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Proposing a Digital Social Media Marketing Framework to Foster Strategic Intelligence in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to propose a digital social media marketing framework aimed at enhancing strategic intelligence within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Given its objectives, this research is classified as applied-developmental. Adopting a qualitative approach and employing thematic analysis techniques, the study endeavors to formulate the proposed model. The qualitative participant population comprises both theoretical experts (academics specializing in management and marketing) and practical experts (industry professionals). A concurrent purposive and snowball sampling strategy was utilized. The qualitative sample size was determined by the attainment of theoretical saturation—interviews with experts from the dairy industry continued until no new thematic insights emerged. Theoretical saturation was achieved after conducting semi-structured interviews with 16 experts. Data collection in the qualitative phase was carried out through semi-structured interviews. To ensure the reliability of the qualitative findings and confirm theoretical saturation, the study employed both an inter-rater agreement correlation matrix and a dual-coder chart. Model development and identification of main and sub-themes were facilitated using MAXQDA 2020 software. The findings reveal six main themes constituting the digital social media marketing framework for advancing strategic intelligence in SMEs: (1) digital strategic awareness, (2) social media marketing capabilities, (3) strategic learning and adaptability, (4) digital organizational resources and capabilities, (5) digital barriers and challenges in SMEs, and (6) strategic integration between social media marketing and strategic intelligence.

KEYWORDS: digital social media marketing, strategic intelligence, small and medium-sized enterprises

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1. Introduction

Over time, new digital technologies and trends have begun to fundamentally reshape traditional business practices. Organizations that fail to acknowledge and adapt to the transformative impact of digital technologies on commerce may struggle to sustain their operations. A notable example is Nokia, once a trusted and dominant mobile phone manufacturer in the 1990s, which lost its competitive edge precisely because it failed to adapt to emerging technological shifts and is no longer considered a key player in the smartphone industry. Similarly, traditional retailers today face significant challenges as a growing number of younger-generation consumers increasingly turn to online shopping (Krbová & Pavelek, 2023).

The evolution of digital social media reflects a deep-seated human need for interpersonal interaction. Social networking platforms have effectively recreated social activities within virtual online spaces. Features such as instant messaging, real-time information sharing, and online social interaction have significantly facilitated communication among users. Consequently, businesses increasingly incorporate social media as a core component of their digital marketing strategies. Social media marketing is defined as commercial marketing activities or processes that leverage social media platforms to positively influence consumer purchasing behavior (Dann, 2010). In response to the rapid proliferation of virtual community websites, many companies have already begun exploring how to utilize these platforms to build closer, friendlier relationships with users and foster virtual brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Chen et al., 2014; Chen & Lin, 2019).

In today's market, where consumers wield considerable power and possess heightened awareness of products, markets, and diverse distribution channels, establishing effective and sustainable customer relationships has become one of the most critical factors for organizational longevity, competitiveness, and profitability. Thus, there is a pressing need for organizations to develop strategic approaches to manage customer relationships, along with precise planning mechanisms to monitor, measure, and manage these interactions. Customer relationship management (CRM) is an organizational strategy that lays the groundwork for fostering customer engagement and collaborative relationships (Gill et al., 2007).

Digital social media marketing has garnered substantial attention due to its exceptional effectiveness: advertising on social media platforms yields approximately 55% higher engagement rates compared to conventional advertising methods. Moreover, a 2013 industry report indicated that social media influences around 90% of purchasing decisions (Seo & Park, 2018).

Concurrently, organizations seeking to create greater value must acquire and utilize relevant knowledge and insights. Strategic intelligence—a key methodology for gathering, analyzing, and interpreting internal and external environmental data to enhance organizational capital—offers a

viable pathway to achieve this objective (Fournié, 2023). Strategic intelligence is defined as the systematic collection, processing, and dissemination of environmental data that informs strategic decision-making within and beyond the organization. It encompasses a broad scope, including economic and political financial regulations, human resource dynamics, and the analysis of sociopolitical and economic behaviors within organizations. It is typically assessed through constructs such as strategic foresight, social and human capital, and the capacity to interpret economic and political contexts. In a broader conceptualization, strategic intelligence is closely linked to organizational intelligence, strategic resource management, and strategic leadership (Ez-zyn et al., 2023).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent one of the most dynamic and vital business segments globally. Many developed and industrialized economies recognize SMEs as pivotal drivers of economic growth across various sectors. Therefore, identifying the factors that enhance strategic intelligence can serve as a strategic compass for SMEs aiming to achieve sustainable performance, resilience, and long-term development. In light of this, the central research question arises: **What is the framework of digital social media marketing for fostering strategic intelligence in small and medium-sized enterprises?**

