

# ADAPT OR DIE: THE ADOPTION OF DIGITAL MARKETING BY FASHION SMMEs IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

*Digital marketing is considered a dominant tool to entice customers to buy products online using internet-enabled means, thus ensuring business success and survival, especially with small and medium enterprises businesses in this digital age. This study on digital marketing among Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises SMMEs in the fashion industry is an area of interest because fashion studies, even though they are thorough, have not focused on the African context, and there are unique challenges faced by the fashion SMMEs in a developing economy. Previous studies on digital marketing showed businesses which adopted digital marketing in their business grew, from fashion luxury brands like Gucci, to local retailers like Mr Price. However, there is limited research on South African SMMEs in the fashion industry. The study is unique because fashion SMMEs in developing economies are survivalist businesses, such that their challenges and the advantages that they face differ from established and multi-corporation businesses. Pandemics, natural disasters and acceleration of internet use has shifted buying patterns, and this study seeks to identify the digital marketing strategies being used by fashion SMMEs in South Africa to reach their customers.*

*The data was collected from 58 fashion SMMEs through a survey that was conducted both online and through hand distribution of the printed questionnaires. The data was analyzed with the use of descriptive analysis and t-test analysis. The results suggest that the most used digital marketing tools by fashion SMMEs are mobile applications, WhatsApp and social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Most fashion SMMEs do not own websites and if they do, these are dynamic or are static. The fashion SMMEs acknowledge the benefits begotten by the adoption of digital marketing strategies. It was concluded that websites are a vital tool for businesses and it was recommended that fashion SMMEs should adopt websites for their businesses. Influencers are another way that businesses can market because customers connect and are influenced to buy products by individuals or celebrities that they admire.*

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Fashion SMMEs, Social Media, Influencers, Website

## INTRODUCTION

South African fashion SMMEs are entrepreneurs, who according to (Pooe, 2020) are entrepreneurs who as individuals start new fashion ventures or clothing labels by taking advantage of opportunities, identifying customer needs, managing resources to create new styles, coordinating manufacturing, and supplying products as services. Over the past decade, internet penetration has become a mainstream resource in everyday life, offering enormous information with just a click (Makrides, Vrontis & Christofi, 2020). The Internet has transformed the way individuals interact, communicate and purchase items, which has been evident in all the industries, and the clothing industry is no exception (Kulova & Mihaylov, 2018).

The purchase and use of mobile devices has skyrocketed, leading to more awareness and use of digital technologies. Thus customer access has enabled customers to have a voice and power to impact some of the business activities (Makrides, 2017). Customers are no longer passive recipients of information, but are now active allies in the digital age with power and voice to decide which information can they can be recipients of, when, and how (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic added a twist, as it adversely affected the supply and demand of businesses, especially SMMEs, who usually lack a strong financial backbone in liquid assets and collateral security to borrow money from banks to cushion the business (OECD, 2020; Mugova, 2018). The pandemic-related restrictions were life-threatening to most SMMEs, and some faced closures, since customers could not visit business sites (Naquetta, 2020). Since customer-fearing infections added to the cause, SMMEs identified the digital technologies as the only response mechanism for them to market and sell their products (Naquetta, 2020).

SMMEs are more vulnerable to external factors, such as political and economic policies; and natural disasters. The change and resilience required in curbing these environmental factors, most of the time; prove a heavy burden to carry for SMMEs (Trawnih, Yaseen, Al-Adwan, Alsoud & Jaber, 2021). The 'repeat and new' customers have proven to be the principal source of hope and survival for SMMEs, where there must be a strong bond with their clients. The fierce competition, including online technologies, is a challenge to growing firms which are strengthening changes in customer behavior, marketplaces, and the changes in the external business environment (Makrides et al., 2020). What is considered a competitive advantage in the digital world in the present day can prove to be ordinary in a few months' time because of the accelerated pace of knowledge and learning (Makrides et al., 2020). Nowadays, an SMME cannot maintain the leader status permanently without diligent business effort to dynamically evolve with the digital trends (Christofi, Vrontis, Leonidou & Thrassou, 2018; Makrides, 2017). If SMMEs with an online presence need to constantly develop, what about those who haven't adopted digital marketing as a mainstream marketing technique? This is an important consideration from a survival perspective.

