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Digital Marketing Adoption Among Small Businesses in Dhaka: A Case Study of Stamford University Graduates

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has redefined marketing practices across the globe, with small businesses increasingly embracing digital platforms to enhance market presence, customer engagement, and operational efficiency. This study investigates the extent and nature of digital marketing adoption among Stamford University graduates operating small businesses in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire (n = 30) and in-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 10). The findings provide insight into the tools used, perceived benefits, implementation challenges, and the influence of academic background on digital marketing behavior. The study revealed that 83% of participants had adopted at least one form of digital marketing, with social media platforms particularly Facebook (90%) and Instagram (65%) being the most widely used. However, more advanced tools such as SEO (28%), Google Ads (20%), and email marketing (15%) were considerably underutilized. While 76% of respondents reported improved customer reach and 69% noted enhanced brand visibility, only 41% observed a significant impact on direct sales. Key challenges included limited technical skills (reported by over 60%), time constraints (45%), and a lack of understanding regarding return on investment. Though participants credited their Stamford University education with providing strong theoretical foundations, 62% acknowledged that practical digital marketing skills were largely self-taught. The research highlights a notable curriculum-practice gap and underscores the need for practical digital literacy training within business education programs. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on SME digital transformation in emerging economies and emphasize the importance of institutional and educational support in enabling effective digital marketing adoption.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing, Small Businesses, Technology Adoption, Entrepreneurship, Dhaka*

1. Introduction

In the wake of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, digital technologies have significantly reshaped the global business landscape, particularly in how enterprises engage with their consumers. Among the various innovations, digital marketing has emerged as a key driver of organizational competitiveness, enabling businesses to transcend geographical boundaries, personalize customer experiences, and operate cost-effectively (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For small businesses, especially in developing economies such as Bangladesh, digital marketing presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It offers by Ikenga & Egbule (2024), an affordable platform for market visibility but simultaneously demands a strategic mindset and digital literacy that many small business owners may lack. This research investigated by Mahmud, 2022; Mamun, 2024; and Sultana (2024), the adoption of digital marketing practices among small business entrepreneurs who are alumni of Stamford University, Dhaka, exploring the extent of adoption, perceived benefits, challenges, and the role that their academic background may have played in shaping their digital marketing strategies.

The digital transformation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has gained traction globally due to the growing penetration of internet connectivity, smartphone usage, and social media platforms. According to Aljahaf (2023), internet users in Bangladesh have surpassed 130 million, making digital platforms increasingly vital for business sustainability. Despite this, the extent of digital marketing adoption among SMEs in Dhaka remains uneven, influenced by factors such as business size, owner's education, technological readiness, and institutional support (Aljahaf, 2023). Stamford University graduates, equipped with formal education in business disciplines, potentially represent a unique cohort of small business owners who may exhibit higher levels of digital engagement compared to the general population. However, empirical evidence specifically focused on this group is scarce, warranting further exploration.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, hosts a large and growing number of small and medium enterprises that contribute significantly to the country's economy. According to Manik (2024), SMEs account for over 25% of GDP and employ more than 7.8 million people. Yet, a significant proportion of these businesses rely on traditional marketing practices such as word-of-mouth, printed flyers, and banners. The transition from offline to online marketing strategies is often constrained by infrastructural limitations, a lack of digital skills, resistance to change, and limited access to capital (Hossain et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the younger generation of entrepreneurs, particularly university graduates, is beginning to embrace digital tools such as Facebook Ads, Google My Business, SEO strategies, and e-commerce platforms, albeit with varying degrees of proficiency.

Digital marketing is more than just a trend; it is an essential tool for survival and growth in an increasingly competitive marketplace. For small businesses, it provides a cost-effective means of reaching a large customer base, enabling targeted communication, gathering real-time feedback, and building brand identity (Hossain et al., 2021). However, successful digital marketing adoption depends on multiple internal and external factors, including the entrepreneur's innovativeness, awareness, strategic vision, access to training, and support from government or private institutions (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In this context, examining the digital marketing behavior of Stamford University alumni operating small businesses in Dhaka provides a relevant and timely case study that can offer actionable insights into educational, technological, and policy interventions needed to support the digital transition of SMEs in Bangladesh.

