

Marketing to Modern Parents: Digital Marketing Strategies for Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast Asia's Maternity and Baby Market

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Abstract. In today's digital landscape, digital marketing has become a cornerstone for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) seeking to enhance brand awareness and customer loyalty. This study addresses a gap in the literature concerning how niche-market-SMEs – particularly those in the Southeast Asian maternity and baby-care sector – can effectively implement digital marketing strategies. The discussion evolved from two perspectives: First, the paper explores key digital marketing strategies and analyzes the role of these strategies in SMEs, especially how data and platform tools can inform decisions; Second, from the consumers' behavior perspective, it identifies and analyzes the emotional and practical-driven factors that determine young parents' purchasing decisions. Finally, considering the intersection between digital marketing and fulfilling customer expectations, this paper proposes the Customer-Centricity-Awareness & Authenticity-Relationship Building-Engagement & Experience (C.A.R.E.)strategic framework, a model designed to provide actionable recommendations for SMEs competing in the SEA maternity and baby market to harness digital tools to enhance brand awareness, foster trust, and build loyalty, even with limited marketing budgets.

Keywords: digital marketing strategies, SMEs, consumer behavior, maternity and baby products, Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

SMEs, businesses characterized by their relatively small workforce, limited financial resources, and modest market presence, form the backbone of the Southeast Asian Nations' economies; they play a crucial role in local employment and innovation. The maternity and baby market has emerged as a fast-growing and digitally sensitive industry since the end of Covid-19, propelled by rising middle-class demand, digitalized parenting habits, and increasing concern for child health. As younger generations of parents become more reliant on digital platforms for parenting and shopping, SMEs face unique opportunities in reaching, attracting, and retaining customers to increase competitiveness in the increasingly saturated market.

In the digital age, marketing has transcended traditional boundaries, as some scholars highlighted that digital marketing has become a cornerstone for businesses seeking to enhance brand awareness

and loyalty [1]. However, many SMEs have access to data but struggle to utilize it fully to support their business, often due to limited digital expertise. At the same time, most research on digital marketing is centered on multinational firms or general e-commerce trends, leaving a research gap in understanding how SMEs, particularly those in niche markets like maternity and baby care, can implement digital marketing to improve brand awareness.

This literature-based study examines how consumer-oriented digital marketing strategies can enhance brand awareness and competitiveness for Southeast Asian SMEs in the maternity and baby-care sector. Analyzing existing literature and real-life case studies, the research explores the intersection of digital tools and paternal decision-making, providing insights for industry practitioners.

2. Digital marketing in SMEs

2.1. Digital marketing strategies for SMEs and their advantages

Research indicates that the increased internet penetration and growing reliance on digital technologies have made it crucial for businesses to adopt digital marketing strategies to stay competitive [2]. One key advantage digital marketing provides to SMEs is cost efficiency. For example, online social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook can help SMEs reach global audiences, cultivate higher brand visibility, receive market feedback, and strengthen customer relationships at little or no cost. In comparison, traditional marketing approaches, including print media, radio, television promotion, and direct marketing, are costly and rely on one-way communication methods to reach audiences.

Digital marketing strategies like live sessions and User-Generated Content (UGC) empower SMEs to make more personalized and compelling content that can communicate their brand values, product features, and industry expertise in a more relatable, educational, persuasive, and visually appealing way. Studies show that content-focused advertising outperforms traditional direct selling ads in effectiveness and customer engagement, receiving 27% more clicks on average [3]. This study proves consumers prefer marketing strategies that deliver valuable, entertaining, and relevant messages tailored to their needs, concerns, or interests. For SMEs operating in trust-sensitive sectors like maternity and baby care, producing authentic, educational, and high-quality content marketing is crucial for increasing credibility. It nurtures long-term customer relationships, promotes loyalty, and positions brand-owned platforms as the go-to resource for reliable parenting information.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is another critical digital marketing tool. It refers to improving brand visibility by enhancing a website's content and keyword alignment to rank better on Search Engine Result Pages (SERPs), increasing brand awareness among customers searching for related products. This visibility not only improves brand awareness but also enhances credibility. Highly ranked websites are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and high quality.