The giant social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are platforms that allow for easy entry for any SMMEs. These global social giants did not miraculously occupy the market leader positions, but they earned a definite place by seriously investing in digital marketing and effectively using customer feedback to improve their offerings (Makrides et al., 2020). Ritz, Wolf & McQuitty (2019) statistics support this because YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and so forth in 2017 spent a budget of \$51.3bn on advertising which was approximately a 55% increase from the previous year. Digital marketing was almost half of the budget, occupying a 44% margin of the global advertising budget approximated at \$629bn (McNair, 2018). Mobile digital marketing had a 39% growth in 2017 and had projected that it would grow with 27%, and overall it occupied 55% of the total digital advertising budget (MAGNA Global, 2018). Facebook which is the social network leader, was the first social network to reach 1 billion registered accounts and currently hosts 2.27 billion active users monthly (Statista, 2019). Facebook earned this place because it adapted to customer needs by focusing firstly on individuals through the creation of an engaging social interaction platform for connection with family and friends. Secondly, it then focused on making effective and affordable ads and attractive business products which businesses could not resist, especially SMMEs, and this led to growth of business trading (del Vecchio, Secundo & Passiante, 2018). Thus, the digital platforms are a critical avenue for SMMEs to consider if they want to make a mark, especially the fashion industry which is continuously evolving.

Some studies also proved that reputed companies earned a definite place in the market through effective marketing and communication strategies, coupled with a proper understanding of customer needs and a robust business strategy in place (Muniesa &

Giménez, 2020; Grover & Mandan, 2017). Fashion luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Prada impressed their fashion positions by embarking on ‘storytelling’ through digital marketing. These fashion luxury brands initially resisted internet marketing, however, they realized that millennial born in the digital world could not perceive reality without the internet, so they had to change their strategies and adapt to current trends (Romo et al., 2017). Adopting this approach by SMMEs provides a conducive platform for business sense.

In South Africa, statistics reveal the impact of digital marketing on the fashion giants like Mr Price, Foschini and Superbalist (Gilbert, 2019). Black Friday, the most marketed sale, annually led to Superbalist South Africa in 2018, cloaking 40 million in revenue through online selling. Superbalist, as an online business, has grown annually by 115% (Gilbert, 2019). Studies have highlighted international fashion brands and big retailers in South Africa extensively using the online platforms to market their brands. The digital tools used in internet marketing are websites (creation and maintenance), social media sites (writing and content publishing), blogs (information-filled content with photos, videos) (Ritz et al., 2019).

While most fashion SMMEs in South Africa are 'survivalist entities' birthed out of a need to provide for the family subsistence, it raises questions whether digital marketing also is a vital part of their business strategy (Mkhosi, 2017). Despite this debate, there are immense benefits that can be accrued by the SMMEs, which include customer interaction (likes, comments, reviews, and recommendations), awareness (likes, reactions, shares, clicks, views), increase in the market segment, increase in sales and customer loyalty (Ritz et al., 2019).

The article is organized as follows. First, digital marketing is defined, followed by the comparison of traditional marketing and digital marketing, then the digital tools used in marketing tools utilized by the fashion SMMES are discussed and then digital marketing in the South African fashion industry is explored. Thereafter, the methodology is described, the results, findings and discussions are presented and recommendations provided.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Marketing is defined as the formation of demand for a product or service that should translate into sales and revenue creation (Reddy, 2017). Thus, digital marketing is the use of technology to market a brand (Reddy, 2017). Digital marketing is a direct electronic way of advertising; it involves technologies such as e-mails, websites, social media networks, online forums, and mobile communications (Rathnayaka, 2018). E-commerce supports the selling and marketing of products and services on the internet, since e-commerce is a broad term for any market on the internet. Thus, digital marketing is a subset of e-commerce (Bala & Verma, 2018). Bala & Verma (2018) attest that digital marketing was initiated around the 1990's, with static websites that were text-based, but now with the advancement of the internet, digital marketing involves advertising space and software programs. Multinational companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon.com, Alibaba.com, and Youtube.com have spearheaded these technologies in marketing online (Bala & Verma, 2018).

Digital marketing results from studies, indicate that customers internalize the buying process, and the final purchasing decision is based on the impact of the internal and external stimulus, ease and convenience of purchasing products online, personal and situational characteristics, personalized advanced marketing techniques, and influence from social circles of the individual (Rathnayaka, 2018; Kim & Johnson, 2016; Aragoncillo & Orus, 2018).

### **Digital vs Traditional Marketing**

Table 1 gives a comparison of traditional marketing vs the digital marketing.

