

Digital Marketing in Small and Medium Enterprises: Evidence from the Industrial Supplies Sector in Singapore

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Abstract

In this digital age, technology has affected many company businesses, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs). From the perspective of resource-based theory (RBT), SMEs inherently possess limited resources reducing the companies' competitiveness in the marketplace. In the Singapore business environment, it becomes tough particularly for the industrial supplies SMEs. These companies are heavily dependent on their relationship-based networks (RBN) for surviving their businesses. Despite the Singapore government's initiatives to encourage the industrial supplies SMEs to digitalise their marketing efforts, the response has been lukewarm which can be detrimental to their business sustainability in a competitive market space.

This study burrows in-depth into understanding the role of digital marketing as a strategic tool for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. This would allow SME owners/managers to comprehend the role of digital marketing (DM) tools in forging a sustainable competitive advantage for these companies. The data for this study was collected by conducting 10 semi-structured interviews through purposive sampling. Six owners/managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and four customers with digital marketing capabilities were selected for the interviews. This dyadic approach was applied to improve the validity of this study.

The study findings of this thesis would enrich the digital marketing literature. A novel approach was posited by combining the RBT and RBN as the underpinning theories to investigate the role of digital marketing in forging competitive advantages for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. This thesis recommends DM tools that are helpful to improve business performance despite having limited company resources. An action framework that guides SME owners/managers in adopting digital marketing innovation in their businesses was postulated to enable these practitioners to build more RBNs and increase customer retention.

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Declaration

I declare that this Doctorate of Business Administration thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of the text.



Signed:

Date: 25 March 2022

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview, background, context and motivation

Over the years, studies on relationship-based network (RBN) theory have attracted many researchers' attention (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999; Ehret, 2004; Ford et al., 2002; Naudé et al., 2014; Wu & Chiu, 2016). It has been argued that an RBN drives relationship marketing and uses relations to promote selling (Arli et al., 2018). It also builds trust and customer loyalty (Casidya & Nyadzayo, 2019) and expands companies' networks to increase potential customers (Kuo et al., 2020) and better retention of existing customers (Casidya & Nyadzayo, 2019). However, digital transformation has greatly changed the lifestyle of people both in the working environment and in their personal lives (Ancillai et al., 2019).

According to Arli et al. (2018), digital platforms can help to reduce salesperson involvement. However, B2B customers demand complex service and solution offerings which requires salesperson involvement and RBN. Digital marketing tools, such as websites, ranked as the second-most-trusted item in the mind-set of consumers with RBNs as the most-trusted (The Nielsen Company, 2015).

In the customer acquisition-retention literature, studies that focus especially on the use of technologies for acquiring new customers (Aini & Hapsari, 2019), building relationships (Eid et al., 2020) and ensuring customer loyalty (Hassan et al., 2019) have emerged in recent years. Many studies show that the use of digital tools has helped SMEs in building internal and external resources from the resource-based theory (RBT) perspective, which, in turn, helps improve their business strategy and the building of competitive advantages (Chong et al., 2018; Dumitriu et al., 2019).

Studies focusing on digital marketing tools reveal supporting evidence that digital marketing tools help companies to open many opportunities for shaping

RBNs (Steinfield et al., 1995; Turunen, 2021; Veronica et al., 2018), although this is not straightforward to understand.

The digital marketing tools in this thesis refer to the use of web-based media in a B2B context (Bhayani & Vachhani, 2014; James, 2020) such as websites, emails, search engines, customer relationship management systems and social media platforms (Aini & Hapsari, 2019; Durmaz & Efendioglu, 2016). Bhayani and Vachhani (2014) argued that digital marketing tools do not change traditional ways of business that are reliant on RBN but also add value to the relational selling approach enhancing relationships using digital marketing tools such as helping to integrate customer relationship building (Arli et al., 2018). James (2020) concluded that digital marketing tools have a positive and significant impact on SMEs' relationships and network building.

Several studies explore the association between digital marketing capability and relationship-based networks (e.g., Cenamor, et al., 2019; Iankova et al., 2019). Iankova et al. (2019) advocated the greater need to investigate digital marketing and RBN building, as digital marketing will have different impacts in different countries and in different economic and industrial sectors (Casidya & Nyadzayo, 2019). Therefore, this thesis takes a specific focus on the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to present some evidence from a very competitive and unique RBN network environment. The business nature of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore requires technical knowledge of manufacturing because the industrial suppliers are mainly dealing with the manufacturing factories in Singapore. In addition, those factories are facing huge pressures on cost of operation (Bloom, 2014; Choo, 2021) and are looking for opportunities to reduce their operating costs. This has resulted in an increased number of business closures of industrial suppliers (Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority, 2021), which is alarming, as the manufacturing sector still accounts for a substantial proportion (one-fifth) of the GDP of Singapore (Yong, 2021).

Presently, digitalisation has started the process of reforming companies and this has seen significant changes in many companies in Singapore (Tan, 2020). Since the launch of the national SMEs Go Digital programme by the

government, there are about 25% of SMEs took up the program to begin digitalisation (Kenny, 2021b). SMEs in the manufacturing industries were carefully targeted as part of the digitalisation initiatives (Kenny, 2021a) as manufacturing companies are relocating out of Singapore due to high land prices and labour costs (Bloom, 2014; Choo, 2021). To combat the challenges, digitalisation is encouraged to help the manufacturing sector. The government envisions the transformation of the sector to stay competitive (Ng, 2021).

Although many digitalisation initiatives were targeted at the manufacturing sectors. There are no specific initiatives for the industrial supplies sectors, the government has plans that targeted the wholesale trade industry as a whole and they have introduced many government grants to help SMEs to go digitalise and also grants that help SMEs in tapping digital technologies to expand themselves both locally and globally. Although, there are SMEs that have gone digitalised and adopted a hybrid strategy on both a relational approach and a digital approach. However, there is a challenge in convincing the older generation of business owners to go for digitalisation (Ng, 2018) as most businesses are still heavily reliant on a personal relationship with face-to-face interactions and are concerned about the cost of digitalisation (Hariz, 2020).

There has been an increase in the number of business closures among the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore (Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority, 2021) due to the saturated and small market in Singapore. Although many Singaporean businesses have dealings with neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia (Tessa, 2021), the resources needed to capture market share in those countries have been inadequate (Neoh, 2018). Iankova et al. (2019) have suggested that an in-depth investigation of these topics is needed, as currently, there is a lack of literature on B2B digital marketing despite intensive digitalisation in Singapore. Furthermore, SMEs in general lack the resources within their organisation to implement digital marketing. A resource-based approach helps to identify opportunities for SMEs to improve their capabilities and work with the limited resources they have available.

SMEs normally have limited resources compared with larger companies and this is especially the case in the challenging economic environment of Singapore. Companies with limited market share are facing stiff competition locally. Digitalisation is encouraged to help the manufacturing sector. The influence of Industry 4.0 envisions the transformation of the sector to stay competitive (Ng, 2021). In recent years, with digitalisation, buyers could search the Internet and find new sources and this has brought challenges to the traditional sales activity that is heavily reliant on face-to-face interaction (Arlin et al., 2018). In addition, Forkman et al. (2022) also conclude that the challenges that face-to-face meeting is resource consuming and could expose risks to the overall sales performance. Therefore, it is important to explore how digital marketing could help the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore which mainly focused on B2B relationships.

The purpose of this thesis is to fill the gap as there is limited digital marketing literature in the context of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to promote digitalisation. It also seeks to provide an understanding of managerial and customer perspectives on digital marketing tools and RBN theory, and how both are affected. It also adds to the academic literature using RBT as an underpinning theory and focusing on RBNs and digital marketing in the context of Singapore.

This chapter emphasises the need to consider the adoption of digital marketing tools amidst this evolving global digitalisation transformation. It is also important to understand how RBNs have played a critical role in helping industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore remain competitive until the present day, while drawing upon the RBT.

1.2. Definitions

There are many similar terms used in different contexts in this field. For the sake of clarity, the definitions of terms used throughout this thesis are explained as follows:

1.2.1. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

The definition of SMEs varies across countries. For example, the number of employees in an SME differs (Kusi et al., 2015). In Singapore, the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (2020) defines a local SME as having at least 30% local shareholding and a group annual sales turnover of not more than \$100 million or a group employment size of not more than 200 employees. Currently, SMEs make up 99% of the total business entities in Singapore (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020).

