Digital Marketing in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Hidalgo, Mexico: Strategies for Business Competitiveness

Francisco Alfonso Chiapa Téllez[1], Víctor Olvera Camarillo[2], Fátima Daniela García Servin[3], Jovanna Guadalupe Meléndez Zamitiz[4], Christiane Iliane Sánchez López [5], Jacqueline Galindo García[6]

[1]Ingeniería Industrial, Instituto Tecnológico de Pachuca, Pachuca de Soto, México

[2]Ingeniería Industrial, Instituto Tecnológico de Pachuca, Pachuca de Soto, México

[3]Económico-Administrativo, Instituto Tecnológico de Pachuca, Pachuca de Soto, México

[4]Económico-Administrativo, Instituto Tecnológico de Pachuca, Pachuca de Soto, México

[5]Económico-Administrativo, Instituto Tecnológico de Pachuca, Pachuca de Soto, México

[6]Ingeniería en diseño Industrial, Instituto Tecnológico de Pachuca, Pachuca de Soto, México

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a small share of the business population in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, yet they account for a meaningful portion of employment and revenue, and their commercial survival increasingly depends on digital channels. Evidence on how Hidalgo's SMEs use digital marketing remains scarce and scattered. This study aimed to analyze the digital marketing strategies used by SMEs in Hidalgo, the factors that enable or constrain their implementation, and their documented association with commercial positioning and competitiveness. A qualitative, descriptive-analytical documentary design was applied. Official statistics and scholarly sources were identified through purposive searches, screened against explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, coded in a review matrix, and examined through thematic analysis, keeping state-level evidence separate from national and international evidence. In 2023, SMEs represented 2.8% of the private-sector economic units in Hidalgo, and 4.4% of all units in the state sold online, compared with 5.5% nationally; national data show that internet use and online sales rise sharply with firm size. Hidalgo-specific studies are few. A survey of 52 food-service SMEs in Pachuca reported frequent use of delivery platforms and social networks alongside logistical, financial, and technological constraints, while an earlier survey of 321 small firms documented the predominance of direct personal selling. No reviewed study demonstrates a causal link between digital marketing and competitiveness in Hidalgo. The article proposes a conceptual model integrating the Technology Acceptance Model, the Technology-Organization-Environment framework, and the Resource-Based View. It concludes that training, owner professionalization, and low-cost, measurable digital practices are priorities, and that field research across Hidalgo's urban, semiurban, and rural municipalities is needed to test the model.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, SMEs, Hidalgo, Digital Transformation, Business Competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a central role in employment generation and regional economic activity in emerging economies. Although they represent a minority of total economic units, they account for a substantial share of jobs and contribute to local market dynamism (INEGI, 2025a). In the Mexican state of Hidalgo, SMEs face growing pressure to adapt their commercial strategies to an environment in which digital channels have become a primary means of reaching customers and sustaining competitiveness.

The expansion of internet access and the widespread use of social networks and digital platforms have redefined the conditions under which firms interact with consumers and manage their market presence (INEGI, 2025b).

Despite the recognized importance of digital marketing, its adoption among SMEs remains uneven. National data show that internet use and online sales increase markedly with firm size, while micro and small enterprises continue to exhibit low levels of digital commercialization (INEGI, 2025c). In Hidalgo, the share of economic units selling online rose from 2.0% in 2018 to 4.4% in 2023, a figure still below the national average of 5.5% (INEGI, 2025a).

These statistics indicate that digital channels have not yet been widely integrated into the commercial practices of most local firms. At the same time, research on digital marketing in Latin American SMEs remains limited, and studies focused specifically on Hidalgo are scarce (Gutiérrez-Leefmans & Nava-Rogel, 2016).

Available evidence in the state is fragmented. An earlier survey of small firms documented a predominance of traditional personal selling and limited use of formal marketing techniques (Saavedra García & Saavedra García, 2014). A more recent study of food-service SMEs in Pachuca reported frequent use of delivery platforms and social networks, accompanied by economic, logistical, and technological constraints (Gutiérrez Cervantes, 2024). No studies have systematically compared digital marketing practices across different sectors or across urban, semiurban, and rural municipalities of Hidalgo.