Several theoretical frameworks underpin the analysis of technology adoption in businesses, with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Al-Zoubi, 2013) being among the most widely cited. The TAM posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence an individual's decision to adopt technology. Similarly, Rogers' model emphasizes the roles of innovation characteristics (e.g., relative advantages, compatibility, complexity) and social systems in determining adoption rates. Applying these theories to the context of digital marketing adoption among small businesses, previous studies have shown that educational background, previous technology exposure, and peer influence are strong predictors of adoption behavior (Al-Zoubi, 2013 and Shi et al., 2024).

In Bangladesh, existing research on digital marketing has largely focused on large corporations and startups in the tech sector, with limited attention given to SMEs or university graduates as entrepreneurs. A study by Hassan (2023) found that while awareness of digital marketing was relatively high among business graduates in Dhaka, practical implementation remained low due to budget constraints, inadequate technical support, and a lack of customized digital strategies. Moreover, training and mentorship opportunities were often unavailable or not aligned with the needs of SME owners.

Another relevant study by Drari (2022) highlighted that digital literacy and a proactive attitude toward innovation were more prevalent among university-educated entrepreneurs compared to non-graduates. Their research indicated that access to formal business education correlated with better understanding of SEO, data analytics, and customer relationship management tools. However, even within this subgroup, barriers such as lack of time, fear of failure, and limited ROI knowledge continued to impede full-scale adoption. These findings align with the work of (Wang et al., 2025), who argued that digital transformation in SMEs cannot be achieved solely through individual motivation but requires institutional scaffolding, including digital infrastructure, policy support, and capacity-building initiatives.

Saura et al. (2023) reported that SMEs that effectively integrated digital marketing tools demonstrated higher sales growth and better customer engagement than those that did not. Similarly, a study by Taiminen & Karjaluo (2015) in the Finnish SME context revealed that while small businesses were aware of digital marketing benefits, strategic and technical skill gaps often limited their implementation. These insights resonate with the Bangladeshi context, where rapid digitalization contrasts sharply with the underutilization of digital tools by SMEs due to practical constraints.

Although the significance of digital marketing for SME competitiveness is well established, there is a notable research gap concerning its adoption by university graduates who operate small businesses in Bangladesh. Most studies conflate the behavior of small business owners without differentiating between education levels or institutional affiliations. Yet, understanding how formal business education influences digital adoption decisions can offer critical insights for curriculum development, entrepreneurship training programs, and national SME support policies. Addressing these gaps, previous studies explored digital marketing adoption in SMEs broadly, emphasizing barriers, infrastructure, and institutional roles, but failed to differentiate based on educational background, especially within the Bangladeshi SME context. While the current research fills this gap by focusing on Stamford University graduates in Dhaka, linking formal education, entrepreneurial practice, and digital marketing adoption.

Moreover, Stamford University one of the leading private universities in Bangladesh produces a significant number of graduates who enter the entrepreneurial ecosystem each year. Their educational exposure to business theories, marketing strategies, and technology tools places them in a potentially advantageous position to lead digital transformations in the SME sector. However, empirical evidence regarding their actual engagement with digital marketing remains sparse. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences, practices, and perceptions of Stamford University alumni engaged in small business ventures in Dhaka. By focusing on this specific group, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of digital marketing behavior in a transitional economy and provides evidence-based recommendations for improving digital readiness among SME entrepreneurs.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were small business owners based in Dhaka who graduated from Stamford University, Bangladesh, between 2012 and 2022. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that the participants had both academic exposure to business education and current involvement in entrepreneurial ventures. A total of 30 participants were selected for the

study to ensure a manageable but diverse sample for qualitative and descriptive analysis. Participants were identified through Stamford University's alumni network, business forums, and social media entrepreneur groups.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Instrument of Collecting Data

To obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher employed two primary instruments:

1. **Structured Questionnaire:** A self-administered questionnaire was developed to assess participants' demographics, types of digital marketing tools used, perceived benefits, frequency of usage, and challenges faced. The questionnaire included closed-ended items using a 5-point Likert scale and multiple-choice questions.
2. **Semi-Structured Interview Guide:** To gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions, a semi-structured interview guide was used. The questions were designed to explore themes such as motivation for adopting digital marketing, decision-making processes, the role of their university education, and strategic outlook on digital platforms.

The instruments were developed based on previous studies e.g., Salim, 2022; Woldu & Quazi, 2024; and Yusfiarto & Pambekti (2019) and adapted to the Bangladeshi context. The questionnaire and interview guide were validated through expert consultation from two faculty members from the Department of Business Administration.