Traditional marketing is most successful as a 'one to one' relationship, while the digital marketing is about internet technology connection. Traditional marketing has been proven to be more expensive because the channels used such as printing flyers, advertising in a newspaper, advertising on radio and TV require money, while digital marketing social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram offer free access, but noting that the expense is the data charges (Shivani & Jyoti, n.d). The uniqueness of digital marketing is that there is two way communications with 24hr access supported by media such as image, videos and text, while in traditional marketing on some platforms such as pamphlets or newspapers there is no access or instant access to send your feedback. Both target market segments, but traditional marketing is inclined to mass marketing while digital marketing focuses on niche markets (Shivani & Jyoti, n.d). However, globalization and disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic have precipitated use of technologies such that the greater population is making use of the digital technologies (Naquetta, 2020). Digital media was voted the most efficient tool for business to communicate and market products with customers during the Covid- 19 quarantine policy, providing easy access to accurate, attractive, and useful information (Effendi, Sugandini & Istanto, 2020).

### Digital Tools for Marketing

E-mail is the most easily adopted technology tool in the e-commerce adoption stage, where businesses can send a personalized message (Laudon & Traver, 2017; Nhuvira, 2021). E-mail marketing is an effective tool when an SMME has a well-thought-out and appropriate

**Table 1**  
**DIGITAL VS TRADITIONAL MARKETING, SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM (SHIVANI & JYOTI, N.D; STANKEVICH 2017; RITZ ET AL., 2019)**

Reach	Small range limited to the region where SMME conduct business and large corporates have resources to conduct and market business more broadly	Global reach
Time utility and availability	Educates customers on a one-on-one basis and requires good infrastructure when marketing such as posters, paying a certain place where there is traffic of people. Limited to business hours unless they have helpdesk access.	Gives a platform to educate the customers on the authenticity and durability of their products couples with text, images, videos. On a 24hr basis, 7days a week.
Target audience	Aimed at the mass market. The idea is to reach the widest potential audience. However, a large part of the audience might not be the right target audience.	Focused on the individual or niche. It's easier to approach the right market segment as the digital tools offer resources such as, Marketing ads, SEO tools that aid in exposing the business to the right audience.
Geographical reach	Limited to the region where marketing is conducted	No limits to geographical areas reached
Return on investment	Among others, by the high cost, the aimlessness, and the guesswork is the return on investment lower.	Because of the low costs, the focus, the measuring device is the return on investment is much higher.
Geographical space	Need a physical location for trading. Money to pay for premises required.	No physical building is required. Many options are available to start an online business, even with a limited startup. Can become an influencer, do dropshipping business, etc.
Cost/budget	Relatively expensive because of media require a lot of money for placing ads eg on TV or radio, printing ads.	Relatively cheap, the company can succeed online with a very limited budget.
Participation interaction	Most of the companies have impersonal relationships with their customers due to the company presenting itself as far removed from the customer thus no transparency. No continuous feedback of customer wants and needs.	Its two-way communication creates a personal relationship with the brand. Transparency of the SMME to customers. SMMEs get feedback on how and why consumers make buying decisions for and they can improve marketing strategies, increase sales.

plan to achieve the marketing objectives as they engage customers on their terms (Makrides et al., 2020). Marketing is the power to build a positive permanent image in the minds of the clients (Brzozowska & Bubel, 2015). Campaign Monitor (n.d) denotes that emails are 40 times more fruitful in customer acquisition compared to social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Despite e-mails being a tool that is easy to miss, easy to delete, or remove, SMMEs need to be cognizant of the best type of email to use to their audience to tailor market the products. Statistics reveal that success has been achieved in transactional emails with a high rate of clicks up to 8 times more than other email formats and with a high probability of 6 times revenue generation capacity (Campaign Monitor, n.d). E-mails are a very appropriate marketing medium for personal communication in areas of interest, but it is not suitable for professionals who use work e-mails extensively at their workplaces as this is usually against company protocols (Brzozowska & Bubel, 2015). Additionally, segmented e-mail marketing has multiplied business revenue with a good 76% increase (Makrides et al., 2020).

Social media is the most powerful tool that has redefined marketing, because it has a value-added benefit to the customer through the interaction with individuals of similar interests (Grover & Mandan, 2017). Social media has become the mainstream tool for marketing because it affords SMMEs the option of using this platform to market their brands through advertising, content creation, and creating engagement with little resources (Hua, Ramayah, Ping & Jun-Hwa, 2017). Social media enhances the marketing opportunities of SMMEs with tight budgets to reach a massive audience (Hua et al., 2017). It's a tool for personal and business use with the resources to support the different activities, and, for example, the 2.27 billion Facebook users are a great asset to SMMEs as they avail a great pool of customers for marketing by SMMEs (Ritz et al., 2019). Because of its characteristics, social media opens SMMEs to additional data sources through initiated and circulated information among the customers, constant awareness of customers through their behaviors, opinions, content liked or most shared, and after-sales feedback (Grover & Mandan, 2017). Social media, thus is a 'two-way street' for fashion SMMEs as it informs the business of customer preferences and influences the customer's decision to purchase (Kulova & Mihaylov, 2018; Grover & Mandan, 2017).