Consequently, it is not yet possible to determine the extent to which digital marketing contributes to commercial positioning and competitiveness in the state's SMEs, nor to identify the most relevant enabling or constraining factors in different local contexts.

This situation justifies the need for a structured analysis of the digital marketing strategies currently used by SMEs in Hidalgo, the barriers that affect their implementation, and the documented relationships between these strategies and business outcomes.

Such an analysis is necessary to move beyond isolated findings and to generate a clearer understanding of the conditions under which digital marketing can support the commercial performance of local enterprises. It also provides a basis for formulating practical recommendations that take into account the resource limitations typical of SMEs in the region (OECD et al., 2020).

The general objective of this study was to analyze the digital marketing strategies employed by small and medium-sized enterprises in Hidalgo, Mexico, the factors that facilitate or hinder their adoption, and their documented association with commercial positioning and competitiveness.

The specific objectives were to identify the strategies and tools reported in the available evidence, examine the technological, economic, and organizational barriers described in the literature, analyze the existing evidence linking digital marketing with business outcomes, and propose a conceptual model and recommendations grounded in the reviewed sources. By integrating state-level, national, and international evidence, the study seeks to contribute to a more precise understanding of digital marketing practices among SMEs in Hidalgo and to identify priorities for future empirical research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SALSA / PRISMA-style Approach

A literature review was conducted to identify studies on digital marketing strategies, adoption barriers, and competitiveness in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with special attention to Latin American and Mexican contexts. Searches were performed in Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Springer, and regional databases for the period 2016–2026. Keywords included: "digital marketing SMEs," "e-commerce small firms Mexico," "digital adoption barriers SMEs," "social media marketing SMEs Latin America," and "digital transformation Hidalgo OR Mexico SMEs."

Priority was given to empirical studies, surveys, and reviews that addressed strategies, barriers, or performance outcomes. After screening, 20 studies were selected.

Table 1. Literature Review Analysis

#	Author(s) and Year	Title	Source	Key Findings	Relation to the Study
1	Gutiérrez-Leefmans & Nava-Rogel (2016)	La mercadotecnia digital y las pequeñas y medianas empresas	Enl@ce	Limited research on digital marketing in Latin American SMEs; lack of strategic planning.	Highlights the research gap in the region and in Hidalgo.
2	Saavedra García & Saavedra García (2014)	Las técnicas de mercadotecnia y su relación con las características de las empresas	RECAI	Personal selling predominated; owner education linked to marketing technique use.	Provides the traditional baseline for Hidalgo's small firms.
3	Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)	Impacto del comercio electrónico en las PYMES de Pachuca	CaleidoscoPI	High use of delivery platforms and social networks; economic and logistical barriers.	Main state-level evidence on digital practices in Hidalgo.
4	Zamora Montenegro (2024)	Estrategias de marketing digital para pequeñas y medianas empresas	LATAM	SMEs recognize importance but lack resources and systematic approach.	Supports findings on limited strategic use.
5	Clemente-Almendros et al. (2024)	Digital transformation in SMEs: Understanding its determinants	Technology in Society	Manager education, size, and internationalization positively associated with digital adoption.	Contextualizes organizational barriers.
6	INEGI (2025a, 2025c)	Censos Económicos 2024	Official statistics	Low online sales rate in Hidalgo (4.4%); strong size gradient nationally.	Provides quantitative context for digital adoption.
7	Martínez Mariel et al. (2025)	Análisis sobre la publicidad y el uso de redes sociales	INVESTIGIUM	Facebook most used network among consumers at a gastronomic fair.	Illustrates consumer digital behavior in Hidalgo.