2.2.2 Techniques for Collecting Data

A mixed-methods approach was employed to strengthen the validity and depth of the findings:

1. **Quantitative Data Collection:** Questionnaires were distributed to participants via email and online forms (Google Forms). Follow-up reminders were sent to increase the response rate. Out of 40 distributed forms, 30 valid responses were received and analyzed.
2. **Qualitative Data Collection:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 selected participants from the 30 who completed the questionnaire. The selection was based on willingness and diversity in digital marketing practices. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person, each lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Stamford University Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection commenced. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital marketing adoption patterns.

1. **Quantitative Analysis:** Data from the structured questionnaire were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation) were used to summarize demographic profiles and digital marketing usage patterns. Correlation analysis was also conducted to examine relationships between educational background, business size, and extent of digital tool usage.
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic coding was performed manually by reading each transcript line-by-line and identifying recurring patterns or themes. Codes were grouped into broader categories, including adoption drivers such as cost-effectiveness and customer reach, challenges such as technical barriers and time constraints, the influence of university education, and strategic benefits and limitations. Through triangulation of both datasets, the findings were validated and enabled the generation of rich, nuanced interpretations of the digital marketing behavior of Stamford University graduates.

3. Results

This section presents the findings derived from both the quantitative survey ($n = 30$) and the qualitative interviews ($n = 10$) conducted with Stamford University graduates who currently own or manage small businesses in Dhaka. The analysis is structured around four key areas: (1) extent of digital marketing adoption, (2) types of digital tools used, (3) perceived benefits and challenges, (4) key challenges faced, (5) Influence of Stamford University Education, and (6) Summary of Key Patterns.

3.1 Extent of Digital Marketing Adoption

Most participants (83%) reported using some form of digital marketing in their business operations; however, only 27% indicated that it was a core component of their business strategy, with the majority employing it in a more informal or supplementary way. Meanwhile, 17% of respondents reported minimal or no use of digital marketing, citing reasons such as lack of knowledge, limited time, or reliance on traditional word-of-mouth marketing. Among those who adopted digital marketing, social media proved to be the most dominant practice, with Facebook being used by 90% and Instagram by 65% of adopters. In contrast, Google Ads was utilized by only 20% of respondents, and email marketing had a penetration rate of just 15%, reflecting a relatively narrow scope of digital marketing strategies.

3.2 Types of Digital Marketing Tools Used

The survey asked participants to select all digital tools currently used in their business operations. The frequency of use was as follows:

Table 1. The Frequency of Participants Survey

Digital Tool	Usage (%)
Facebook (Ads/Posts)	90%
Instagram	65%
WhatsApp Business	43%
Google My Business	33%
SEO (Search Engine Opt.)	28%
Email Marketing	15%
Influencer Collaboration	22%
Paid Google Advertising	20%

Participants mainly relied on low-cost, user-friendly platforms, with limited use of data-driven or paid digital marketing services.

3.3 Perceived Benefits of Digital Marketing

Respondents identified several benefits of digital marketing for their small businesses. A majority (76%) stated that digital tools enabled them to connect with a broader audience, particularly younger consumers in urban areas, while 69% believed that digital platforms significantly enhanced their business visibility. Additionally, 58% viewed digital marketing as more cost-effective compared to traditional media such as newspaper advertisements or physical banners. Around half of the respondents (50%) also highlighted its role in maintaining regular engagement with customers through comments, likes, and direct messages. However, despite these advantages, only 41% reported a direct increase in sales because of digital marketing, indicating that while visibility and interaction improved, the conversion of engagement into revenue remained a challenge.

3.4 Key Challenges Faced

The survey and interviews revealed several barriers to effective digital marketing adoption. More than 60% of participants admitted to having limited technical knowledge, particularly in areas such as SEO, ad targeting, and analytics tools, with many interviewees explaining that their learning was largely self-directed and supported by very limited

structured training. Time constraints also emerged as a challenge, as 45% of respondents reported struggling to consistently manage digital campaigns due to their multitasking roles within the business. Furthermore, uncertainty over return on investment (ROI) was a concern, with several participants expressing difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of their campaigns, which often resulted in inconsistent or minimal usage. The rapid pace of changes in digital platforms, such as shifting social media algorithms and new features, was also perceived as overwhelming. Finally, budget limitations restricted the adoption of advanced strategies, as while social media was generally considered low-cost, expenses for paid ads and professional services, such as graphic design or video marketing, were often seen as unaffordable.