Websites are another tool used for digital marketing. A website is a web application that is tailor made for business needs, using programming languages that contain company information, product information, online shop, and blogs (Ullah, Alauddin & Zaman, 2016). There are two types of websites, namely static website (simple and provides necessary SMME information but cannot buy) and dynamic website (active and provides detailed information of the products customers can buy and make payments) (Elbeltagi, Hamad, Moizer & Abou-Shouk, 2016). Websites brand the SMME and give a sense of what the SMME stands for and elevates reputation, such that if they focus locally to build a strong e-commerce system, they can eliminate competition, allow effective online penetration and increase opportunities for cross border trading (Gnezdova, Barilenko, Semenov, Yakutin & Sharova, 2017). With increased customer involvement, reverse development is gaining popularity and SMMEs are marketing themselves by allowing users to design their production, thus gaining a competitive advantage (Kulova & Mihaylov, 2018). These unique activities make dynamic websites stand out as a marketing tool and allows for direct customer contact, while collecting data on customer preferences, searches, and activities on the website.

## Digital Marketing in South Africa

The clothing sector occupies the second largest employer space in the manufacturing sector of South Africa (Walters, Bohlmann & Clance, 2016; Charles, 2019). South Africa is

among the top break baskets in Africa and a refuge state for many refugees (CTGN, 2019; Mbumbwa & Chigada, 2018). In South Africa, fashion is culturally or socially influenced due to the different ethnic cultures in the country and the strong connection that the nationalists have to their roots and social systems (Mbumbwa & Chigada, 2018). South African digital marketing is more inclined to target marketing because social media is the most used online platform for marketing (Kulova & Mihaylov, 2018). There are many types of fashions in South Africa, whereby fashion SMMEs can digitally market their products. The country's prominent fashions include event-influenced fashion (event theme sets the tone for the fashion worn on the day), socio-influenced fashion (a socio-economic group or individual's sets trends through the influence of migration, liberalization, and technology), and media-influenced fashion (trends that are broadcasted on media for internationally and locally trendsetters copied) (Nhuvira, 2021). For example, the Vodacom Durban July is an event influenced in terms of fashion because the organizers advertise the fashion theme a few months before the event through social media and their website allowing for fashion SMMEs and attendees ample time to make their high end or haute couture customs for the day.

### Categories of Fashion and Fashion Brands in South Africa

According to Xuan (2019), fashion consumption can be divided into four categories, namely necessary (essentials inevitable for life survival, usually fits in the mass market), basic (fundamentals for ordinary wear where is in between the survivalist outfits and the affluence, usually fits in the bridge market), affluence (custom designed or exclusive wear, usually fits in the premium market) and luxury (rare, prestigious unique wear with limited supply and high price tag, usually fits in the high-end fashion or haute couture markets). The five fashion categories are further illustrated below in their categorized markets, illustrating some of the South African fashion brands in the various categories in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1**  
**SOUTH AFRICAN FASHION PYRAMID, SOURCE: ADOPTED FROM LE XUAN (2018); DURBAN FASHION FAIR (2019)**

Current digital marketing trends in South Africa

There are three prevailing marketing trends utilized by South African fashion SMMEs, which are experimental marketing, Omni channel marketing, and influencer marketing.

### Experimental Digital Marketing

Experimental digital marketing applies more to affluence and luxury fashion SMMEs,

for example, Maxhosa, Collen Eitzen, and Zarth designs, as depicted in Figure 1. The online customers are moving from the traditional customers who accepted what the market offered, and the clothing was purchased based on functionality and benefits (Le Xuan, 2019). Digital technologies aid customers in experimental marketing by allowing customers to be emotionally involved in purchasing to achieve pleasurable experiences. According to global trends, in 2018, the revenues for experimental marketing increased by 7% to 50.6 billion over the previous year (Global, 2018). Luxury fashion thrives on creating memorable, enjoyable customers for online shopping, and this also has led to fashion brands partnering with IT companies to spearhead such innovations (Okonkwo, 2016).

### **Omni-Channel Marketing**

Omni-Channel Marketing is the ability to interact with current and potential customers on both online and offline platforms. Multi marketing involves interaction on multiple channels, such as a retail store, website (compatible with different devices), promotional events, e-mails, and social media platforms in a seamless and amalgamated way (Xuan, 2019). These marketing models aim to provide a consistent and complementary customer experience both online and offline. It applies across the bridge to Haute fashion, with varying degrees of platforms embarked on to reach the customer.