8	OECD et al. (2020)	Latin American economic outlook 2020	OECD	Digital skills are a condition for capturing benefits of digital transformation.	Supports recommendations on training.
9	Davis (1989)	Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance	MIS Quarterly	Foundational Technology Acceptance Model.	Theoretical basis for adoption analysis.
10	Tornatzky & Fleischer (1990)	The processes of technological innovation	Book	Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework.	Used in the proposed conceptual model.
11	Barney (1991)	Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage	Journal of Management	Resource-Based View.	Supports treating digital capabilities as strategic resources.
12	Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015)	The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs	Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	SMEs use digital channels opportunistically rather than strategically.	Aligns with limited strategic approach in Hidalgo.
13	Ainin et al. (2015)	Factors influencing the use of social media by SMEs	Industrial Management & Data Systems	Relative advantage and compatibility influence social media adoption.	Relevant for social network use in Pachuca.
14	Dutot & Bergeron (2016)	From strategic orientation to social media orientation	Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	Social media orientation linked to performance in SMEs.	Supports the competitiveness discussion.
15	Chatterjee & Kumar Kar (2020)	Why do small and medium enterprises use social media marketing	Information Systems Frontiers	Perceived usefulness and cost are key drivers of social media marketing.	Related to economic barriers identified.
16	Qalati et al. (2021)	A mediated model on the adoption of social media	Technology in Society	TOE factors influence social media adoption and firm performance.	Reinforces the proposed conceptual model.

17	Alalwan et al. (2017)	Social media in marketing: A review	Telematics and Informatics	Reviews benefits and challenges of social media for businesses.	Contextualizes platform and social network use.
18	Verhoef et al. (2021)	Digital transformation: A multidisciplinary reflection	Journal of Business Research	Digital transformation requires complementary capabilities.	Supports the need for training and professionalization.
19	Bocconcelli et al. (2017)	SMEs and marketing: A systematic literature review	International Small Business Journal	Marketing in SMEs is often informal and owner-driven.	Aligns with the 2014 Hidalgo baseline.
20	Scuotto et al. (2021)	A microfoundational perspective on SMEs' digital transformation	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	Owner digital skills are critical for digital transformation.	Reinforces the importance of owner professionalization.

The reviewed literature confirms that digital marketing adoption in SMEs is frequently constrained by limited resources, lack of strategic planning, and owner-related factors. Evidence specific to Hidalgo remains scarce and concentrated in one sector and municipality, supporting the need for broader field research across the state.

Digital Marketing in SMEs

Gutiérrez-Leefmans and Nava-Rogel (2016) found few studies on digital marketing in SMEs, fewer in Latin America, and reported that SMEs often adopt digital business without strategic analysis, whereas planning models such as SOSTAC emphasize planning and metrics. A mixed-methods study of 50 SMEs (site not specified) found that most recognized the importance of digital marketing but lacked resources and a systematic approach (Zamora Montenegro, 2024).

Economic and Business Context of Hidalgo

Beyond the structure described above (INEGI, 2025a), a survey of 321 of 1,643 registered small firms found a sample of 15% industry, 68.5% commerce, and 16.5% services, 75% family-structured, with about half serving the local market (Saavedra García & Saavedra García, 2014). Internet use in Hidalgo (79.8% in 2023) was slightly below the national level (81.2%; INEGI, 2024).

Digital Marketing Strategies in Hidalgo's SMEs

In Pachuca's food-service SMEs, 73% knew the concept of e-commerce and 81% used platforms such as Uber, DiDi, Rappi, Facebook, or their own pages (Gutiérrez Cervantes, 2024). The earlier small-firm survey found direct personal selling in 78% of firms and did not report digital tools (Saavedra García & Saavedra García, 2014). A survey of 70 attendees of a gastronomic fair in Santiago de Anaya, which concerns consumers and not SMEs, found Facebook (61%) as the most used network (Martínez Mariel et al., 2025). No Hidalgo SME evidence was found for TikTok, WhatsApp Business, paid advertising, SEO, or analytics.