3.5 Influence of Stamford University Education

The central focus of the study was to assess how graduates' academic experiences at Stamford University influenced their digital marketing behavior. The findings revealed that 73% of respondents believed their university education provided a strong theoretical foundation in marketing and entrepreneurship. However, only 38% recalled receiving practical training on digital marketing tools during their studies, with most reporting that their digital exposure came through personal experimentation or post-graduate online learning platforms such as YouTube tutorials and LinkedIn Learning. Despite this gap, several interviewees credited the university with fostering critical thinking and adaptability, skills that enabled them to teach themselves digital marketing after graduation. Additionally, alumni networks and connections built during their time at Stamford were considered valuable resources for sharing strategies and collaborating on digital initiatives.

3.6 Summary of Key Patterns

Table 2. Summary of Key Patterns

Finding Area	Key Result
Digital Marketing Adoption	83% adoption rate, mostly limited to social media platforms
Common Tools Used	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp; limited use of email or analytics tools
Benefits	Visibility, reach, and engagement improved; limited direct sales growth

Challenges	Skill gaps, time constraints, ROI ambiguity, rapid digital changes
Academic Influence	Good business foundation but low practical digital training at university

The research reveals that while Stamford University graduates running small businesses in Dhaka show above-average awareness and use of digital marketing, their practices remain largely limited to basic tools such as Facebook and Instagram. Adoption is driven more by peer influence and self-learning than by formal education or institutional support. Although digital marketing offers clear benefits in terms of visibility and reach, technical skill gaps, time constraints, and uncertain ROI prevent most from leveraging its full potential. The findings suggest an urgent need for practical digital training at the university level and broader support for SMEs to maximize the impact of digital technologies

4. Discussion

4.1 Digital Marketing Adoption: Awareness Versus Strategic Integration

The study revealed that 83% of participants have adopted at least one form of digital marketing, primarily through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. This is consistent with the findings of Olugbenga (2024), who emphasized that small businesses frequently adopt social media as their initial digital marketing tool due to its accessibility, affordability, and wide reach. Similarly, Ramos (2021) reported that Finnish SMEs showed a preference for low-cost, easy-to-use digital channels rather than more complex tools like analytics, SEO, or content marketing.

However, while awareness was high, strategic usage remained limited, with only 27% of respondents integrating digital marketing as a core business strategy. This aligns with Nuseir (2018), who found that although SME owners in the UAE were familiar with digital platforms, most lacked the planning and strategic capacity to execute long-term digital marketing plans effectively. In the Dhaka context, this could be attributed to both individual and systemic barriers such as lack of formal training, time, and analytical capabilities.

4.2 Key Influencing Factors: Education, Motivation, and Peer Influence

A unique aspect of this study was its focus on Stamford University graduates. Many participants cited their academic background as providing them with general business knowledge,

but not the technical competencies required to carry out effective digital marketing campaigns. This confirms Bhattacharya et al. (2021), who found that digital literacy among Bangladeshi SMEs was significantly influenced by personal initiative rather than formal education.

Moreover, the role of peer influence emerged as a strong factor in tool adoption. Many respondents stated that they chose platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp Business because others in their network were using them a pattern consistent with Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2003), which emphasizes that adoption of new technologies often follows observable behavior within one's social group. This also resonates with Shirish et al. (2023), who argue that digital transformation in SMEs is shaped not only by internal capabilities but also by the broader digital ecosystem and community practices.

4.3 Barriers to Adoption: Skills, Time, and ROI Uncertainty

Several challenges hindered the full-scale adoption of digital marketing tools, including a lack of technical skills such as SEO, ad targeting, and performance analytics, limited time for consistent content creation and campaign management, and uncertainty over the potential Return on Investment (ROI). These barriers mirror the findings of Mechman et al. (2022), who reported that many SMEs in developing countries lack the expertise and resources to implement complex digital strategies. Similarly, Ishaq (2022) investigated that SMEs in South Asia face difficulties in digital adoption due to weak support structures, including inadequate access to professional training and advisory services.

The issue of ROI uncertainty is particularly notable. In this study, only 41% of participants observed a direct impact of digital marketing on sales. This is consistent with Ahmed et al. (2024), who found that many Bangladeshi SMEs perceive digital marketing as a visibility tool rather than a direct driver of profit. Without proper analytics or conversion-tracking mechanisms, many entrepreneurs operate on assumptions rather than evidence-based decision-making.

4.4 Educational Gaps and the Role of Higher Education

Although Stamford University graduates showed better awareness and motivation to adopt digital tools than the general SME population, many interviewees felt that their academic training did not adequately prepare them for real-world digital marketing challenges. This critique suggests a curriculum-practice gap, where theoretical knowledge is not always translated into practical digital competencies.