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

Digital Social Media Marketing

Digital social media marketing can be defined as a strategic process whereby organizations leverage interactive digital platforms—such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube—to create, publish, manage, and analyze content that generates value for both the brand and its target audience through two-way engagement. This concept extends beyond merely posting content or running targeted advertisements. It encompasses three core elements: (1) **co-creation of customer value**, in which customers are treated as active partners in the marketing process; (2) **interaction dynamics**, which require rapid responsiveness, empathy, and adaptability in communication with audiences; and (3) **data-driven decision-making**, which shifts strategic choices from intuition-based to evidence-based and analytically grounded approaches. Within this framework, every like, comment, share, or direct message is not merely an interaction metric but a behavioral data point that can inform strategic decision-making systems (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Strategic Intelligence

Strategic intelligence is conceptualized as a systematic, continuous, and cyclical process through which organizations collect, filter, analyze, and interpret knowledge about their internal and external environments to shape strategic decisions based on realistic insights and forward-looking foresight. This concept comprises four fundamental components:

- (1) understanding competitors' moves, strengths, weaknesses, and strategies;
- (2) tracking consumer trends, demand fluctuations, and unarticulated needs;
- (3) monitoring technological innovations capable of disrupting business models; and
- (4) observing macro-environmental factors—including economic, political, social, environmental, and legal dimensions.

The key distinction between strategic intelligence and traditional information management lies in its capacity to transform raw data into actionable knowledge that directly informs strategic decisions. In volatile and uncertain environments, strategic intelligence functions as an early-warning sensor, enabling organizations to respond flexibly to emerging crises (Agustin et al., 2022).

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are defined as economic entities that meet specific thresholds—established by international bodies such as the OECD or the European Union—in terms of employee count, annual turnover, and sometimes fixed assets. Generally, SMEs employ fewer than 250 people, generate annual revenues below €50 million, and operate with limited financial resources. These firms typically feature simple organizational structures, centralized decision-making (often controlled by owners or small management teams), and constrained access to financial, human, and technological resources. Despite these limitations, SMEs serve as economic cornerstones in many countries, playing a vital role in job creation, fostering innovation, and strengthening local supply chains. Their inherent vulnerability to environmental shocks—stemming from structural constraints—heightens the urgency of developing dynamic capabilities such as strategic intelligence and digital marketing (Cameron et al., 2023).

Empirical Insights from Recent Literature

Rosário and Dias (2023), in their study on "Marketing Strategies on Social Media Platforms," argue that business dynamism in the digital economy necessitates the development of new business models to achieve strategic marketing superiority. They confirm that nearly half of the global

population is active on social networks. Social media, as a flexible communication medium, enables organizations to gain market insights, enhance business intelligence, and implement integrated marketing strategies—including brand engagement, customer interaction, communication planning, and performance monitoring. In essence, social media marketing constitutes a strategic approach to connecting with brands, products, services, and ideas.

Li et al. (2021), in their comprehensive study titled “Social Media Marketing Strategy: Definition, Conceptualization, Taxonomy, Validation, and Future Agenda,” note that although social media has become an increasingly integral component of corporate strategy portfolios, systematic academic efforts to synthesize and expand knowledge on social media marketing strategy (SMMS) remain limited.

Khanom (2023), in a study entitled “Using Social Media Marketing in the Digital Era: A Necessity or a Choice,” emphasizes that the current era is defined by digital immersion. Individuals now habitually integrate their lives with social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Consequently, producers and service providers heavily rely on these channels to deliver their offerings to customers. The study’s key findings highlight the need for interventions that promote responsible usage and mitigate potential negative effects. Moreover, regarding the central question of whether social media marketing is a necessity or a choice, the author contends that productive and purposeful utilization should be the primary priority—whether on social media or other digital platforms.