Barriers to Digital Adoption

In Pachuca, limited resources constrained technological investment (63%) and digital marketing (37%), and challenges included logistics (43%), online competition (28%), and security concerns (Gutiérrez Cervantes, 2024). In the 321-firm survey, owner education and experience were associated with greater use of marketing techniques (Saavedra García & Saavedra García, 2014). Internationally, manager education, internationalization, and size were positively associated with digital adoption among Spanish SMEs (Clemente-Almendros et al., 2024).

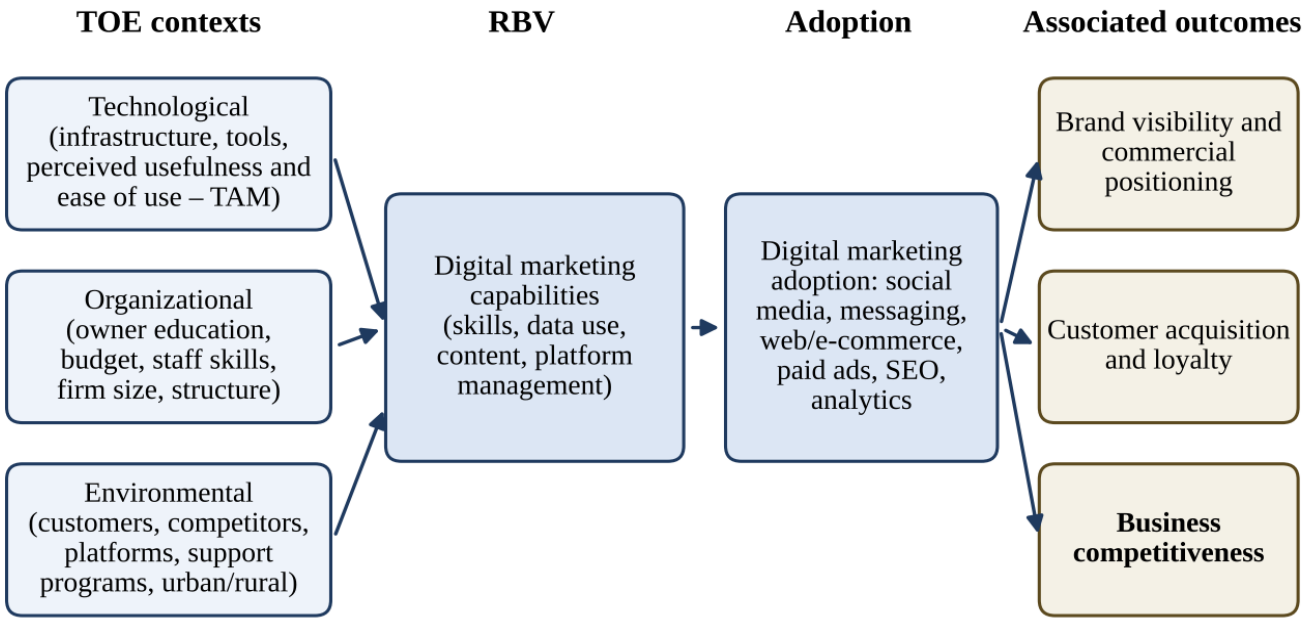
Digital Marketing and Business Competitiveness

In Hidalgo, evidence is limited to perceptions: 64% of platform-using food-service SMEs rated e-commerce results as good (Gutiérrez Cervantes, 2024). Elsewhere, firms that integrate digital tools strategically report better visibility and market access (Zamora Montenegro, 2024). These are associations or perceptions, not demonstrated causal effects.

Theoretical Framework

The Technology Acceptance Model explains adoption through perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989). The Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework situates adoption in technological, organizational, and environmental contexts (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990). The Resource-Based View holds that valuable, rare resources and capabilities sustain advantage (Barney, 1991), so digital marketing capabilities are treated as organizational resources.

Figure 1 integrates the three frameworks, with two propositions for future testing: P1, technological, organizational, and environmental conditions are associated with digital marketing adoption; P2, adoption is associate with positioning and competitiveness when complementary capabilities exist. They are propositions, not tested hypotheses.