1.2.2. Industrial supplies

The definition of industrial supplies generally means items that customers in the industrial sector such as manufacturing, maintenance, repair and overhaul, would need to use in their operations, the manufacturing sectors, make up about 20% of the GDP and 10% of employment in Singapore (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020). The industrial supplies sector is important to the overall industrial sectors supply chain, ensuring continuity of supply, quality and safety of the industrial sectors. In recent years, the industrial supplies sector faces tremendous pressures in retaining customers as the cost of the business in Singapore is forecasted to increase gradually (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020), causing customers to shift their focus to streamlining their manufacturing process and cost savings (IPI Singapore, 2020).

In this thesis, industrial supplies constitute companies from the following two codes classified by the government, as shown in Table 1. This sector is considered part of the wholesale trade, B2B category in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019).

Table 1

SICC code for wholesale trading – industrial supplies in Singapore

| | |
|------------|---------------------------------|
| SICC 46599 | Other Machinery & Equipment Nec |
| SICC 46332 | General Hardware |

Note. Adapted from Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019

(<https://www.tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/publicfacing/createDataTable.action?refId=12905>)

The main focus is on the two business activities of industrial supplies, mainly on ‘Other Machinery & Equipment Nec’ and ‘General Hardware’. The term industrial supplier is used to represent the businesses that provide industrial supplies. This research focuses only on highly technical industrial supplies such as abrasives, an indirect material which is used for grinding and polishing process in the manufacturing process (Alary, 2021), and cutting tool products, an indirect material which is used for the manufacturing process such as milling and turning (Schneider, 2009; Sandvik Coromant, 2018). As the focused product range in this research is commonly classified under the General Hardware and Other Machinery & Equipment Nec which covers the highly technical industrial supplies as well as all other industrial supplies.

1.3. Research aim, objectives and approach

This research aims to explore the role of digital marketing as a strategic tool, and the gap in RBN structure from the underpinning RBT for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to gain sustainable competitive advantages.

The research objectives are:

- RO1: To investigate the extent of prominent digital marketing tools used by industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

- RO2: To investigate the extent to which industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore benefitted by using digital marketing tools strategically.
- RO3: To investigate the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and customer retention.

The fulfilment of these aims and objectives will make a valuable contribution to the owners/managers in the business by offering an understanding of how their adoption of digital marketing tools may assist them to expand, or at least maintain, their digital marketing capabilities to achieve competitive advantages.

It also contributes to the customer acquisition-retention literature, as the methodology and findings may have wider applications. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the uniqueness of Singapore in practising digitalisation in recent years (Ng, 2021; Tan, 2020). This study presents some evidence highlighting the impact of digitalisation on the traditional operating method of companies in Singapore.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to produce practical recommendations for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as well as contributing to the digital marketing literature. The study will interpret the social roles of the owners/managers and the customer of the industrial supplies in Singapore by their own set of meanings. As the unique interview predominately involves Singapore SMEs operating in Singapore where a majority of the population are Chinese immigrants and are deeply influenced by Chinese culture (Zhang & Hong, 2017) and heavily reliant on a relationship-based network. In addition, the concept of free-market also has a deep root in Singapore where people believed in working hard to gain higher rewards. As these cultural factors were taken into consideration during the research, the complexity of the cultures is being carefully considered during the interview. The cultural aspect has already been embedded deep into the individual values and is shown in the response collected from the individual responses. Therefore, the potential impact that culture might have affected the outcome

of the research would be considered as a holistic approach toward how the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore would behave.

Semi-structured interviews are used as the primary research instrument to engage with both the owner-managers and the customers dealing with industrial supplies in Singapore, as well as to develop a deeper understanding of the research topic as well as the national culture that might potentially affect the research topic. The detailed research methodology is explained in Chapter 3.

1.4. Research significance and contribution

This research is important to various stakeholders: owners and managers of industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and the customers of the industrial supplier, as this thesis, provides deeper insight and understanding of business practices. It also makes three categories of recommendations to the practitioners.

First, the research deals with the issue of prominent and most effective digital marketing tools used at present. Owners/managers from the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore could adopt similar digital marketing tools to improve their business. Second, the research explores and develops an understanding of how digital marketing tools could create competitive advantages for SMEs. Owners/managers could apply the recommendations to their business strategy. Third, it also explores the effectiveness of digital marketing as a tool to enhance the RBN with the ultimate goal of acquiring more customers through the network and achieving better customer retention using RBT as the underpinning theory. The owners/managers that have resource limitations would be able to review the effectiveness of various digital marketing tools before implementing the recommendations.

The thesis also expands the understanding of the use of digital marketing tools and RBN theory from the underpinning RBT to fill a gap in the customer acquisition-retention literature and the digital marketing literature. To improve the robustness of the thesis, the data triangulation technique applied in this study provides an additional showcase to the customer acquisition-retention

literature in increasing the validity of the results, as the research was undertaken qualitatively. This research was focused on a specific area of study which could limit the generalisation in the finding, as the targeted industry in this study was focused on the environment of the industrial supplies in Singapore where there is a unique relationship between the RBN, digital marketing and technical challenges of the manufacturing industry. However, the methodological process of using a dyadic approach could also contribute to further research in showcasing both the owners/managers and the customers' perspectives, an in-depth discussion would be in Chapter 6.5.

1.5. Thesis organisation

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the thesis and provides an overview of the background context, aim and objectives. It summarises the research approach and contributions of the thesis.

Chapter 2 outlines the current situation of digital marketing in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. It provides a review of the background literature to understand the research topic, discussed theories and issues and identifies the research gaps.

Chapter 3 presents the research paradigm, ontology, epistemology and axiology and explains the choice of qualitative methods for this study. This chapter also details the methodology, data gathering and how the analysis was carried out. In particular, the data triangulation technique that is applied in the data analysis is also explained. This chapter also presents in detail the process of the pilot studies and the creation of the questionnaire for the semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 4 presents the detailed analysis and findings from the semi-structured interviews for two different groups of participants.

Chapter 5 discusses the research findings from the two different groups of participants and uses the data triangulation technique to increase the robustness of the discussion.

Chapter 6 summarises the achievement of the research aims, gives recommendations, explores the limitations, suggests further research, and concludes this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This chapter serves as a foundation for the thesis through an extended review of the literature, broken down into three parts, namely: (1) a review of relevant underpinning theories related to resource-based, relationship-based networks, digital marketing and competitive advantages, (2) a review of research evidence and an assessment of the impact of the underpinning theories on business practice, and (3) a chapter summary.

2.2. The Background of Singapore

Singapore became independent on 9 August 1965 after its separation from Malaysia (Abisheganadan, 1965). During colonial times, there were active trading activities, which helped turn Singapore into a trading port in the South East Asian region (Turnbull, 2009). Singapore in the past was known for its locational advantage as a world port. Merchants from all over the world, mainly traders, were attracted to the small island for trade and enterprise (Miksic, 2013). This helped the country to grow and evolve into a high-income economy with a gross national income of US\$54,530 per capita in 2017. Its economy experienced continued growth of 3.2% into 2018, particularly in value-added manufacturing, and 6% each year in the services sector (The World Bank Group, 2019). Singapore shifted from labour-intensive manufacturing to research-based, capital-intensive, high-technology industries (National Library Board, 2010), which helped it to remain one of the most advanced economies globally. It enjoyed several advantages, such as a highly skilled and productive workforce, a flexible labour market and a stable government with policies that encouraged foreign investment (Chauvin & Chenavaz, 2017).

The increase in land prices and labour costs have resulted in many manufacturing companies relocating their factories out of Singapore (Bloom,

2014; Choo, 2021; Reuters, 2012) to Malaysia (Lim & Danubrata, 2012; Tessa 2021). This has affected the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore: as more factories move out of Singapore, they typically look into buying their industrial supplies from a local source to shorten their supply chain and increase the efficiency of their business (Handfield, 2019). Despite the manufacturing sector contributing 20% of Singapore's GDP (Yong, 2021), there is an increase in the number of businesses from the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore that are shutting down (Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority, 2021) due to the saturated and small size market in Singapore. This has posed great challenges to the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore bearing in mind that 99% of the businesses in Singapore are SMEs (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2021).