The mass fashion SMMEs uses retail shops and WhatsApp for their marketing. The stores are in the downtown Durban Central Business District (CBD), and daily they send pictures of the items with prices, and they often discount their prices as they focus on mass selling. WhatsApp marketing is the best method to communicate with the customer because of cheap data bundles and accommodates mass marketing as many customers request to receive new offerings frequently. The SMME adds new customers to the WhatsApp group for fresh offerings. The WhatsApp charges are cheap across different networks. This is both affordable to the fashion SMME and the customer.

The bridge and premium market uses retail shops, usually in shopping malls with well-air-conditioned stores, with quality displayed dolls and ads on the windows. The bridge market is less prestigious compared to the premium market, though some characteristics appear similar. The stores are in the principal streets of Durban or at upmarket shopping malls. The fashion SMMEs either run their stores individually, or they rent space in a boutique on a consignment basis or are under an organization that subsidizes expenses, or they have collaborated with other designers to sell under the same roof. They usually advertise on social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, posting high-end quality pictures using professional models. The fashion SMMEs with the right connections will grow and possibly dress celebrities, and if the brand is successful, they can upgrade to offer exclusive high-end fashions, or they can add it as an addition to their business.

High-end fashion brands have a niche market, and they house their brands in only exclusive places and malls. Their target is the affluent customer, and they are usually in places where such people meet and shop. The brands have a high level of celebrity and influencers wearing the fashion items on social events and social media. The brands also market through fashion shows and promotional events where the items are displayed, and the brand's history and fashion they share creation process with customers for brand loyalty. They have a large following on social media, and they have online events on social media platforms to interact with their customers and create engagement. The fashion SMMEs usually showcase on fashion shows such as SA Fashion Week, Mercedes Benz, Durban fashion fair, etc. The fashion shows publicize the creativity of South Africa's established and upcoming fashion SMMEs with the support of other African designers in neighboring countries. The fashion shows are usually divided into three areas namely, i) fashion shows, ii)

retail which are the pop-up shows to sell merchandise from the fashion designers, and iii) the trade fairs which is a business-to-business interaction (SAFW, 2018). Fashion SMMEs can trade and showcase ladies, menswear, children's wear, jewelry, footwear, and accessories.

Haute couture brands are similar in many respects to high-end fashion, though their items are usually in small quantities or once-off pieces because they are specialized and custom-made according to the customer. These brands have state-of-the-art studios due to the high rate of walk-ins for the adjustments for a perfect fit garment. Most of these brands market through fashion shows, social media platforms, word-of-mouth referrals, and websites.

The Haute fashion SMMEs dress South African celebrities in the latest fashion creations. One event is Idols, a national musical competition show that is broadcasted on Mzansi Magic, a DSTV channel. Idols have approximately 1700 000 followers on Facebook (IdolsSA, 2019), and the last show in 2018 had 326 687 views on YouTube (Idols, 2018).

Idols is a well celebrated and well-publicized event that runs for a couple of months on all media platforms such as television, radio, and social media, and it allows for the interaction of the nationals because of its voting structure as an elimination process of candidates (IdolsSA, 2019). The musicians and judges are dressed by the haute fashion SMME creating publicity over large views. For example, in 2018, the show had 142 million votes and in 2017 it had 98 million votes, showing the extent of marketing the fashion SMME potentially holds (Idols, 2018).

## **Influencer Marketing**

Influencers are social media personalities with a large following on social platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram (Xuan, 2019). These individuals are usually experts in a particular field, such as fashion, exercise, beauty, and lifestyle. Therefore, influencer marketing is a type of marketing where brands invest in selected individuals with a significant social following to create content, promote and advertise their branded products both on the influencer social media pages and on the fashion SMMEs social pages to their targeted customers (Xuan, 2019). Influencer marketing is effective for fashion because fashion is a culturally or socially influenced way of dressing at a time in a social system (Mbumbwa & Chigada, 2018). These social circles are vital, as people tend to be easily persuaded by people whom they admire or who are in their social circles due to similar beliefs and values. Of particular note is that social media has become a mainstream 'information and communications technology' tool for private communications amongst friends, family members, and affiliates, it is so powerful that organizations can reach billions of people through its power exponentially (Duffett & Wakeham, 2016). Statistics attest that 38% of the South African population is occupied by the millennial, and this group is technologically aware and is fully engaged on these platforms. These are the future buyers, and fashion SMMEs that are looking at growing in the coming years should be cognizant of this group and embrace digital marketing strategies such as influencer marketing. As such projections have estimated that the global workforce by 2025 will constitute over three-quarters of the millennial (Moavenzadeh, 2015; Mbumbwa & Chigada, 2018; Nhuvira, 2021).