Dimitrios et al. (2023), in their research on “Digital Marketing: The Case of Digital Marketing Strategies in Luxurious Hotels,” observe that while digital marketing has been at the center of many scholarly inquiries, the current state of digital marketing strategies—particularly in the luxury hotel sector—requires further clarification. The study notes that the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the tourism industry and significantly altered hotels’ digital marketing approaches. Findings indicate that social media plays a pivotal role in luxury hotel marketing. Customer reviews on these platforms can profoundly influence a hotel’s reputation—either elevating or damaging it. Therefore, practitioners must pay close attention to guest-generated content on social media. The study employed a literature review methodology.

Behera et al. (2019), in a recent Indian study, proposed an intelligent digital marketing model designed to provide e-commerce firms with a customized digital platform. This model begins by encoding a company’s internal business rules and industry-specific regulations. It then integrates these rules with the organization’s marketing information system and enterprise information system. Digital branding strategies—both strategic and operational—are delivered to customers through four primary tools: corporate websites, mobile applications, digital media, and social networks. Customer feedback is systematically collected and channeled back into the marketing

information database and the organization's ICT infrastructure, enabling continuous improvement and real-time responsiveness.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts an exploratory design and relies on qualitative data. Its primary objective is to develop a framework for **digital social media marketing aimed at fostering strategic intelligence in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)** in Tehran Province.

The qualitative participant pool comprises two categories of experts:

- **Theoretical experts:** academic faculty members specializing in management and marketing, holding PhD degrees, with a minimum of 10 years of teaching and research experience in marketing-related fields.
- **Practical experts:** professionals with at least 10 years of relevant industry experience and a postgraduate academic degree (master's or higher).

A concurrent **purposive and snowball sampling** strategy was employed to recruit participants. The sample size was determined by the principle of **theoretical saturation**—that is, data collection continued until no new thematic insights emerged from interviews with experts in the dairy industry. Theoretical saturation was achieved after conducting **16 semi-structured interviews** with selected experts and key informants.

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data and construct a conceptual model of “digital social media marketing for strategic intelligence development in SMEs,” followed by preliminary validation of the model.

To ensure **construct validity**, participant validation (member checking) was performed. Additionally, the research team actively sought **negative cases** and considered **alternative interpretations** to enhance analytical rigor. Efforts were also made to include participants with diverse professional backgrounds, perspectives, and attitudes toward the topic to minimize researcher or participant bias.

Given the qualitative, non-probabilistic nature of the sample—in which participants are not statistically representative of the broader population—**external validity (generalizability)** cannot be claimed. However, **internal validity** was strengthened by comparing the emergent experiential model with the preliminary theoretical framework derived from the literature.

To assess **reliability** and confirm theoretical saturation, two techniques were employed: (1) an **inter-rater agreement matrix** analyzing consensus across interviewees, and (2) a **dual-coder**

chart to evaluate coding consistency between researchers. All qualitative data analysis was conducted using **MAXQDA 2020** software.

4. Findings

This section presents the analysis of collected data and the key findings of the study. Data were gathered through **semi-structured interviews**, and analysis was performed using **MAXQDA 2020**. A total of **16 interview transcripts** were analyzed through a three-stage coding process: **open coding**, **sub-thematic coding**, and **main thematic coding**, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The coding procedure unfolded as follows:

1. **Open coding**: Interview transcripts were systematically reviewed and initially coded by the researcher. In this study, 16 interview files were transcribed, reviewed, and open-coded.
2. **Sub-themes**: During this stage, segments of text (e.g., sentences or paragraphs) were assigned descriptive codes. Multiple codes could be applied to a single textual segment if warranted by the content.
3. **Main themes**: The resulting codes were organized, grouped, and refined within MAXQDA's code system. This final stage—often referred to as **selective coding**—involved categorizing and integrating codes into higher-order themes to construct a coherent conceptual framework (Figure 1).

The qualitative findings reveal six **main themes** that constitute the proposed framework of digital social media marketing for strategic intelligence development in SMEs:

1. **Digital strategic awareness**
2. **Social media marketing capabilities**
3. **Strategic learning and adaptability**
4. **Digital organizational resources and capabilities**
5. **Digital barriers and challenges in SMEs**
6. **Strategic integration between social media marketing and strategic intelligence**

Collectively, these themes form an interconnected thematic network that illustrates how digital social media marketing practices can be systematically leveraged to enhance strategic intelligence within SMEs. This integrated model is visually represented in **Figure 1**.