Solid arrows: proposed associations to be tested empirically (not demonstrated causal effects).
The model is an analytical proposal derived from the documentary review.

Figure 1: *Proposed conceptual model of digital marketing adoption and competitiveness in Hidalgo's SMEs.*

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study follows a qualitative, descriptive-analytical documentary design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research questions are: RQ1, what strategies and tools are documented in Hidalgo's SMEs; RQ2, what barriers are reported; RQ3, what associations with positioning and competitiveness are documented; and RQ4, what gaps remain.

Population and Sample

The documentary population comprised scholarly articles, institutional reports, and official statistics on SMEs and digital marketing relevant to Hidalgo. Micro-enterprise studies were used only as context; national and international studies were used only as labeled comparisons. The search was purposive and non-systematic (general web search and INEGI, university, and publisher repositories, in Spanish and English; Scopus and Web of Science were not queried), so no record counts or sample size are claimed. Zamora Montenegro (2024) and Clemente-Almendros et al. (2024) were consulted at abstract level.

Instruments and Data Analysis

A review matrix recorded author, year, location, sector, method, strategies, findings, evidence level, and limitations. Sources were coded and grouped by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Percentages are reproduced as published; relationships are reported only as the original authors state them, with no causal inference.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main Findings

1. Adoption. Documented adoption centers on platforms and social networks in Pachuca's food-service SMEs (81% of 52 firms; Gutiérrez Cervantes, 2024), while statewide online selling is still low (4.4% of units; INEGI, 2025a). The earlier baseline of personal selling in 78% of small firms suggests that digital channels extend traditional ones, although this was not tested (Saavedra García & Saavedra García, 2014). Table 1 summarizes the strategies documented.

Table 2 *Digital Marketing Strategies Identified in SMEs in Hidalgo, Mexico.*

Strategy or tool	Evidence level and setting	Documented finding	Source
Delivery and e-commerce platforms	State; 52 food-service SMEs, Pachuca	81% used platforms; 27% of users reported over 50% of sales online	Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)
Social networks and own web pages	State; same survey	Facebook and own pages named; respondents rated social networks as important	Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)
Online sales (all unit sizes)	State; INEGI census	2.0% (2018) to 4.4% (2023) of units; electronic transfers 6.1% to 16.4%	INEGI (2025a)

Traditional baseline	State; 321 small firms	Direct personal selling 78%; digital items not reported	Saavedra García & Saavedra García (2014)
TikTok, WhatsApp Business, paid ads, SEO, analytics	No Hidalgo SME evidence found	Evidence gap	—

2. Tools and platforms. Documented tools are delivery and e-commerce platforms, social networks, and some own web pages; messaging, paid advertising, and analytics are not documented for Hidalgo's SMEs. Facebook leads among consumers at Santiago de Anaya, but this is not evidence of SME practice (Martínez Mariel et al., 2025).

3. Barriers and limitations. Table 2 groups the barriers reported. They come from food-service SMEs in one municipality and cannot be generalized to all of Hidalgo.

Table 3. *Main Barriers to Digital Marketing Adoption in Hidalgo's SMEs.*

Barrier category	Documented evidence	Evidence level	Source
Economic	Limited funds constrained technology investment (63%) and digital marketing (37%)	State; Pachuca	Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)
Technological and security	Platform vulnerability (53%), transaction security (31%), data protection (16%)	State; Pachuca	Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)
Operational	Logistics (43%) and online competition (28%)	State; Pachuca	Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)
Organizational	Owner education and experience associated with use of marketing techniques (not digital tools)	State; 321 small firms	Saavedra García & Saavedra García (2014)
Firm size	Online sales: micro 4.4%, small 27.9%, medium 33.4%; no Hidalgo breakdown	National	INEGI (2025c)
Resistance to change; measurement	Not examined in retrieved Hidalgo sources	Evidence gap	—

4. Business competitiveness. No Hidalgo study measures sales, market share, or profitability attributable to digital marketing; the evidence is perceived satisfaction (64% rated results as good; Gutiérrez Cervantes, 2024). The national gap in online selling by size (INEGI, 2025c) is descriptive and does not show that digital marketing improves competitiveness.