Influencer marketing is another formidable digital strategy for SMEs to boost brand awareness. This involves collaborating with individuals with substantial influence and popularity on social media to shape consumer opinions and behaviors. Influencer marketing is particularly effective because influencers are seen as relatable and credible figures whose endorsements feel like recommendations from trusted friends or experts. This credibility builds genuine consumer connections and loyalty [4]. SMEs can access a hard-to-reach group of targeted customers who already show interest in the field by collaborating with influencers who share their brand's niche [5]. These influencers have the ability to tell gripping stories, create eye-catching content, and provide viewers with an engaging experience. Overall, influencer-generated content can enhance brand

image and boost customer trust if the influencer's values and style match the brands. Additionally, influencer marketing offers key metrics for performance tracking. For instance, engagement rates and promo code-driven sales allow precise ROI measurement and provide actionable insights for review and refinement.

2.2. The role of data-driven decision making in SME digital marketing

Unlike traditional marketing approaches, where data collection is often manual and time-consuming, digital marketing enables real-time, automated, cost-effective data gathering. In this context, data is more than mere information; it becomes a valuable supportive tool for decision-making. This process is defined as Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM), referring to making business decisions based on the analysis of accurate, relevant, and measurable data. In digital marketing, common data sources include social media metrics, web analytics, e-commerce dashboards, and customer feedback. DDDM can be particularly helpful for SMEs by enhancing efficiency and precision in strategic movements.

First, DDDM enables ongoing measurement of key performance metrics such as conversion rate, Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC), and Click-Through Rate (CTR). These measurements allow accurate evaluation, efficient resource allocation, and real-time adaptation for SMEs. Underperforming campaigns can be quickly adjusted, while successful channels receive further investments. A study shows data-driven decisions are likely to be more successful in the long term because they are based on actual trends rather than intuition alone [6].

Second, DDDM provides market segmentation insights and guides SMEs to create more personalized content to attract customers. By analyzing historical customers' demographics, psychographics, and behavioral pattern data, SMEs can better understand their target audiences and tailor messages accordingly. For example, product recommendations can be organized based on search history, and advertisement content can be crafted to cater to customer interests. Personalized content can encourage customer engagement and satisfaction. These data-driven capabilities help SMEs ensure that marketing investments can boost conversion and customer loyalty to the greatest extent.

3. Consumer behavior in maternity and baby market

For SMEs, staying competitive and attracting consumers, understanding consumers' desires and needs-not just products-is essential to marketing success. This is especially relevant in the maternity and baby industry, where parents' buying decisions are shaped by complex emotional factors, practical concerns, and insights drawn from various information sources. The maternity and baby industry are experiencing rapid growth, fueled by urbanization, the rise of dual-income families, and increased disposable income. With a new generation of mobile-first and high-discerning parents shaping demand, it becomes crucial for SMEs to understand what these consumers value in baby care products, what factors increase their purchase intentions, and where they seek trusted information.

3.1. The values that parents care when buying baby-care products

A mix of emotional and practical drivers influences consumer behavior when buying baby-care products.

First, emotional factors like love, safety, and parental responsibility determine how mothers and fathers evaluate product options. According to research, in this market segment, consumers are more impacted by emotionally charged marketing strategies than by rational messaging. Among parents born in the 1990s and after, there was a shift toward increasingly aesthetically driven, placing high value on emotional alignment and aesthetic appeal with their parenting values [7]. A recent study revealed that 36.4% of parents are willing to pay for a premium when a product meets both their practical needs and visual expectations [8].

