use.

4.3.1 Infrastructure, Connectivity and Cost

SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa face serious infrastructure challenges, where key infrastructures are poorly provided, such as the unreliable internet, unstable electricity, and high data and device costs, and these barriers cut across the majority of the SSA countries, and studies from

Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, and Ghana reported similar infrastructure challenges (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023; Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2025; Chengula & Lyakurwa, 2025; Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2024; Kikawa et al., 2022; Mataruka, 2024; Mpungose et al., 2025; Tsikirayi & Mupambireyi, 2023). Peculiar challenges have been reported from different SSA countries, for example, in Ethiopia, major challenges are weak government infrastructure, unreliable electricity and limited e-payment access (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023). Whereas in Tanzania, the major infrastructure challenge is unreliable power (Chengula & Lyakurwa, 2025). The situation in Zimbabwe was reported as an outright lack of digital infrastructure, although this claim is contestable (Chigombe et al., 2022). These structural challenges are also among the key mediating factors identified as capable of enhancing performance gains. This review concludes that SSA SMEs cannot fully adopt digital marketing tools if these challenges persist.

4.3.2 Financial Constraints and Resources

Whereas the first category of challenges discussed is external, this category is internal and limits SSA SMEs' capacity to adopt digital marketing tools. The challenges uncovered include, but are not limited to, inadequate finance, limited marketing budgets, and general resource scarcity, which have been reported in Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Uganda (Bakashaba et al., 2024; Bruce et al., 2023; Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2024; Kithandi & Kithandi, 2024; Mataruka et al., 2025; Mushi, 2024; Quaye et al., 2024). Further investigation was done into specific challenges associated with different countries, for example, SMEs in Zimbabwe cited financial constraints as key challenges limiting adoption, and recommended access to loans, grants, and government funding to improve infrastructure and training (Mataruka et al., 2025). Studies in Ghana also corroborated this claim, where the lack of finance and low absorptive capability were reported as major barriers to digital marketing adoption. On the other hand, a study in South Africa reported market access as a key factor alongside financial constraints (Mpungose et al., 2025).

4.3.3 Trust, Security, Regulation and Strategy

This category of challenges is quite distinctive because they are most visible in the more digitally mature markets, where basic access is not the primary challenge. The key challenges in this category are trust, security, regulation, and strategy, which were reported in South Africa, where low consumer trust in social media purchases has led some SMEs to abandon platforms such as Facebook (Botha & Wiese, 2025). In Nigeria, another digitally mature market, strategic approaches were highlighted as adoption limitations due to SMEs' decisions not to align them with business objectives, despite a high level of awareness of digital marketing tools (Awotunde et al., 2024; Ezurike, 2023). In Kenya, effectiveness depends on maintaining an active, trusted advertising presence (Kyalo, 2024). This study concludes that trust and security issues will continue to increase as adoption increases, hence the need for better regulation for digitally mature markets to improve the SME ecosystem.

4.3.4 Digital Skills, Literacy and Awareness

In Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and rural South Africa, limited digital marketing skills, low ICT and computing literacy, and weak awareness among SSA SMEs have been reported to hinder the adoption of digital marketing tools, and these have been well documented by studies in Nigeria (Awotunde et al., 2024; Ezurike, 2023), rural South Africa (Mkansi & Nsakanda, 2025; Mpungose et al., 2024), Kenya (Alhshan & Aliyu, 2024; Kinyua, 2025) and Ghana (Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2025; Deku et al., 2024). This category of challenges is less frequently mentioned in studies reviewed when compared to infrastructure and finance; however, it does reveal an important concern: if the infrastructures and access to finance of countries where

these factors were dominant are to be improved, the practitioners in those countries will still lack the capacity to harness those opportunities due to low digital skills and literacy.

4.4 Cross-Country Differences in Adoption and Performance

Comparing the adoption and performance of the ten SSA countries, this review observed a pattern that groups the countries based on tool mix, level of adoption maturity and common constraints. These groups are categorised as stages in adoption, which implies that a country can move from one stage to another. The stages are mature digital marketers, mobile-first adopters, and early-stage and fragile contexts.

4.4.1 Mature Digital Marketers (Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana)

The mature digital marketers consist of four SSA countries, which are Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana. They share common characteristics, such as having the largest evidence base for digital marketing usage, having the most diverse use of tool mixes, and reporting the strongest evidence of sales performance attributed to the adoption of digital marketing tools (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025; Bruce et al., 2023; Khoza & Mkosana, 2025; Mwongela et al., 2025; Otugo et al., 2025). In addition, their challenges have shifted from basic access to advanced digital literacy, trust and strategic management (Awotunde et al., 2024; Botha & Wiese, 2025; Deku et al., 2024; Quaye et al., 2024; Ramsern & Govender, 2023). This review considers these Sub-Saharan countries as the regional frontiers and pacesetters, where policy formulation has moved beyond getting online, but is more focused on strategic usage and improved security.