Singapore is a unique multi-cultural country, with a population that is mainly ethnic Chinese (Statista Research Department, 2020) due to the migration of Chinese in the early days (Chan & Chiang, 1994). Owners/managers in Singapore are usually involved in everyday business activities, as SMEs are small and lack resources. Singapore has a working language of English and a national language of Malay (Sim, 2016), which makes it easy for Singaporeans to communicate globally. This is especially true with Malaysia. Singapore has particular advantages in doing business with Malaysia due to the close proximity of the two countries and also because many businesses from the Singapore manufacturing sector have relocated to the southern part of Johor (Lim & Danubrata, 2012; Tessa 2021), just across the Johor Strait from Singapore. This has resulted in many industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore exploring and building businesses across borders. Similarly, industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore have been able to capture market share in Malaysia, despite the geographical difference and the differences in cost.

As the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore faced huge market pressure, it is surprising that so many of them could continue to sustain and grow their businesses. In addition to building international business using traditional marketing methods, SMEs in Singapore have also focused on transformative technologies and digitalisation (Ernst & Young Solutions LLP, 2019). Technology transformation has increased productivity, sustained growth and

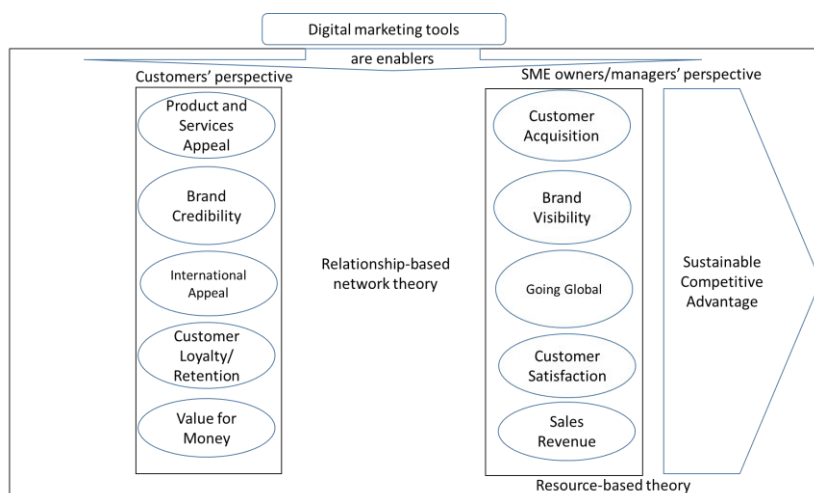
created new business opportunities in the current tightened labour market and challenging business environment (Elangovan, 2018). However, it is still the case that a majority of SMEs have not adopted new technologies in their businesses, citing a lack of resources and skills to implement them as their main reason (Tay, 2019). Therefore, to understand the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore whose main customers are in Singapore and Malaysia, there is a need to use RBT to review their internal resources.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Conceptually, the following Figure 1 shows the overall scope of this thesis. The resource-based theory (RBT) is used to explain differences in firm performance using internal resources such as digital marketing tools, while the relationship-based network theory explains the external forces that bind various variables to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Zaheer & Bell, 2005) for the owner-managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Both resource-based and relationship-based network theories build the foundation of this thesis while digital marketing tools and their performance help create competitive advantages for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

Figure 1

Overview Scope



Note. Overview framework of the thesis scope, by Author.

2.4. Resource-based theory

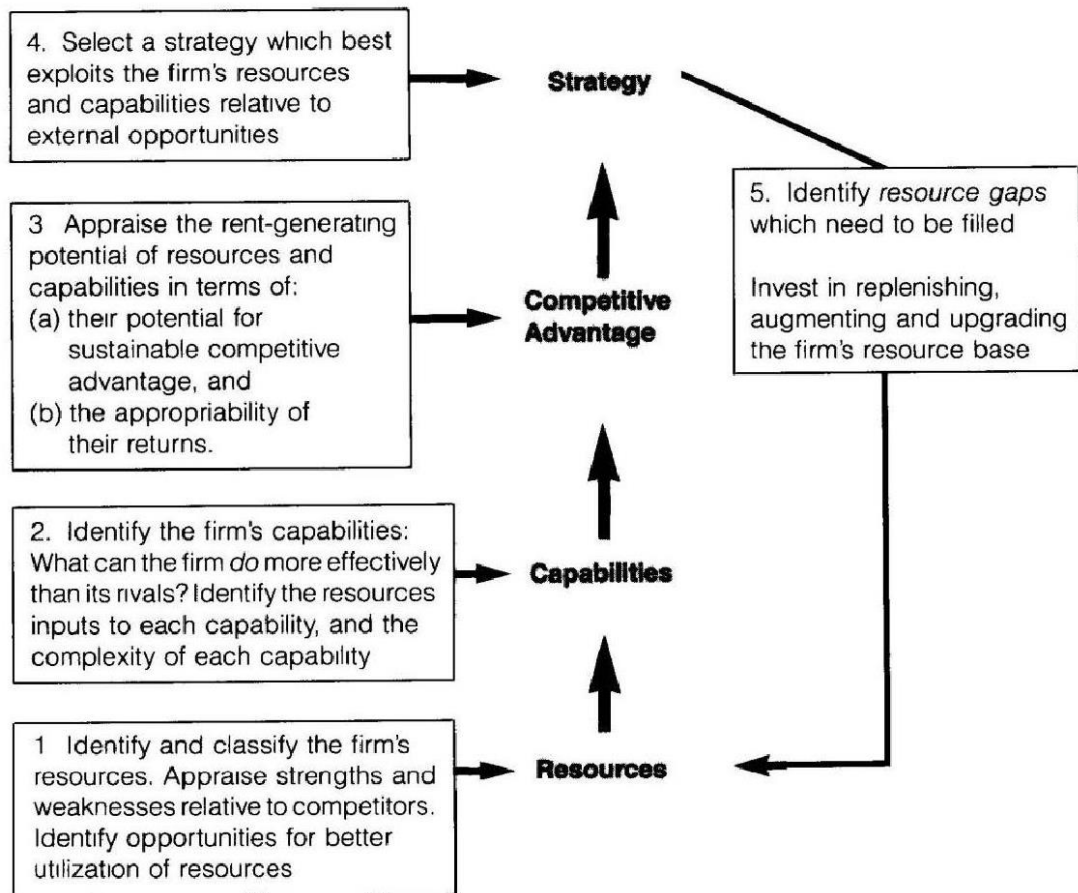
The Resource-based theory focuses on using a company's internal characteristics to develop sustained growth (Penrose, 1959). It was further developed by Wernerfelt (1984), who proposed the concept of using differentiated resources to build competitive advantages. RBT has become an important consideration in developing strategies for companies (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Penrose, 1959).

RBT focuses on using a company's resources that are considered a strength (Porter, 1981) to develop value-creating strategies (Barney, 1991; Day, 2014; Grant, 1991). Given that the resources and capabilities of a company normally provide direction for it, companies can use this direction to generate an effective strategy (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991) and help optimise profits (Grant, 1991) through market share growth (Hooley et al., 2001; Tsao, 2013).

RBT has also been applied widely in recent years to marketing-related studies and business development strategies (Kozlenkova et al., 2014; Porter, 1985), by focusing on the limited resources that a company has for creating competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984).

Figure 2

A Resource-Based Approach to Strategy Analysis: A Practical Framework



Note. From *The resource-based theory of competitive advantage: Implications for strategy formulation* (p.115) by Grant, 1991. *California Management Review*, 33(3), 114–135.

The strategy framework shown in Figure 2 is used as a formulation for analysing a company's resource-based approach, appraising its capabilities, analysing the potential of the company's resources and capabilities, selecting a strategy, and extending and upgrading its resources and capabilities (Grant, 1991). The objective of the resource-based approach in business is to create competitive advantages that could help the business to grow and stay competitive (Barney, 1991; Barney & Clark, 2012; Grant, 1991; Penrose, 1959; Porter, 1985; Wernerfelt, 1984). Studies show that international competition (Agarwal & Wu, 2018; Jormanainen & Koveshnikov, 2012; Ruzzier et al., 2006) and rapid technological change (Brady et al., 2008; Veronica et al., 2018; Yeh et al., 2012) have required businesses to operate in intense competition.