Globally, as stated in Launchmetric's report of 2019, influencer marketing has matured and social media such as Instagram has grown by 2.38 billion United States dollars in 2018. Many of the organizations are pursuing influencer campaigns, with the special target of an audience of millennial. This is supported in the study by Le Xuan (2019), which reported that of the 480 organizations surveyed, 78% confirmed that their marketing focus was on this target audience and the generation Z. The influencers are categorized into four, namely micro-influencers (10k-100k followers), mid-tier influencers (101k-500k followers) and



mega influencers (501k-2M followers), and lastly all-star influencers (2M plus followers) (Le Xuan, 2019). The influencers that create engaging content create positive feedback and are likely to get more followers, thus growing on the rank. SMMEs can choose which of the four categories best suits their budget and their targeted audience.

## METHODOLOGY

### Population

The population is the total set of individuals that fit the characteristics of the participants (Ganesh, 2017). The population of the study is Durban designers, which comprise approximately 600 fashion SMMEs. Information regarding them was obtained from KZN Fashion Council (KZNFC) statistics and Durban Fashion Fair statistics (EDGE, 2014; Ngobese, 2016). The sample was chosen from the Durban Fashion Fair (DFF) that made up 70 fashion SMMEs who were invited to take part in the quantitative study by filling in the questionnaire under the three categories of fashion SMMEs (mentee, emerging, and established).

### Instrument

The survey design included closed-ended questions in a '5 point Likert scale' that was distributed by the researcher to the owners or managers of the fashion SMMEs. The questionnaire was distributed in the following forms: i) hard copy printed ii) a Microsoft Word questionnaire iii) an online Google form. The questionnaire used an interval scale. A Likert scale allows a psychometric scale with multiple categories where participants can show their knowledge. The Likert questionnaires have been used frequently for investigations, and data can be gathered in a brief space of time relative to the participants responding positively (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). Questionnaires provide reliable estimates and valid interpretations from collected data (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). The research Sample and data collection

The researcher used a census study where data was gathered on every member of the population. A census survey collects complete information from all participants in the population. The census survey includes establishing and maintaining a complete list of the Primary Sampling Unit (PSU) components. The census study was chosen as the best method because it collects information about individuals and gives a broader sense of the population. The population for the fashion SMMEs at the Durban Fashion Fair (DFF) was 70. In total, 70 questionnaires were dispatched, but 58 responses were received, which gave an 83% response rate. According to Ganesh (2017), the response rate is the percentage of responses received against the sample and, he denotes that the response rate should be at least 70% to avoid bias and compromising of the data. The respondents from the DFF were divided into three categories, namely the 'mentees' who are starting their business under the guidance of a mentor; they have less than two years in business, then the 'emerging' who have been in business (2 to 6 years) and then 'established' who have more than 6years in business. The total 58 respondents comprised of 15 mentees, 25 emerging, and 18 established SMMEs. The emerging SMMEs had the highest responses; and this might be attributed to the inception of DFF founded in 2012, since the 'emerging' group was the first mentored group from inception (Durban Fashion Fair, 2019).

### Data Analysis Strategy

The researcher analyzed the data using descriptive statistics, and independent sample

tests (T-test). The mean and standard deviations of digital marketing categories were conducted on IBM SPSS version 26.

## RESULTS

### Validity

Face validity is the extent that the instrument 'looks' valid, since it's based on a subjective judgment and which is neither quantifiable nor testable (Creswell et al., 2007; Ndayizigamiye, 2012). Validity was assured in that the questionnaire needed to be easily understandable by the respondents, and it was applied in real-life scenarios (Al Abdallah, Abou-Moghli & Al-Thani, 2018). The questionnaire was scrutinized by experts, one statistician and two research supervisors, and the received feedback included in redrafting the final questionnaire (Phelan & Wren, 2006). Content validity was assessed as the extent that “the instrument covers the complete content of the particular construct it is set out to measure” (Creswell et al., 2007). The questionnaire assured subject area was covered.

### Reliability

Test-retest reliability is the scope on which the questionnaire produced similar results for the same group of people at different times (Ndayizigamiye, 2012). The survey instrument ensured that it supplied consistent results by making sure that the DFF respondents answered the questions at their own pace and time, to give correct responses. Participants were approached individually, and the results were collected individually so that the responses were not influenced by other designers (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The reliability of the instrument was the measurement of consistency and repeatability (Creswell et al., 2007). Reliability was achieved such that if a similar research investigation was carried out or repeated under the same conditions and with the same variables, the results of the data will be the same or similar to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

<b>Independent sample test–Previous online experience</b>			
	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Benefits	2.308	45	0.026
Usage	0.0478	34	0.636

According to the results in Table 2, the ‘benefits’ have a statistically significant ( $p=0.026$ ,  $<0.05$ ) difference between the mean score of respondents who have experience and those who do not. The ‘usage’ mean score difference is non-statistically significant because of the p-value (0.636) being above 0.5, meaning that there is no difference between people with previous experience and those without.