5. Opportunities for improvement. The evidence points to training and owner professionalization, since education and experience were associated with greater use of marketing techniques in Hidalgo and with digital adoption in Spain (Saavedra García & Saavedra García, 2014; Clemente-Almendros et al., 2024), and to strategic

planning with metrics (Gutiérrez-Leefmans & Nava-Rogel, 2016). The growth of electronic payments in Hidalgo (INEGI, 2025a) is a base for online sales, and regional analyses stress digital skills as a condition for benefits (OECD et al., 2020). These are inferred opportunities, not measured effects. Table 3 compares the evidence.

Table 4. *Comparative Analysis of Digital Marketing Research in Hidalgo and Mexico.*

Evidence level and source	Scope and method	Main findings	Limitations
State: Gutiérrez Cervantes (2024)	Food-service SMEs, Pachuca; survey of 52 firms	81% used platforms; barriers: funding, logistics, security	One sector and municipality; self-reported
State: Saavedra García & Saavedra García (2014)	Small firms; survey of 321 of 1,643 firms	Personal selling 78%; owner traits associated with technique use	Predates current platforms; no digital items
State: INEGI (2025a)	Economic Census 2024, Hidalgo; all sizes	Online sales 2.0% to 4.4%; SMEs 2.8% of units	No size or municipal breakdown
National: INEGI (2025c)	Economic Census 2024, Mexico; by size	Online sales: micro 4.4%, small 27.9%, medium 33.4%	Descriptive; not marketing-specific

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the digital marketing strategies used by small and medium-sized enterprises in Hidalgo, Mexico, the factors that facilitate or constrain their adoption, and the documented relationships between these strategies and commercial competitiveness. The available evidence indicates that digital marketing practices among SMEs in the state remain limited and uneven. Statewide data show that the proportion of economic units selling online is still low, while the few existing studies concentrate on specific sectors and municipalities, particularly food-service firms in Pachuca. In these cases, the use of delivery platforms and social networks is relatively frequent; however, economic, logistical, technological, and organizational barriers continue to restrict a more strategic and sustained adoption of digital tools.

The review also shows that evidence linking digital marketing to measurable improvements in competitiveness is scarce. Existing findings are mainly based on perceptions or associations and do not demonstrate causal effects on sales, market share, or profitability. This limitation is consistent with broader literature on SMEs in Latin America, which indicates that many firms adopt digital tools without a clear strategic orientation, often due to resource constraints and limited digital capabilities of owners and managers. The conceptual model proposed in this study, integrating the Technology Acceptance Model, the Technology-Organization-Environment framework, and the Resource-Based View, offers a structured way to examine these relationships in future research.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that training, owner professionalization, and the implementation of low-cost, measurable digital practices should be prioritized. Educational institutions, business chambers, and local government programs can play a relevant role by combining access to digital tools with the development of planning and analytical skills. At the same time, the scarcity of Hidalgo-specific evidence highlights the need for field research that covers different firm sizes, sectors, and territorial contexts, including urban, semiurban, and rural municipalities.

In conclusion, digital marketing represents an important opportunity for SMEs in Hidalgo, but its contribution to competitiveness cannot yet be fully established with the available evidence. Strengthening digital capabilities,

promoting strategic rather than opportunistic use of digital tools, and generating more systematic empirical research are necessary steps to understand and support the digital transformation of local enterprises. Future studies should test the proposed conceptual model and examine the conditions under which digital marketing strategies can effectively contribute to the commercial performance of SMEs in different regions of the state.

Ethical Approval

This documentary study used only public sources and involved no human participants or animals; ethical approval was not required.

Data Availability

No new primary data were generated. All sources are public and identified by DOI or URL in the References.

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