Competitive advantage is the primary source of inter-company profit differentials (Grant, 1991). Therefore, according to Wernerfelt (1995), strategies that are not resource-based are unlikely to succeed in a highly competitive market.

There are studies that have suggested that successful companies with good financial performance, such as McDonalds and Southwest Airlines, have focused on other capabilities (Collins & Porras, 1997). Barney and Clark (2012) suggested that improving non-financial capabilities can lead to sustained competitive advantage. Therefore, a company should not focus only on current profitability but should also take their future position and the development of competitive advantage/s as their goals to optimise long-term company performance (Hart, 1995). Moreover, Day (1994) argued that internal resources are not the only resources that a company can utilise: there may also be external resources available that a company can exploit without having to own them.

As there are limitations on resources in SMEs compared to bigger and more established companies. SMEs do not have many internal resources, to begin with and would find it hard to explore both internal and external factors adequately. According to Day (1994) and Teece (2009), by focusing on its internal resources, a company can further organise their resources to identify external opportunities to execute. Lusch and Harvey (1994) suggested that external opportunities, such as customer relationships and brand equity, could become increasingly important in creating competitive advantages for SMEs. This is extremely important to the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as they lack resources and constantly hope to improve their market share.

This study aims to explore the role of digital marketing that could become a strategic tool of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, the discussion focuses on RBT and how the digital marketing capabilities of industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore would enable resources, including RBNs, to improve their strategy and create competitive advantages. Although, there are there theories such as marketing theory and strategic theory. The RBT would provide a better underlying framework to look into the industrial supplies SMEs

in Singapore as highlighted Teece (2009), Kozlenkova et al. (2014) and Burt and Soda (2021) and suggesting that RBT would be more appropriate, especially in the environment which involves resource scarce SMEs. The other theories could be more effective when the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore have resolved the scarcity issue.

In summary, RBT provides an underlying framework for an analysis of how SMEs could benefit from using their RBNs as an external resource to build their capabilities. There is also the possibility of using existing internal resources to build company capabilities to create competitive advantages in the current competitive environment, characterised by increasing international competition and rapid technological change.

2.5. The theory of relationship-based network structure

There are studies that argued that since technological advancement which made information easily available, the market is moving towards transactional selling (Ahearne, 2022). However, Geiger and Finch (2011) emphasise the need to balance relational and transactional selling strategies. Whereas, Arli et. al. (2018) argued that technological advancement could help enhance relationship selling, and companies could leverage technology to enhance relationship-based network to build successful business network relationships. In addition, due to the unique Singapore context where relationship-based networks are greatly valued. It is important to understand how the relationship-based network is applicable to this study.

Relationship-based networks are commonly explained with the help of network theories (Akhtar et al., 2018; Schoenherr et al., 2015). In Asian societies, the words “*guanxi*” and “*yongo*” are indicative of the influence of Confucianism, which focuses on collectivism over individualism (Yao, 2000; Zhang & Hong, 2017). The words can also be defined as the relationship between people, forces, and objectives (Du et al., 2019). In some spheres, they are also considered as an informal social network. “*Guanxi*” would normally have

characteristics such as commitment, reciprocity, loyalty, and commitment to maintaining the relationship for the long term (Chen & Chen, 2004). Although in “*yongo*”, one is unable to develop a relationship without a proper connection, “*guanxi*” and other RBNs typically keep their network closed and not accessible to outsiders, although it is possible to be developed between strangers depending on the changing needs and the situation between the parties (Barbalet, 2021).

In RBN structures, the network is typically kept closed and most businesses would normally focus on their network. In addition to the closed network of a business, individual networks would often be brought into a business for official dealings, translating into an organisational relationship between two companies instead of a personal relationship (Kuo et al., 2020). A network could be set up through a mediator’s guidance. Individual social activities, such as going out for drinks or having meals, could help to build the relationship (Zhang et al., 2019), which could be expanded through those social activities and brought back to the business (Kuo et al., 2020).

Therefore, in RBN structures, networks can be built from individual activity or through business dealings. The latter can take place during a casual dinner through a friend’s introduction to another circle of friends or via business networking events as well. Individual events can also assist to build RBNs that could be useful to the business (Yata & Hurd, 2021).

The primary aim of the RBN structure in all businesses is to acquire and maintain customers who are profitable for the business since good and stable relationships with customers will provide a sense of trust, which in turn, promotes long-term benefits to both parties (Yang et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2019). Relationships in companies occur with every individual. They make an important contribution at the company level (Akhtar et al., 2018; Rocca, 2020) and could ultimately improve performance by generating competitive advantages (Cenamor et al., 2019). RBNs can help companies by promoting long-term cooperation, as both parties understand each other well (Varadarajan, 2020), trust each other (Zhang et al., 2021), and are better able

to solve any potential conflict or address any miscommunication (Casidya & Nyadzayo, 2019; Yeh et al., 2020).

This helps companies know their customers' goals and objectives, thereby enabling them to better serve their customers. This, in turn, builds customer loyalty (Suherna, 2021) and competitive advantages for the company (Ledikwe et al., 2019). Using the competitive advantages that are generated by relationship-based networks allows companies to increase their market share (Agostini et al., 2019) as well as retain existing customers, which, in the long run, benefits companies significantly.

In an RBN where companies tap into the potential benefits from the network, the relationships can be used to create benefits and competitive advantages. This helps companies compete in the global market (Liu & Yang, 2020) and achieve their goals. Relationships are not built overnight: they require time and opportunity for individual social activities to occur (Forkmann et al., 2022). Furthermore, an RBN is heavily reliant on links with a person who has a network to both parties to expand and build a new network (Guan, 2011; Kuo et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019).

There are limitations on building relationships, in particular for the SMEs in Singapore. Problems can arise from the saturated market in which many companies compete for the same customers. The size of the SMEs (Yata & Hurd, 2021) puts them at a clear disadvantage in the number of relationships they can form with customers. Because SMEs have a size limitation, their networks are limited and most networks are typically built by the owners and the managers of the company, both informally and formally (Agostini et al., 2019).

The size of the SMEs means that there are a limited number of networks that they can generate (Agostini & Nosella, 2019; Lu & Beamish, 2001). In addition to maintaining existing networks, these SMEs also need to develop new networks if the company is to grow further. That means that the traditional method of building a network physically by owners and managers is no longer sustainable: they cannot both retain current networks and build new ones at

the same time (Setkute & Dibb, 2022). They have reached the maximum number of networks they can maintain.

Due to the rapid adoption of technology in everyday life, studies that focus especially on the use of technologies for gaining new customers, building relationships and ensuring customer loyalty (Hassan et al., 2019; Orenga-Roglá & Chalmeta, 2016) have emerged in recent years. This has changed the way SMEs can potentially run their businesses and maintain their traditional methods of dealing with customers. Many studies show that the use of digital tools has helped SMEs with their business strategy (Li et al., 2016) and in building competitive advantages (Parker et al., 2016).

It is therefore important that the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore have a good relationship-based network to create a competitive advantage. However, having limited resources to build networks is a problem for them. Digital marketing tools have the potential to help them acquire and build relationships and ensure customer loyalty, thus creating competitive advantages over their competitors in the market.

In this study, it can be seen that although industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore use relationship-based networking to foster relationships and enhance sales, there are resource challenges. The addition of rapid adoption of digital marketing tools might help businesses use relationship-based networks to build and sustain their businesses.

In summary, RBNs have long been in existence and are making a huge impact on companies around the world. However, existing relationships take time and effort to maintain. A new relationship would be most effective when there is a bridge that links to it. In today's digitalised age, digital marketing tools could potentially take over some of the time and effort required to maintain existing relationships and also act as a bridge to form new RBNs. Relationship-based networks and digital marketing tools can both be used by industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to assist them in working towards building competitive advantages and helping them have a better standing in the current competitive market.