Research finds, parents are extremely risk-averse when it comes to their children's wellness and hygiene; therefore, they prioritize quality and safety over price [9]. In particular, concerns over harmful components and chemical ingredients have fueled a growing preference for natural and organic baby-care products [10]. Some scholars further confirm that organic components, eco-friendly materials, and natural ingredients positively correlated with consumers' decisions to purchase baby care products. These features are perceived as indicators of safety, care, and high-quality [11].

Given these behavioral insights, it is vital for SMEs competing in this market to develop baby-care products and marketing strategies that appeal to emotional values through storytelling and aesthetic design, while highlighting practical benefits like organic, safety, and quality. These attributes foster brand trust and positive brand image in the eyes of young parents.

3.2. Marketing touchpoints that influence parents

Parents, particularly first-time mothers and fathers, tend to conduct extensive research before purchasing baby care items. Their need for quality and safety assurance prompts them to seek purchase guides through various platforms, including word-of-mouth recommendations, product descriptions, forum reviews, and social media content. According to research, before making a purchase, over half (54%) of moms of children aged 0-6 search for products that have been approved by a scientific institution. Notably, nearly 70% of mothers in Poland reported they consider scientifically backed recommendations as the most reliable source of product validation. This common consumer perception applies broadly, including across Southeast Asia (SEA). A focus-group study conducted with mothers in Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia found that these mothers generally trust health claims on baby-care products governed by credible authorities [12].

Moreover, parents often feel overwhelmed by the complex and nuanced choices, prompting them to prioritize sources that break down these complexities in practical guidance [13]. Consequently, social media influencers, parenting bloggers, and online review platforms emerge as influential entities, complementing scientific endorsements, in shaping parents' purchasing decisions.

4. Strategic implications

This section seeks to integrate strategic and behavioral insights into actionable recommendations, providing a road map for SMEs pursuing long-term success in the digital age.

4.1. Market context: digital opportunities in SEA

SEA is an evolving digital and consumer market that offers opportunities for SMEs in the maternity and baby care sector. With a combined population of 700 million and a rising middle-class proportion, the digital economy in the region is expected to grow to \$1 trillion by 2030. Notably, more than 70% of nations across the region have internet access, making SEA one of the most

digitally developed and mobile-first markets globally [14]. These factors present an ideal environment for SMEs expanding market reach digitally.

This favorable macroeconomic context also shapes parenting-related consumption behavior. Despite a decline in fertility rates, there's steady growth in demand for baby care products in key markets like Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand. This trend is driven by rapid urbanization, increasing female workforce participation, and rising health consciousness. Working parents, especially mothers, are becoming more knowledgeable and willing to spend a premium on their babies' health.

In parallel, Faster-paced lifestyles and prevailing digital habits among SEA parents are transforming the purchase channels. Consumers are more inclined to opt for convenience when shopping, turning to online platforms as a time-saving tool to acquire parenting information and order products. Short-form video platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts, emerged as dominant forces in consumer engagement, acting as primary channels for product discovery. E-commerce platforms, led by Shopee, Lazada, and TikTok Shop in SEA, prevail as key purchase channels. The nuanced understanding of local digital trends and new consumer habits lays the foundation for SEA firms to grow strategically and thrive in the long run.

4.2. Strategic framework: the C.A.R.E. model

4.2.1. Connect through relevant platforms

SMEs must strategically choose platforms that dominate the digital lives of Southeast Asian parents to optimize their reach. With high smartphone usage, a mobile-first approach is no longer an option, but a necessity to make the brand ubiquitous. A consistent omnichannel presence across social media, e-commerce platforms, and brand-owned websites or mobile apps ensures brand exposure and seamless user experience [15].

Recommended practices for firms include developing mobile-user-friendly purchasing experiences by featuring touchscreen-friendly interfaces, app store optimization, and quick page loading times. When choosing channels for customer outreach, firms should prioritize region-specific platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, for widespread visibility and daily customer engagement; Shopee, Lazada, and TikTok Shop, three leading e-commerce platforms in SEA, for conversion into sales.