Figure 1. Thematic Network of the Digital Social Media Marketing Model for Strategic Intelligence Development

One of the key indicators of reliability in qualitative research is the degree of agreement between two or more coders (or data sources) regarding the application of a specific code or theme. MAXQDA 2020 supports this functionality through intercoder agreement analysis. Reliability coefficients can be calculated using one or multiple statistical tests, and these tests may be applied either at a single point in time or across multiple time points (Mohammadbeygi et al., 2014).

In the present study, the level of agreement among interviewees regarding each main theme was assessed and is presented in **Table 1**. An intercoder agreement threshold of **above 60%** was considered acceptable. Specifically, the diagonal cells of the matrix—representing the intersection of each interviewee with themselves—are, by definition, equal to 1 (or 100%). The off-diagonal cells indicate the degree of thematic overlap between different interviewees. For instance, the agreement level between Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 on a given main theme is **0.71 (71%)**, meaning that these two participants share 71% conceptual alignment regarding that theme. A similar interpretation applies to all other pairwise comparisons in the matrix.

Given that the **average inter-interviewee agreement exceeds 60%** across all main themes, it can be concluded that **theoretical saturation** has been achieved, and the thematic structure of the model demonstrates sufficient consistency and reliability.

Table 1. Intercooder Agreement Matrix for Main Themes

	Res01	Res02	Res03	Res04	Res05	Res06	Res07	Res08	Res09	Res10	Res11	Res12	Res13	Res14	Res15	Res16
Res01	1.00	0.61	0.67	0.64	0.65	0.65	0.67	0.69	0.64	0.72	0.63	0.65	0.59	0.60	0.63	0.65
Res02	0.61	1.00	0.64	0.67	0.65	0.65	0.64	0.72	0.67	0.69	0.68	0.65	0.72	0.71	0.68	0.65
Res03	0.67	0.64	1.00	0.69	0.60	0.68	0.74	0.67	0.64	0.67	0.68	0.68	0.62	0.60	0.65	0.65
Res04	0.64	0.67	0.69	1.00	0.62	0.68	0.85	0.72	0.95	0.62	0.63	0.65	0.69	0.83	0.60	0.71
Res05	0.65	0.65	0.60	0.62	1.00	0.85	0.65	0.65	0.67	0.71	0.64	0.67	0.65	0.64	0.69	0.62
Res06	0.65	0.65	0.68	0.68	0.85	1.00	0.62	0.78	0.63	0.73	0.64	0.69	0.65	0.69	0.69	0.69
Res07	0.67	0.64	0.74	0.85	0.65	0.62	1.00	0.62	0.90	0.64	0.68	0.63	0.67	0.73	0.63	0.68
Res08	0.59	0.72	0.67	0.72	0.65	0.78	0.62	1.00	0.69	0.69	0.81	0.68	0.85	0.88	0.81	0.83
Res09	0.64	0.67	0.64	0.95	0.67	0.63	0.90	0.69	1.00	0.64	0.63	0.60	0.67	0.81	0.63	0.71
Res10	0.72	0.69	0.67	0.62	0.71	0.73	0.64	0.69	0.64	1.00	0.71	0.71	0.72	0.71	0.78	0.73
Res11	0.63	0.68	0.68	0.63	0.64	0.64	0.68	0.81	0.63	0.71	1.00	0.82	0.94	0.79	0.92	0.85
Res12	0.65	0.65	0.68	0.65	0.67	0.69	0.63	0.68	0.60	0.71	0.82	1.00	0.78	0.72	0.82	0.79
Res13	0.69	0.72	0.62	0.69	0.65	0.65	0.67	0.85	0.67	0.72	0.94	0.78	1.00	0.86	0.91	0.88
Res14	0.60	0.71	0.60	0.83	0.64	0.69	0.73	0.88	0.81	0.71	0.79	0.72	0.86	1.00	0.77	0.87
Res15	0.63	0.68	0.65	0.60	0.69	0.69	0.63	0.81	0.63	0.78	0.92	0.82	0.91	0.77	1.00	0.85
Res16	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.71	0.62	0.69	0.68	0.83	0.71	0.73	0.85	0.79	0.88	0.87	0.85	1.00

Based on the results presented in the diagram above, a **Two Cases Model** was generated for Interviewees 13 and 16 using MAXQDA 2020. In this visualization, codes positioned at the center—connected by double-headed arrows—represent **shared themes** to which both participants referred. Codes appearing exclusively on the right side indicate topics mentioned **only by Interviewee 16**, whereas those on the left side reflect content **unique to Interviewee 13**. Conversely, the absence of overlap on either side confirms the lack of reference to those specific codes by the other participant. Additionally, numerical values displayed on each arrow denote the **frequency** with which the corresponding code was applied across coded text segments, as automatically calculated by the software.