2.6. Digital marketing

Digital marketing has been rapidly adopted by companies. It has changed how people interact with one another (Adhiarso et al., 2018). However, there are many conflicting views about whether digital marketing plays a part in enhancing RBNs, suggesting that the issue is not as straightforward as some believe (Ancillai et al., 2019).

In the current digital age, digital technology is used extensively in our daily activities. More than one-third of the current population uses digital technology (Zahoor & Qureshi, 2017) and this affects human behaviour as well. Digital technology changes the traditional ways that companies interact and communicate with each other and maintain (Reimann et al., 2021) or establishes new relationships between individuals and businesses (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). In the case of companies with business operations using digital marketing, business performance can be realized optimally if all work activities run effectively and efficiently so that they generate a competitive advantage over their competitors.

Of course, improving business performance and achieving predetermined targets are the aims of all companies. Technological capabilities play a role in increasing competitiveness and improving business performance (Agostini et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2019). Meeting customers' expectations in perception and behaviour are also elements of building successful competitive advantages (Distanont & Khongmalai, 2018; Dumitriu et al., 2019).

Digital marketing has become important in the B2B context for companies as it brings many benefits (Scheers, 2018). However, different digital marketing tools are suitable for achieving different benefits. Using Search Engine Marketing (SEM), for example, means that business advertisements are available throughout the year and are accessible to a large segment of the market. This makes them an opportunity to create a direct marketing relationship with potential customers (Scheers, 2018; Todor, 2016).

In addition, digital marketing tools allow businesses to find and engage customers at a lower cost and with a faster rate of engagement compared to

traditional marketing (Narsavidze, 2014). According to the Nielsen Company (2015), people in the Asia Pacific region still prefer recommendations from people they know when looking for products they need. This is the preferred way of finding new suppliers for products they need. Looking at websites is only their second preference. This shows that there are limitations on the role that digital marketing plays in assisting a supplier company.

Companies dealing B2B will have different marketing tools and strategies from those engaged in B2C (Iankova et al., 2019). Given that the industrial supplies sector sells consumable products, customers typically make repeat purchases over a prolonged period unless there are factors that cause them to switch suppliers. To keep these customers, companies strive to build relationships with them so that they can resolve any problems that may arise effectively. Companies can tap into digital marketing tools to help build new networks.

Table 2

List of digital marketing tools used by companies engaged in B2B

| Year | Author | Title | Digital Marketing tools | | | | |
|------|-----------------|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| | | | Website marketing tools | Search Engine Marketing (SEM) tools | Website Directory / Social Media | Email marketing tools | Digital Word-of-Mouth / Blog Tools |
| 2011 | Chordas | Digital Display - Many agents are adding digital tools to their marketing mix to boost leads and create greater brand awareness. | X | X | X | | |
| 2013 | Khan & Siddiqui | The Importance of Digital Marketing. An exploratory study of the perceptions and effectiveness of digital marketing amongst marketing professionals in Pakistan | X | X | X | | X |
| 2015 | Cizmeci & Ercan | The Effect of Digital Marketing Communication Tools in the Creation of Brand Awareness by Housing Companies | X | | X | | |
| 2017 | N kunen et al. | Micro-Enterprises' Digital Marketing Tools for Building Customer Relationships | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2018 | Negoit et al. | Digital Marketing Tools Used by Companies | X | X | X | X | |
| 2018 | Veronica et al. | Traditional versus Online Marketing for B2B Organizations: Where the Line Blurs | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2018 | Scheers | Internet Web Marketing Challenges of South African SMEs | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2019 | Aini et al. | Interests Influence of Digital Marketing Product Sales in Exports by SMEs in Bandung | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2020 | Kumar | Digital Marketing: Its Impact on B2B in India – A Study | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2021 | Krings et al. | Industrial Marketing Management: Digital Media Optimization for B2B Marketing | X | | X | | X |

Note. Compiled by author from searching for digital marketing tools used for the past 10 years. Refer to Appendix 1 for more details.

Table 2 shows the digital marketing tools most commonly used by B2B companies. They are websites, Search Engine Marketing (SEM), email, participating in online directories or social media and using a blog as a means

of creating word of mouth referrals from existing customers through a feedback comment section. Although those are the commonly used tool that is used by the B2B companies, the digital marketing tools and how they are being used might differ in Singapore. A more in-depth analysis will be done in the following section to understand how the tools are used and how they contribute to companies.

2.6.1. Website marketing tools

Website marketing sounds simple and straightforward. As the name suggests, website marketing first involves creating a website to showcase the product and services of the company. Websites are the most basic requirement of the entire suite of digital marketing tools (Bhayani & Vachhani, 2014) and the most basic step in creating a company's online presence (Sharma et al., 2020). However, creating a website requires many sophisticated steps, considerations and methods, and is the most important part of an overall digital marketing strategy (Aini & Hapsari, 2019; Nikunen et al., 2017).

According to Nikunen, et al. (2017), a website can assist in building customer relationships by engaging a customer's interest and participation to enhance retention. Similarly, Veronica et al. (2018) stated that a website should be the first go-to resource as customers want to access information that may offer solutions in the shortest possible time. Furthermore, websites are always available at any time and to customers in any location (Scheers, 2018). A website is the most preferred digital marketing tool used to create competitive advantages for SMEs (Negoit et al., 2018). However, Rowley (2008) noted that website content is a very important aspect of the website marketing tool: a website that does not have value creation for the customers may have a negative impact on the company instead of creating any competitive advantages (Capece & Pillo, 2021).

There are many ways in which a website could help a company build competitive advantages, such as enhancing the brand, increasing brand equity (Dumitriu et al., 2019) and leveraging on a global image (Makrides et

al., 2020). In the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, there are fair number of companies which have a website presence. However, it is not sufficient merely to have a website as the main digital marketing tool. B2B sales cycles are complex and more needs to be done to effectively create competitive advantages using digital marketing (Veronica et al., 2018). One other method is using Search Engine Marketing (SEM) to help attract potential customers to the website.

In summary, website marketing tools can assist companies in building their customer base. The perception of owner-managers is that having an online presence helps to build customer relationships. Customers agree that a website marketing tool is effective, as a website is always available to them. However, creating a website marketing tool is not an easy task: managers have to focus on creating value for the customers if a website is to have a positive impact on building their company's competitive advantages. SEM can be used to enhance the website marketing effort to reach more potential customers. In the next segment of this chapter, SEM will be explored in greater depth to better understand how it connects to website marketing.

2.6.2. Search Engine Marketing (SEM) tools

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) is a very broad topic on its own but the minimum requirement for SEM work is to have a basic website and a website marketing strategy. The fundamental goal of SEM is to enhance the visibility of a website presence, which could be classified into three main sub-categories, Pay-per-Click (PPC), Content marketing, and search engine optimisation (SEO).

SEM, according to Leung and Mo (2019), is defined as tactics and skills that are used for directing internet users from search engines to marketing websites. Such techniques usually include PPC, which is paying a search engine to put a website at the top of a list of results when selected keywords that the company has chosen are searched for. The company pays the search

engine every time a potential customer clicks on their link (Aini & Hapsari, 2019).

Content marketing consists of creating relevant content that customers need. The content should be short, simple and to the point on the website as this will make the content stand out in an internet search engine (Bhayani & Vachhani, 2014). This, in turn, allows potential customers to get the relevant information in the shortest time, thus creating value for the customers (Rowley, 2008). While generating content for marketing, SEO techniques are a consideration.

SEO is a technique that helps the website to be found easily by potential customers: website content is optimised according to the keywords that potential customers are likely to use for their search and this would normally help the website to be at the top of the search results (Bhayani & Vachhani, 2014).

In addition, SEM could assist in helping the company build brand visibility, as SEM helps websites to be listed at the top of search results. It assists increase brand visibility when potential customers search for related items (Makrides et al., 2020; Nikunen et al., 2017).

According to Durmaz and Efendioglu (2016), SEM is considered the most important aspect of digital marketing tools. However, some managers are not convinced that SEM would help them in their business due to its cost (Ainin et al., 2015; Scheers, 2018) and the belief that the lack of personal touch involved means that it doesn't build long-term relationships with customers (Sharma et al., 2020). This is especially prominent in the Singapore context where it is heavily reliant on using RBN to build a long-term relationships with the help of the personal touch involved.