4.4.2 Mobile-First Adopters (Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe)

The mobile-first adopters are Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe; these countries' adoption is largely driven by mobile phone penetration, with a high dependence on tools like WhatsApp, SMS, MMS, mobile and digital finance tools, which have proven effective in improving SME performance; however, they are all constrained by infrastructure and finance limitations (Bakashaba et al., 2024; Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2024; Mafukidze & Chiutsi, 2025; Mataruka et al., 2025; Mugarura et al., 2023a; Mushi, 2024; Tembo et al., 2025). This review concludes that this group can participate in the digital economy even with persistent infrastructure challenges, but to fully harness the potential of digital marketing tools, these countries must invest heavily in improving infrastructure.

4.4.3 Early-Stage and Fragile Contexts (Ethiopia and Sudan/South Sudan)

Ethiopia and Sudan/South Sudan are categorised as early-stage and fragile contexts due to common peculiarities, including positive evidence of digital marketing adoption, but the corpus from this region is thin, and infrastructural constraints have severely impeded adoption (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023; Anguyo & Adea, 2025; Berhanu & Raj, 2024; Tekle & Yang, 2025; Tilahun et al., 2023). In addition, conflict in South Sudan has severely damaged infrastructure (Ayii & Adea, 2025; Jama et al., 2024). This review concludes that for SMEs to thrive in these regions, the conflicts must end, and the government must create opportunities for long-term investment to catch up with other SSA countries.

5. Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Conclusion

Seeking answers to the four review questions has provided valuable insights. In summary, SMEs in Sub-Saharan countries adopt low-cost digital marketing tools that are accessible, mainly social media and mobile channels, and these tools have improved SMEs' competitiveness, sales and customer engagement. However, SMEs' ability to adopt a mix of

digital marketing tools and the performance gains from their adoption are clearly influenced by key mediators, such as capability, finance, infrastructure, and governance. Furthermore, the mediators influence nations differently based on their digital maturity.

5.2 Implications for Practice

SME owners and marketing practitioners who rely solely on social media should expand their mix of digital marketing tools to include business websites, e-commerce and analytics tools, which have proven to improve sales performance in mature markets (Aina & Wepukhulu, 2025; Otugo et al., 2025). In addition, because performance is influenced by capability, SSA SMEs must invest in training and development to improve the digital skills of employees. Furthermore, SSA SMEs that have not embraced digital adoption should consider starting with low-cost tools, such as WhatsApp and other messaging tools, as they match how customers already engage and have proven to improve sales and customer engagement (Mugarura et al., 2023a; Mushi, 2024). Finally, because trust is a key component in sales conversion, SSA SMEs should implement systems to manage privacy, security, and responsiveness to build consumer confidence (Botha & Wiese, 2025; Sendawula et al., 2025).

5.3 Implications for Policy

Governments, regulators and SME-support organisations in countries categorised as early-stage and fragile contexts (Ethiopia and Sudan/South Sudan) and mobile-first economies (Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe) should prioritise improving electricity, internet reliability, lowering data and device costs, and improving e-payment infrastructure (Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023; Chengula & Lyakurwa, 2025; Tsikirayi & Mupambireyi, 2023). On the other hand, governments, regulators and SME-support organisations in countries categorised as mature markets (Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana) should focus on data-protection and cybersecurity frameworks that build consumer confidence because barriers in those countries have shifted from access toward trust and strategy (Botha & Wiese, 2025; Quaye et al., 2024; Sendawula et al., 2025).

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This review, while comprehensive, is not without limitations. The limitations cover evidence included in the review and the processes employed for the systematic literature review. These limitations provided the foundation for the recommendation of future studies. Most of the studies included in the review are cross-sectional, survey-based designs that rely on the reports of individuals. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs that track the same SMEs over time so that the direction and durability of effects can be established.

In addition, the current review included only studies published in the English language due to the reviewers' inability to review studies in other languages, thereby excluding studies published in French, Arabic, and Portuguese, although evidence suggests that English-language restriction does not generally introduce systematic bias into review findings (Morrison et al., 2012). In addition, the review included only open-access studies due to the reviewers' limited funds. In light of this, future reviews should include studies published in other languages and also source high-quality studies from other databases, which will ensure that the review is comprehensive and does not underrepresent any region.

Furthermore, the review adopted qualitative content analysis to investigate secondary data, which does not provide empirical insights. Following the aforementioned, the review suggests that an empirical study be conducted where primary data is collected to test the hypothesis of the research questions raised. This will help strengthen the claims and findings of this review. Finally, the review relied on the findings reported by the original authors, and the primary data used by those authors were not validated, so any analytical errors in the

source study are inherited; this review suggests that future studies could seek individual-participant datasets to mitigate this.

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