The thematic analysis yielded six main themes and their respective sub-themes. The findings are detailed below:

Main Theme 1: Digital Strategic Awareness

This theme encompasses three sub-themes:

1. **Monitoring the digital competitive environment:**
 - Tracking competitors' activities on social media platforms
 - Analyzing competitors' strengths and weaknesses through their online content

- Identifying digital market gaps and unmet customer needs
- 2. **Understanding digital customer behavior and expectations:**
 - Analyzing user comments, reactions, and feedback
 - Detecting latent customer needs and pain points through online conversations
 - Responding promptly to rapid shifts in consumer behavior
- 3. **Monitoring technological and algorithmic changes:**
 - Staying informed about platform updates (e.g., Instagram algorithm changes)
 - Adapting to the emergence of new digital platforms
 - Leveraging technology news to anticipate market trends

Main Theme 2: Social Media Marketing Capabilities

This theme comprises the following sub-themes:

1. **Digital brand and identity management:**
 - Ensuring brand consistency across all platforms
 - Maintaining a coherent and distinctive brand voice
 - Using storytelling to communicate brand values
2. **Digital engagement and community building:**
 - Responsively addressing comments and direct messages
 - Creating interactive content (e.g., polls, Q&As, challenges)
 - Cultivating a loyal and engaged online community
3. **Data analytics and performance optimization:**
 - Regular use of analytics tools (e.g., Meta Business Suite, Google Analytics)
 - Monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement rate, reach, and conversion
 - Conducting A/B testing to optimize content formats and posting schedules

Main Theme 3: Strategic Learning and Adaptability

This theme includes:

1. **Feedback-driven learning:**
 - Extracting actionable insights from customer comments and messages
 - Iteratively refining products or services based on online feedback
 - Systematically documenting organizational lessons learned
2. **Content and strategic experimentation:**
 - Testing new content formats (e.g., short videos, live streams, Reels)
 - Adopting emerging tools (e.g., AI-powered content generators)
 - Continuously evaluating the effectiveness of innovative marketing approaches

3. **Strategic flexibility in decision-making:**

- Rapidly adjusting strategies in response to social media crises
- Updating the digital vision based on real-time data
- Integrating market feedback into long-term strategic planning

Main Theme 4: Digital Organizational Resources and Capabilities

This theme consists of:

1. **Digital skills and workforce knowledge:**

- Expertise level of the social media manager
- Degree of employee involvement in content creation
- Participation in digital marketing training programs

2. **Digital infrastructure and tools:**

- Use of content management systems (CMS)
- Access to advanced data analytics software
- Implementation of automation tools for customer interaction (e.g., chatbots)

3. **Budgeting and financial resource allocation:**

- Allocating a fixed percentage of revenue to digital marketing
- Investing in targeted paid advertising (e.g., Meta Ads, Google Ads)
- Maintaining a balanced cost-to-return ratio in digital initiatives

Main Theme 5: Digital Barriers and Challenges in SMEs

This theme encompasses three key sub-themes:

1. **Resource constraints (time, budget, personnel):**

- Lack of dedicated, full-time digital marketing specialists
- Insufficient managerial time allocated to digital initiatives
- Overreliance on non-professional or part-time staff for digital tasks

2. **Digital knowledge and cultural gaps:**

- Managers' unfamiliarity with core digital marketing concepts
- Resistance to adopting or learning new technologies
- Skepticism regarding the effectiveness of social media marketing

3. **Security and reputational risks:**

- Fear of social media crises (e.g., viral negative comments)
- Concerns about data privacy and regulatory compliance
- Inadequate crisis communication protocols (e.g., prolonged silence during controversies)

Main Theme 6: Strategic Integration of Social Media Marketing and Strategic Intelligence

This theme includes the following sub-themes:

1. **Alignment of digital objectives with organizational vision:**
 - Clearly articulating the role of social media within the company's mission
 - Developing annual digital marketing plans grounded in strategic goals
 - Providing regular reports to senior management on digital impact metrics
2. **Data-driven strategic decision-making:**
 - Leveraging social media analytics for long-term strategic planning
 - Integrating digital insights into executive strategy meetings
 - Measuring the contribution of digital initiatives to overall business growth
3. **Digital-strategic organizational culture:**
 - Active support from top management for digital innovation
 - Fostering a continuous learning environment around emerging technologies
 - Encouraging cross-functional employee participation in strategic intelligence activities

Hierarchical Structure of High-Frequency Codes

Among all extracted codes, the following demonstrated the highest frequency of occurrence:

- Participation in digital training programs
- Investment in targeted advertising
- Employee involvement in content analysis
- Allocation of a fixed percentage of revenue to digital marketing
- Use of content management systems (CMS)
- Responsiveness to the emergence of new platforms
- Adoption of innovative tools (e.g., AI for content generation)

These high-frequency codes were organized into a **conceptual pyramid model** within the proposed framework, reflecting their strategic positioning:

- **Apex (highest strategic priority):** *Employee involvement in content analysis and allocation of a fixed percentage of revenue to digital marketing* — representing top-level commitment and resource dedication.
- **Core (central enabling factor):** *Participation in digital training programs and investment in targeted advertising* — serving as the pivotal drivers that bridge strategy and execution.
- **Base (foundational operational layer):** *Investment in targeted advertising* (reiterated for emphasis on operational continuity), along with *use of content management tools*,

responsiveness to new platforms, and adoption of AI-driven content tools — forming the tactical foundation that enables agility and scalability.

This hierarchical configuration illustrates how strategic intelligence in SMEs is cultivated not merely through technology adoption, but through a layered integration of leadership commitment, human capital development, and adaptive digital capabilities. The pyramid model thus captures both the structural logic and dynamic priorities of the proposed digital social media marketing framework for strategic intelligence development in SMEs.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

the findings of this study reveal that the proposed framework for digital social media marketing in support of strategic intelligence development in SMEs is composed of six interrelated core dimensions: digital strategic awareness, social media marketing capabilities, strategic learning and adaptability, digital organizational resources and capabilities, digital barriers and challenges, and, crucially, the strategic integration of social media marketing with strategic intelligence. Quantitative validation confirmed the significance, factor loadings, and structural coherence of these themes, while model-fit assessments indicated an acceptable level of alignment between the theoretical framework and empirical data. Critically, the results demonstrate that in today's turbulent digital landscape, mere presence on social media is inadequate; SMEs must transform scattered digital data into actionable strategic insight. This transformation hinges on a triad of interdependent practices: continuous competitor monitoring through social listening tools, deep customer understanding via sentiment analysis and digital journey mapping, and proactive surveillance of algorithmic shifts (e.g., Instagram or TikTok updates) and emerging technologies such as generative AI. This conceptual triad aligns with and extends prior research—Cheah and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) similarly identified competitors, customers, and technology as the pillars of digital environmental scanning, while Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) and Khil-Goñez et al. (2020) emphasized competitive monitoring and technological awareness as key drivers of SME performance in Finland and Spain, respectively. Likewise, Li et al. (2021) identified delayed responses to platform algorithm changes as a primary cause of digital campaign failure among Chinese SMEs, and Boccheciampe et al. (2023) showed that post-pandemic Italian SMEs enhanced strategic awareness by integrating competitor tracking, real-time customer behavior analysis, and AI-driven platform trend forecasting. What distinguishes the present study is its holistic conceptualization of these three elements not as isolated practices but as an inseparable, integrated system—what we term the “digital strategic awareness triad”—which, when embedded within a broader framework of strategic integration (through vision alignment, data-driven decision-making, and a digital-strategic culture), enables SMEs to convert digital challenges into sustainable competitive advantage. To operationalize this insight, SMEs are encouraged to implement a low-cost, integrated competitive monitoring system—leveraging a single social listening tool, defining key competitors, setting up brand and industry keyword alerts, and generating monthly

comparative reports on metrics such as follower growth, engagement rates, and content timing thereby staying ahead of rivals without requiring extensive resources. Ultimately, prioritizing this integrated approach empowers SMEs to maximize strategic intelligence and thrive in the evolving digital ecosystem.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Authenticity of the texts, honesty and fidelity has been observed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author/s confirmed no conflict of interest.