Central tendency measures (mean, median, and standard deviation) were used to conduct the descriptive analysis of the constructs involved in the study. The aim was to assess the distribution of the responses on scaled items. A five-point Likert scale (where the value of 1 corresponds to “Strongly disagree” and the value of 5 corresponds to “Strongly agree”) was used to measure all the constructs. Based on the principle that 2.5 (5/2) is the middle value of the five-point scale, any mean score below 2.5 indicates that most respondents tend to either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. Mean scores between 2.5 and 3.4 suggest that most respondents are neutral about the statements of the construct. Lastly, all the mean scores equal to or above 3.5, showing that most respondents tend to either agree or strongly agree with the statements of the construct. Standard deviation describes the ‘score spread’

that is the how far the score of responses deviates from the average responses (Edmentum, 2019). Mean is the average, which is the measure of the participant's responses (Edmentum, 2019).

Central tendency measures (mean, median, and standard deviation) were used to conduct the descriptive analysis of the constructs. Tendency measures (mean, median, and standard deviation)

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard dev.</b>	<b>Avg mean</b>	<b>Avg std dev.</b>
Business category	Mentee	3.03	0.86	3.06	0.65
	Emerging	3.1	0.63		
	Established	2.99	0.56		
Ecommerce use	Email communication in house	3.02	1.61	3.48	1.116
	Email communication with other businesses	3.85	1.25		
	Email communication with customers	3.57	1.33		
	SMME has a static website	2.21	1.55	2.20	1.136
	SMME has a WOO commerce website	2.19	1.54		
Marketing	<b>Market and sell products in house resources</b>				
	On social media - Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	3.93	0.82	3.93	.817
	On company's Website	4.23	1.09		
	Using WhatsApp	4.31	1.06		
	<b>Market and sell products using second-party companies</b>				
	Using sites like gumtree and paying a commission	1.94	1.33	2.11	0.941
	Paid advertising on social sites, eg Facebook, Instagram,	2.55	1.44		
	Sell on prominent fashion SA e-commerce sites, eg Superbalist	1.83	1.15		
Benefits	Internets market business globally	4.19	0.88	3.765	0.917
	Increased customer base due to marketing	4.04	0.75		
	Increased revenue due to marketing	3.87	0.77		
	Low advertising marketing costs	3.36	0.90		
	Faster decision making due to accurate information	3.53	1.06		
	Customer experiencing efficient delivery of service	3.6	1.14		
	<b>Previous online experience</b>				
	Yes	3.11	0.71	3.06	0.66
	No	3.01	0.61		

The results in Table 3 indicate that the mean score of e-commerce usage is different across categories. The results on digital marketing in Table 3 show that 3.02 of the respondents were neutral to the use of electronic mail (e-mail) in-house. The results also show the mean of 3.57 of the respondents, showing that they agreed they use e-mail to communicate with customers. The mean of those who e-mailed to and with other businesses is 3.85, thus they strongly agree. From Table 3, we can note that most respondents were neutral with the statements on the usage of e-mail for correspondence because the overall

mean is 3.48. The mean score for using marketing and selling products using in-house applications is 3.93, indicating that the respondents agree since the value is greater than 3.5. The SMMEs market and sell their products on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, and the highest mean is on WhatsApp (4.31).

Most businesses disagreed with using second party parties/businesses that require commission or payment to market and sell their products. The mean figures are: Gumtree (1.94), Facebook and Instagram (2.55), and fashion sites e.g. Zando.co.za, Superbalist.com, and Takealot.com (1.83). The average mean is 2.11, while the average standard deviation is 0.941. Most SMMEs do not own their websites, since the overall mean score is 2.2. The benefits realized from digital marketing are visible to the business. The SMMEs agree to the positive impact of the business and the overall average mean score is 3.765, and a standard deviation of 0.941. This is followed by the mean of benefits of increased customer base 4.04, and the least of the benefits is low advertising costs, with a mean of 3.36.

In the previous online experience, the average mean score of e-commerce usage is slightly different across respondents who have previous experience (Yes= 3.11) and those who do not (No= 3.01). The mean score difference is non-statistically significant because of the p-value (0,636) above 0.5, so there is no difference between people with previous experience and those without.

### **Association between a Static Website and the Category of Designers**

The relationship was scrutinized between the static website and the category of designers. The p-value was 0.198, which is greater than 0.005, indicating no relationship between the two variables. The statistics revealed that 66.7% of the mentee designers did not have a static website, and 64% of the emerging designers did not have a static website; however, 55.6% of established designers showed that they have a website. This could mean the two categories, mentee, and emerging designers, have a different business focus compared to established designers.