This aligns with Apulu (2012), who emphasize the importance of curriculum reform in business and IT faculties in developing nations. To support digital entrepreneurship effectively, universities need to integrate hands-on training modules, simulation-based learning, and real-time digital marketing projects into the syllabus. As also noted by Langseth et al. (2023), higher

education institutions must act as digital enablers for students transitioning into entrepreneurial roles.

4.5 Practical Engagement and Self-Learning

Another important theme that emerged was the role of self-learning. Many participants had acquired their digital marketing skills through informal means, such as YouTube tutorials, free webinars, or experimentation. This behavior reflects what (Enaigbe & Ezeliara n.d.) call "entrepreneurial digital literacy" the proactive acquisition of technical know-how outside formal learning environments.

While such self-driven learning is commendable, it also underscores the lack of institutional support systems, such as mentorship, incubators, or training centers that could help bridge the digital divide among SME owners. The absence of such systems is consistent with the concerns raised by Zohir (2023), who argued that many Bangladeshi small business owners are navigating digital transformation with minimal structured support from government or private institutions.

4.6 The Role of Digital Platforms and the Local Market Context

Interestingly, participants indicated that Facebook and Instagram were not just preferred platforms but essential tools for small businesses in Dhaka. These platforms are deeply integrated into the lifestyle of urban consumers and offer a relatively level playing field for business visibility. This is in line with Hoque et al. (2020) data that shows Facebook as the leading digital platform for both advertising and customer interaction in Bangladesh.

However, over-reliance on just a few platforms also poses risks, such as algorithm changes or ad cost inflation. As Madhavi (2025) suggest, a diversified digital strategy involving SEO, email marketing, and content development is critical for sustainable digital growth.

4.7 Summary of Discussion

Table 3. Summary of Discussion

Thematic Area	Findings in This Study	Supporting Literature
Digital Adoption	High awareness, limited strategic use	Tiago & Veríssimo (2014); Taiminen & Karjaluo (2015)
Influencing Factors	Academic background helps, but self-learning dominates	Islam et al. (2021); Rogers (2003)
Barriers	Skill gaps, time, and ROI concerns	El-Gohary (2012); Ali et al. (2020)

Educational Role	Theory-rich, practice-poor business education	Kapurubandara & Lawson (2006); Setiawan et al. (2020)
Platform Use	Facebook is essential but overused	Statista (2023); Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2019)

In conclusion, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research on digital marketing in emerging economies and reinforce the notion that awareness does not guarantee strategic adoption. While Stamford University graduates show higher digital readiness than average SME owners, their adoption patterns remain reactive and narrowly focused. Educational institutions must reorient business curricula to meet the demands of a digitally driven entrepreneurial environment. Simultaneously, broader ecosystem supports such as targeted training programs, government subsidies for digital tools, and SME incubator services are essential to help small business owners in Dhaka fully harness the potential of digital marketing.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the extent, patterns, and challenges of digital marketing adoption among small business owners in Dhaka who are graduates of Stamford University. The findings reveal a moderate but growing engagement with digital marketing tools, particularly social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. While most respondents demonstrated awareness of the importance of digital marketing for business growth, their practices remained largely basic and reactive rather than strategic and data driven.

The study concluded that formal business education provided by Stamford University contributed to foundational knowledge in marketing and entrepreneurship. However, practical skills in digital tools such as SEO, email campaigns, performance tracking, and content strategy were mostly self-taught, highlighting a clear gap between academic training and industry needs. Although many participants were motivated to use digital marketing due to peer influence and customer demand, they were often constrained by time limitations, budget constraints, lack of technical training, and uncertainty about return on investment (ROI).

In alignment with previous research, this study reaffirms that while digital marketing holds significant promise for small enterprises, its successful implementation depends on a combination of digital literacy, strategic orientation, and institutional support. Stamford University graduates showed greater openness to adopting digital tools than the average SME population in Bangladesh, suggesting that higher education has a role to play in promoting digital entrepreneurship provided the curriculum evolves to include hands-on, up-to-date digital marketing training.

Therefore, this study concludes that effective digital marketing adoption among small businesses in Dhaka requires more than just awareness; it demands practical skills, mentorship, ongoing support, and an enabling environment. Bridging the gap between business education and real-world digital competency is essential for preparing graduates to thrive in an increasingly digital economy.

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