4.2.2. Appeal to emotions and safety values

Emotional assurance and product safety are core purchasing decision drivers for baby care products. Brand must resonate with trust, care, safety, and quality through emotionally resonant storytelling and transparent messaging.

Recommended approaches include focusing on emotionally appealing content design for marketing. Firms could utilize visual narrative techniques and present real-life parenting scenarios in advertisements to place their products into realistic daily settings that resonate with parents. Content-driven advertisements can better reflect how the products' practicality can solve real-life problems for young parents, creating a desire to purchase, because they feel they "need it" for a happier life. To further boost brand trustworthiness, firms must ensure transparency by emphasizing key certifications (e.g., USDA Organic or Halal) and scientific endorsements in ads and product descriptions. Remember to highlight product quality, especially toxin-free and natural ingredients, to provide safety assurance for parents. This makes the brand more reliable, while also creating

opportunities for improving profit margin, since parents are willing to spend more on options that promise their babies' safety.

4.2.3. Reinforce trust through social proof

The Maternity and Baby Sector is a trust-sensitive sector where parents tend to repurchase brands that they find trustworthy. Trust is amplified when endorsement comes from other peers, and this is where UGC, product reviews, and micro-influencer partnerships can be particularly effective persuasion tools.

Firms are recommended to publish content like parent testimonials, real-user cases, and unboxing, keeping them reliable and down-to-earth. Firms should also consider encouraging customers to share real-world applications and reviews of products through UGC and online forums to harness their authentic voice. Moreover, partnerships with trusted influencers to co-create authentic, instructional videos or host live sessions to provide diverse viewpoints and promote customer engagement are powerful tools in promoting products while building trust.

4.2.4. Engage through interactive and measurable approaches

Consumers in the digital era expect two-way communication, even when purchasing online. Firms can launch interactive campaigns like hashtag challenges on social media or parenting-related polls to invite customer participation and community construction, which improves loyalty. Consumers also look for intimate purchasing guidance, which can be fulfilled by regular TikTok, Shopee livestreams, or webinars with influencers or experts to share experience, answer questions, and offer advice. Moreover, the online purchase journey could be optimized by utilizing DDDM. SMEs must employ technical tools like Google Analytics and Meta Insights to track key metrics like CTR, conversion rate, and follower growth. Then clean it, analyze it, and use the data-driven insights to set scalable KPIs and promptly adjust marketing strategies.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature-based research examines how SMEs can harness data-driven marketing strategies that align with consumer behavior insights to build brand awareness, trust, and customer loyalty, even in severe competition from well-established multinational firms. By leveraging affordable and wide-reaching digital approaches, SMEs in the SEA digital economy can bridge financial resource limitations and foster consumer trust. Furthermore, those in the maternity and baby sector should understand and cater to the emotional and practical drivers behind parental decisions, treating them as guidelines while crafting campaigns to resonate with today's mobile-first and highly discerning generations. Additionally, the C.A.R.E. strategic framework provides a handy model and actionable recommendations for marketers to integrate digital marketing execution with the emotional and practical touchpoints valued by Southeast Asian customers. By adopting this holistic and adaptive model, SMEs can build strong visibility while sustaining trust and loyalty in an increasingly saturated market with ever-evolving consumer expectations.

However, this study's limitations include the following: The nature of this research is theoretical and conceptual. It relies on secondary sources and existing literature, and lacks first-hand data from consumers or SMEs, which leaves the empirical validity of the findings in question. Moreover, digital platforms are highly dynamic and constantly evolving. The strategic recommendations in this

study may require constant revision to stay relevant. Additionally, this study focused on examining strategies based on the assumption that SMEs are capable of executing them.

Future research could empirically test the C.A.R.E. model proposed in the study to validate its effectiveness in increasing brand awareness. Future studies could also examine the internal organizational readiness of SMEs, consulting factors like staff expertise, change resistance, and digital tool adoption, to provide a more holistic recommendation for implementing such strategies effectively in real-world settings.

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