### **Association between Functional Website and Profit for the Year**

From the test  $p=0.452$ , it was discovered that there was no significant relationship between a functional website (that a customer can view and buy products) and the profit of the fashion SMME, since the p-value was greater than 0.005. From the statistics, 40% of fashion SMMEs with annual profits of less than R100000 owned functional websites. In contrast, 71.4% of fashion SMMEs making a profit between R100 000 - R250 000 indicated that they owned functional websites, and 50% of the designers earning over R250 000 responded to having a functional website. The results suggest website use grows with the growth of income. It reaches its peak on the middle-profit earners (R100 000 - R250 000) where functional websites act as a driver to expose the businesses to the global world, however as profits increase above R250 000, website use decrease since the business would have established a loyal client base and have goodwill such that the frequency of a website for ordering and viewing catalogues decreases, as the regular customers might receive monthly catalogues through emails.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The results attest that the most used digital marketing tools by fashion SMMEs are WhatsApp and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. According to Grover & Mandan (2017), social media is a relatively low-cost marketing method that avails large numbers of contacts and excessive traffic for the benefit of the company. Other authors

agree with this notion, indicating that the internet is four times cheaper than the conventional channels of marketing ways, such as television (Suryani & Margery, 2020). However, social media and online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google have introduced paid advertisements called Ads. The Ads help increase visibility by either ranking high on the search results or visibility to a greater audience, which now might prove expensive for starting up SMMEs. Kotler, et al., (2014) attest that a good fashion marketing tool involves procedures that identify forecasts and meet the customer requirements efficiently and profitably. Social media is a networking tool that allows for two-way communication where businesses can research the customer's tastes and preferences based on likes or shares, or conversations on social media. Using digital marketing is powerful because it is widely used in Africa, with over 350 million internet users and 94% of the internet users accessing applications like Facebook through their phones.

Most fashion SMMEs indicated they did not own a website, either static or functional website. Websites are viewed as mandatory investment infrastructure for progressive businesses (Brzozowska & Bubel, 2015). The websites are the more organized instrument that offers current product information, give a comprehensive outlook of the business, and provides a seamless way of buying the preferred products and if employed with the right features and design, it can tantalize the customers, provoke curiosity and enhance service delivery through personalization (Kabassi, 2017).

In China, SMMEs practice transaction-focused e-commerce, through applications such as WeChat where they sell business websites or applications, and they can buy on social networks through embedded links. The Chinese social network is an ecosystem that includes influencers playing a key role. However, in South Africa, the websites are the only applications that offer seamless buying as they have an online shop, while social media are instruments to direct customers to businesses but they do not offer a complete system to transact (Sun, Son & Chi, 2016; Brzozowska & Bubel, 2015). Websites have become an essential aspect of digital marketing because customers can buy the product immediately. Impulse buying is prominent as customers who are instant gratifiers, thus increased sales (Biggs, Chande, Chen, Matthews, Mercier, Wang & Zou 2018). The reasons for the low website acquisition may be because websites are high to maintain requiring the organizations to update content and products, offer a variety of value-added features, and a skill set to update and ensure that the website is functional on different devices (Nhuvira, 2021).

A greater percentage of the fashion SMMEs agreed they realized the benefits of digital marketing. They confirmed that through digital marketing, their customer base has grown, they have knowledge of their customer preferences, and there has been an increase in sales. The South African pure online brands like Superbalist reached R40 million in sales on Black Friday in 2018, and their sales have been increasing yearly by 115% (Rawlins, 2018). Akter & Wamba (2016) reveal the importance of a strong relationship between analyzing real data and decision-making for the competitive advantage of the organization. Real-time data has become an asset to 'SMME's decision-making such that it aids firms to solve problems, establish trust and loyalty with customers positively influencing their purchasing decision (Baviskar, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Fashion SMME is cognizant of the importance of the digital marketing, investing time and effort to foster loyal customers through personalized experiences grows the business. Repeat customers are a result of constant communication, and the more your business exposes itself, the more you stay on the customers mind. Digital marketing is a channel to know more about customer requirements, and it's also important to make useful changes for your target market. The application of digital marketing also helps to shorten the distribution

chain link and reach customers faster and more effectively. Websites are important and the fashion SMMEs should consider adopting them as they enhance participation in two-way communications with current and prospective customers more frequently and efficiently than other forms of marketing media. Influencer marketing using celebrities is another way that businesses can market their businesses and this has been successful in China and it's a growing trend in South Africa.

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