In summary, SEM tools could help companies by increasing awareness of their products and services among potential customers. However, SEM is not a total solution for acquiring new customers and retaining existing customers. There are other digital marketing tools that can be used, and they are reviewed next.

2.6.3. Website directory / social media tools

Currently, social media are playing a very active role as a digital marketing tool. In social media, advertisements can be shown only to a certain demographic, meaning advertising can be targeted to those who are likely to be interested (Makrides et al., 2020). This is highly effective as it reduces wastage of time and effort: the company is not paying for poor quality leads, so it is especially good value for money from the company's perspective (Ainin et al., 2015). Social media can also be used to direct customers to the company website for more information, enhancing the sales conversion process. It is also feasible for SMEs to build relationships and networks using social media.

That said, social media can only be used as a bridge to build informal networks (Ainin et al., 2015). In terms of bridges used for more formal networks, some SMEs list themselves on website directories such as Greenbook, Yellowpages, Alibaba and many others. These website directories can help SMEs showcase their presence online and direct potential customers to the company website to find out more about their products and services.

Social media and website directories can also help companies build more RBNs. This follows because using social media for paid advertisements allows targeted individuals to find out about and connect to the companies when they have certain enquiries. Social media can also assist as a bridge for the individual to build informal networks to enhance their relationship-based networks (Ainin et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2021). Website directories are used for more formal network building. Potential customers can find a company in the website directory and make contact with them concerning their enquiry. Companies can use their response to the enquiry to build a relationship with the customer, thus enlarging their relationship-based network.

However, website directories are not standalone digital marketing tools. They rely on websites and can only act as a bridge to direct potential customers to the company website. However, from a manager's perspective, the cost and maintenance of the website directory might be a challenge as the amount of

traffic driven to the company website may not be high enough to warrant the cost. As for using social media tools, according to Ainin et al. (2015) using social media tools helps in improving RBNs because the company has more direct contact with the customers, giving it the capacity to better understand customers. The challenge of using both website directory and social media are that these digital marketing tools consume company resources. The company needs to consider how to most effectively use those tools (Veronica et al., 2018).

In summary, website directories and social media tools can help companies by directing potential customers to their websites from these tools. Both website directory and social media tools can also assist by directing potential customers to the company's website, enabling the company to make direct contact with customers, understand customers better and build an RBN. The only disadvantages of using those tools are the resources required, including the know-how to find the most effective channel for the company to use digital marketing tools. Email marketing tools as an alternative that can reach more customers while potentially using fewer resources will be reviewed next.

2.6.4. Email marketing tools

The other popular digital marketing tool is email marketing, according to Nikunen et al. (2017). Email marketing can help companies introduce new products and services, increase communication, and, therefore, build a deeper relationship with customers and increase customer loyalty. Similarly, studies show that specifically targeted emails can help increase company revenue if the correct email marketing strategy is applied (Makrides et al., 2020). There is a significant body of literature that states that email marketing is the most useful of the digital marketing tools (Charlesworth, 2018) for capturing potential customers and retaining existing customers (Leung & Mo, 2019; Makrides et al., 2020).

Email marketing can also be used to help direct customers to the company website (Turunen, 2021), which can then show customers more about the

company, build brand credibility and assist with the sales conversion process. Leung & Mo (2019) also define email marketing as the most successful channel for delivering highly relevant marketing communications to target customers. Moreover, it can also play a much larger role in terms of building RBNs with the customers as it acts as a communication method with the customers. Frequent communication with existing customers can help to build relationships, understand them better, as well as potentially increase sales to them. Targeted marketing email communications can also help a company acquire new customers and to act as a mediator in building RBNs.

Most companies would be familiar with using email and, as most companies would check their email almost daily, the cost of sending email is virtually free (Neill & Richard, 2012; Rosokhata et al., 2020). This helps by outreaching to customers effectively with the added benefit of being able to engage the customers (Turunen, 2021).

However, constantly sending emails might not be a very good strategy. Customers may be unhappy about email marketing communications they receive if they perceive that such emails do not add value to them (Turunen, 2021). They could, therefore, have a negative impact instead of assisting the company. In addition, managers also need to ensure that email contact with the customer always adds value to the customers (Chaffey & Smith, 2017) to avoid the scenario of customers unsubscribing or moving the emails into the spam email folder (Turunen, 2021).

In summary, email marketing tools could help the company to introduce new products and services to existing customers. As email is one of the oldest digital marketing tools used by companies all across the world, the outreach to existing customers would be huge. However, for email content to be relevant and valuable to the customer, the customer should always be the focus of email marketing. Any mistake in using email marketing tools could end up disadvantaging the company (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004).

The final digital marketing tools that could potentially expand the relationship-based networks of the company, build branding as well as help retain customers that will be examined here are digital word-of-mouth and blogs. In

the next segment, the advantages and disadvantages of these digital marketing tools are explored.

2.6.5. Digital word-of-mouth / blog tools

The term 'digital word-of-mouth' refers to feedback and recommendations about certain products and services made on the internet rather than by actual word-of-mouth (Whitler, 2014). Sharma et al. (2020) suggested that word-of-mouth by customers who left feedback and reviews on a digital platform could improve brand visibility. Positive reviews can even increase brand credibility: they are much more effective than a salesperson trying to 'hard sell' a product or service (Leung & Mo, 2019).

Often, digital word-of-mouth marketing comes from the sharing of digital content, such as content that has been posted on the company's blog for marketing purposes. Nikunen et al. (2017) suggested that content that was posted on a blog could engage customers' interest and participation, as blogging is a very popular activity (Ashwini & Varma, 2020). This would increase interaction with customers and enhance customer relationships. Such content could also be shared by customers with other potential customers, further increasing brand visibility and credibility.

This digital marketing tool can serve as a bridge, helping to enhance the speed and frequency with which the company establishes RBNs. This arises from the fact that the digital word-of-mouth recommendation might come from someone with whom the potential customers are familiar. Thus, they automatically become a bridge despite not setting up a physical/face-to-face meeting or an event, which have been the traditional means of building new RBNs in the past.

Blogging creates useful information and has the potential to improve the ranking of the company website in internet searches (Thomas, 2016). Constant blogging could create additional activity, as customers could leave their feedback in the blog comment section. Interactive blog content could also help to attract the attention of customers, thus improving customer interaction

and customer loyalty at a minimum cost to the company (Ashwini & Varma, 2020).

The only challenge facing digital word-of-mouth is the need to create blog content that appeals to potential customers so that they would be sufficiently interested to read and comment on it (Dean, 2016). From the managerial perspective, it is not always easy to find someone who can generate interesting content, especially in smaller companies.

In summary, digital word-of-mouth could assist the company in building awareness and brand credibility and also act as a bridge to introduce more potential customers to link up with the company through their comments and reviews. Blogging also helps in generating relevant content that would attract potential customers to the blog to understand more, thereby building the customer acquisition capabilities of the company. However, it is not easy for a company to develop interesting content to attract customers and facilitate comments and reviews.

There are various methods for using digital marketing to build competitive advantages for companies, giving the Singapore business environment that is heavily reliant on RBN, the focus of this thesis is using digital marketing tools to build RBN structures to create competitive advantages for SMEs.

2.6.6. Digital marketing tools as an enabler for relationship-based network structures

There is a lot of literature on the topics of digital marketing tools and relationship-building for companies across the world (Casidya & Nyadzayo, 2019; Hlefana et al., 2020; Krings et al., 2021). Although many companies have adopted digital marketing, some have not been convinced of the benefits of digital marketing in relationship building (Khan & Siddiqui, 2013; Nikunen et al., 2017). In most research, successful digital marketing involves planning (Negoit et al., 2018) and concentrating on the efficiency of the tools to achieve their intended result (Nikunen et al., 2017).

Most research shows that digital marketing tools affect customer relationships (Ancillai et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2019; Nikunen et al., 2017; Orenga-Roglá & Chalmeta, 2016; Reimann et al., 2021), ranging from assisting in building RBNs to helping companies retain their customers and attracting potential new customers. Different digital marketing tools can be used for building RBNs. In the following section, RBNs and how digital marketing tools can potentially lead to forging competitive advantages for companies will be discussed.

2.7. The competitive advantages

The theory of competitive advantage has been heavily researched over time. There are many definitions of competitive advantage, ranging from providing a differential strategy (Porter, 1985; Wernerfelt, 1984), creating a value creation strategy (Barney, 1991; Day, 2014; Grant, 1991) and being responsible to customers (Lestari et al., 2020). According to Porter (1985), there are two ways that a company can build a competitive advantage: cost advantage, offering the same products and services at a lower cost than competitors; and differentiation advantage, providing better products and services than competitors. This was further reinforced by Barney's (1991) Valuable, Rare, Inimitable and Non-Substitutable framework for generating competitive advantage.

Competitive advantage is the primary source of inter-company profit differentials (Grant, 1991) and there is a common understanding that most successful companies have a competitive advantage (Batog et al., 2015; Distanont & Khongmalai, 2018) that enables them to outperform their competitors, and thus become more successful.

Competitive advantages are especially important for SMEs. They depend highly on their competitive advantage against larger competitors as they are not able to deliver other customer benefits such as lower pricing or wider product ranges (Harrigan, et al., 2010). Among the intangible firm resources that can be turned into competitive advantages (Barney, 1991) are efficiency and being able to sustain competitiveness in the market (Batog et al., 2015).

Moreover, in the current market, the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore face challenges from global market competitiveness. They are likely to be pushed out of the value chain if they do not have any competitive advantages to offer their customers, given that their customers are also looking to increase their competitiveness in their businesses by optimising suppliers.

In Asia, many successful SMEs achieved success through the RBNs of the owners or managers. Such networks are named differently across Asia, although the concepts are very similar. In Chinese-dominated societies, such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong (Bian, 2019; Burt et al., 2018), the term commonly used is “guanxi”. “Yongo” is used in Korean society (Horak & Klein, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021) and these studies contribute to the RBN literature, particularly in Asia, in which Singapore is located. Moreover, digital marketing has also impacted RBNs in the world where digital technologies have become part of our everyday life. It has helped SMEs to build different strategies and variables that could help them obtain a competitive advantage.

While there are signs that the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore have built competitive advantages by utilising RBNs and digital marketing, there has been a little attempt on using digital marketing to help enable RBNs, resource-based theory and building competitive advantages.

2.8. Digital marketing tool as an enabler for building competitive advantages for SMEs

As more than one-third of the world population uses digital marketing tools in their daily life (Zahoor & Qureshi, 2017), the basic relationship-based network theory (RBN), which, for decades, has explored how people interact with each other, remains unchanged (Zhang et al., 2019). In the unique environment of Singapore, where digitalisation has rapidly taken place in recent years, digital marketing tools have affected RBNs and assisted the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to gain competitive advantages, as discussed earlier.

However, Veronica et al. (2018) argued that just building digital marketing capability is not enough. More work needs to be done for B2B businesses as this type of business is more complex and requires much more work than just building simple digital marketing tools (Pandey et al.,2020). SMEs need to understand that with their limited resources, building digital marketing tools might be a challenge. Even with adequate resources to build good digital marketing tools, the tools can only assist them to build capabilities for their business and enable them to develop competitive advantage. However, Herhausen et al. (2020) highlighted that even though digital marketing could help RBN to build competitive advantages, there are many gaps between the practice and the ideal situation, but found evidence that digital marketing tools could create sustainable competitive advantages for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

Moreover, even with the availability of digital marketing tools, studies show that SMEs do not keep up with the pace of digital development and therefore could not fully utilize digital marketing tools to the fullest potential (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Therefore, for a successful digital marketing tool to build a competitive advantage, the SMEs would need to understand the nature of the tools before implementing the digital marketing tools and adopt the tools appropriately to build sustainable competitive advantages (Järvinen et al., 2012).

2.8.1. Customer acquisition

There are various digital marketing tools that can assist in customer acquisition. One such tool is by searching the internet using a search engine such as Google. Customers use a search engine to search for a product they need. They then click on the search result that takes them to the website where the product specification that matches their requirement is listed (Vieira et al., 2019). The customer would then initiate communication with the SMEs through the website to make further enquiries. This would assist SMEs that use digital marketing tools as using digital marketing tools could help to integrate

customer relationship building that would help to acquire customers (Arli et al., 2018).

From a managerial perspective, customer acquisition is a very important variable. Because of their size, there are limits to the number of customers that SMEs can acquire over the same period compared to larger corporations (Thomas, 2016). However, with the assistance of digital marketing tools, the customer acquisition process can be streamlined. This gives SMEs the potential to acquire more customers over the same period, thus creating competitive advantages. However, customer acquisition can also be heavily affected by RBNs (Kuo et al., 2020), as potential customers could reject purchasing products from a new supplier if they have no network relationship with them; they may not wish to deal with them.

In summary, SMEs could utilise digital marketing tools as a bridge to build formal or informal networks with potential customers initially, and thereafter, use their relationship-based networks for customer acquisition. This would help to increase the number of customers the company has and ultimately create competitive advantages for the SMEs.

2.8.2. Brand visibility

Digital marketing tools play a huge role in supporting brand visibility. One such example is the company website and its content, which is always available at any time of the year without any limitation on the location of potential customers (Scheers, 2018). These characteristics of websites enable brand visibility. However, as previously mentioned, just having a website is insufficient. SEM should be used to attract more potential customers to the website through various techniques.

In addition, using a blog, social media, website directories and digital word-of-mouth could also enhance brand visibility. However, according to Couto and Ferreira, (2017), SMEs do not see marketing as a way to increase brand visibility, instead, customer involvement, satisfaction and building RBNs could

be the main factors that promote brand visibility of SMEs (Todor, 2016). In the current digital age, digital marketing tools could enhance brand visibility (Routray, 2020), which is needed to address the competitive environment today (Negoit et al., 2018).

Therefore, if digital marketing tools can be used to enhance brand visibility, more potential customers will become aware of the company. In turn, there would be more opportunities for SMEs to have customer involvement and to build RBNs; this would help SMEs build competitive advantages.

In summary, digital marketing tools could be used to increase brand visibility in the current digital age. However, other factors such as customer involvement, satisfaction and using RBNs could also be major factors in increasing brand visibility and ultimately contributing to building competitive advantage for the SMEs.

2.8.3. Going global

In the current competitive environment, companies have been going global to continue growing their company (Lis et al., 2012) and to remain competitive (Suh & Kim, 2014). Digital marketing tools can help a company to simplify the process of global expansion and make it easier for SMEs to access the global market (Aini & Hapsari, 2019). The benefit of using digital marketing tools is that there is no location limitation (Scheers, 2018).

In the current digital age, where information is readily available, there is higher competition as businesses are not only competing locally. This is especially true in Singapore (Sim et al., 2003). Instead, they are competing against the rest of the world with the help of digital marketing tools. By going to the global market, SMEs could create a competitive advantage to benefit the company long term (Sui & Baum, 2014) In addition, SMEs could also tap into RBNs to go global (Veilleux et al., 2012), which would facilitate a quick and smooth process for the SMEs to globalise (Liñán et al., 2020).

From the managerial perspective, as SMEs go global, market awareness globally would increase and this would help with brand visibility, as well as increase the potential for customer acquisition in the bigger global market (Aini & Hapsari, 2019). This, in turn, would help to build confidence in terms of company branding and would benefit the company by giving them the option of using a global strategy as a competitive advantage.

In summary, the current competitive market has forced SMEs to go into the global market to remain competitive. By doing so, SMEs can improve their market share, awareness, brand visibility and brand credibility. In addition to using RBNs to facilitate a quick and smooth globalisation process, with the help of digital marketing tools, SMEs will be able to connect globally. Furthermore, it is much easier to build RBNs with digital marketing tools and hence achieve the benefits of going global with ease. This could ultimately build competitive advantages for SMEs.

2.8.4. Customer satisfaction

There is much literature that identifies customer satisfaction as a competitive advantage for the business. One such way to achieve customer satisfaction is to understand the customer's needs and fulfil them (Varadarajan, 2020). Digital marketing tools are important in this regard (Constantinides, 2006; Nikunen et al., 2017).

However, Constantinides (2006) added that increased global competition combined with unpredictable consumer behaviour has seen relationship-based strategies help companies understand their customers better and improve customer satisfaction. Companies need to communicate with their customers to be competitive (Fjellström et al., 2020). Customers who are not satisfied cannot be expected to have good working relationships with the company (Palmatier et al., 2006).

According to Chong et al. (2018), digital marketing tools can be very successful inputs for achieving customer satisfaction. There is evidence that

high levels of customer satisfaction can be due to using digital marketing tools, as they can enhance communication (Aini & Hapsari, 2019) and understanding (Constantinides, 2006) and provide a better customer experience (Veronica et al., 2018), which would help the company achieve a competitive advantage.

From a managerial perspective, having a productive RBN with the customers can help to enhance the coordination between the company and the customer, and improve customer satisfaction (Fung et al., 2007). By understanding customer needs, the company could also improve their customer service to obtain customer satisfaction with the help of digital marketing tools (Hassan et al., 2019).

In summary, using RBNs can help to enhance communication and cooperation with customers. This can be achieved by understanding customer needs with the help of digital marketing tools. This will easily result in higher customer satisfaction and customer retention, as customer experiences improve by maintaining a productive RBN.

2.8.5. Sales revenue

Most SMEs in general lack the budget for a range of purposes, from expanding their business to investing in technologies to improve business processes. Many SMEs face challenges in gaining access to additional working capital and struggle to manage their working capital (Goh, 2018). In any scale of business, a strong and supportive financial system is required for the development, and strengthening of the supply chain and to counter or survive any crisis within the company or in the market (Sonwalkar & Soni, 2017).

According to Musa & Pujawan (2018), financial resources can help to create competitive advantages. Financially savvy businesses can spend resources to gain a competitive advantage and have superior performance in their industry (Lee et al., 2015; Nuryakin, 2020; Yang et al., 2018). In the case of digital marketing tools, there is an indirect relationship between digital

marketing tools and sales revenue. As discussed earlier, digital marketing tools can help SMEs with customer acquisition as well as customer satisfaction, which would help SMEs to increase and retain customers.

With an increase in the customer base and retention of current customers, there would most likely be an increase in sales revenue. The company could potentially use the additional financial resources to create resilience to market uncertainty; the company would have adequate finances to support RBN building, which would provide a stable environment for SMEs to continue building more networks to expand their business and generate competitive advantages.

In summary, an increase in sales revenue could assist SMEs by providing additional resources to align with the company's long term strategy in the current competitive environment. The company would also need extra financial resources from sales revenue to continue with their daily activities and also to create competitive advantages for the SMEs.

2.8.6. Product and services appeal

From the customer perspective, the question of how to use digital marketing tools to assist SMEs to make their products and services more appealing is not as straightforward. In the context of B2B business, different stakeholders will have different objectives (Jussila et al., 2014). According to Habibi et al. (2015), the digital marketing tools that are used should assist customers to facilitate decision making about whether to purchase the products they need. This would be assisted by the quality of the product, customer interaction and brand credibility, which could be enhanced by digital marketing tools and relationship-based networks.

To leverage relationship-based networks, certain decision making could be influenced by the managers of B2B operations (Chong et al., 2018). An RBN could have a positive impact on the appeal of products and services (Nuryakin, 2020). Nuryakin (2020) has further suggested that to achieve high product and

services appeal, businesses should understand the needs of their customers and present suitable solutions that appeal to customers. Given the complex technical requirements of the SMEs' customers, digital marketing tools such as the company website should have adequate information available so that potential customers can assess whether the company has a potential solution for them to consider.

However, as not all information can be listed on a website, some of the technical requirements may need company personnel to take physical measurements on the customer's site. That is, personal interaction would be required to build the appeal of the products and services. It follows, therefore, that it is just as important to build RBNs and employ individuals to build relationships with the customers as it is to use digital marketing tools.

In summary, digital marketing tools can make products and services appealing to the customer. However, RBNs also influence the appeal of products and services. This is especially true given the highly technical requirements of the customers, and when a physical presence might be required to take a certain technical measurement. By using digital marketing tools effectively, a company may be able to provide solutions for customers without needing a physical presence on their site to take technical measurements. Using digital marketing tools and also building RBNs could increase the appeal of the company's products and services to customers, which, in turn, could build competitive advantages for the SMEs.

2.8.7. Brand credibility

The customers experience is very important in building brand credibility among existing customers (Dwivedia et al., 2018). A positive customer experience can add to the credibility of the brand. Understanding the customers' needs enables the company to create a positive experience for customers (Aneesur-Rehman et al., 2017; Nuryakin, 2020). Building a relationship with the customer would further enhance the customer's experience, leading to

enhanced communication, which would, in turn, generate a competitive advantage (Cortez et al., 2020).

Cortez et al. (2020) further argued that positive customer experience could come from digital word-of-mouth through digital platforms such as social media, thus improving brand credibility. Hassan et al. (2019) found that B2B customers preferred sources of information that had been approved and validated by the market. However, brand credibility does not always depend on the customer experience and reviews by the customer (digital word-of-mouth): brand credibility must also be built by offering customers the best quality of products and services (Shi et al., 2017).

Customers prefer to work with credible brands as they want a stable source of suppliers and a pleasant experience, so they will normally find a credible brand if they have new requirements.

In summary, brand credibility is built fundamentally on the quality of products and services offered by the company. However, digital marketing tools can quickly disseminate positive feedback from customers through digital word-of-mouth to potential customers. RBNs can also assist in further enhancing the customer experience, which would also help in increasing brand credibility, thereby, creating competitive advantages for the SMEs.

2.8.8. International appeal

There is much literature that discusses going international. In the current digital age alongside globalisation, consumers are transitioning towards the global market (Fjellström et al., 2020; Liñán et al., 2020). In addition, Liñán et al. (2020) stated that SMEs face competition from large local and foreign companies as, due to their size, SMEs often have difficulty in capturing export markets and overcoming trade barriers. The global market tends to be dominated by big multinational corporations. However, SMEs often have an edge over big corporations due to the speed and flexibility of their decision-making processes. This could potentially be a competitive advantage in the

fast-moving digital world today, where customers want a response as quickly as possible regardless of the location of the company.

From the perspective of the customers, the advantage of internationalisation includes better access to standardised marketing information with larger and more diverse markets, which may help them source products at more competitive prices, with shorter lead-times and better logistical solutions (Popescu, 2019). Customers will no longer restrict their choices to just local suppliers: they will also look for companies that have an international presence, in the expectation that their pricing would be more competitive. However, not only do digital marketing tools help to create international appeal, RBNs assist in building international appeal given that SMEs build RBNs globally – expanding their networks internationally (Veilleux et al., 2012).

In summary, digital marketing tools can help customers to find the most suitable products and services for their needs. In addition, customers can also investigate RBNs. Companies that have international RBNs will enhance their international appeal. Both digital marketing tools and relationship-based network theory would help to build a company's international appeal and, hence, its competitive advantages.

2.8.9. Customer loyalty / retention

Customer loyalty is closely influenced by customer satisfaction and satisfied customers (Bahadur et al., 2018). To achieve customer loyalty, companies need to ensure customer satisfaction (Jokela & Söderman, 2017). To strengthen customer loyalty, a company could build a relationship-based network with the customer to further enhance long-term customer loyalty (Hlefana et al., 2020).

In addition, Hlefana et al. (2020) acknowledge that building relationships with customers can help retain customers as they are more loyal and want to maintain a good relationship with the company. Forming good RBNs would benefit both customers and suppliers as they could potentially expand their

networks through informal gatherings. Having a mediator to assist in expanding their network could result in SMEs expanding their network and potentially changing informal relationships into formal customer relationships by acquiring the customers.

There are many studies that state that digital marketing tools could help to build customer loyalty and retention (Nuseira& Refae, 2022). Nikunen et al. (2017) concluded that website marketing and email marketing are the main factors that contribute to building customer loyalty and retention. Website marketing engages customer interest and email marketing gathers feedback and enhances customer engagement. These tools enable the company to better understand the customer and achieve greater customer satisfaction, thereby increasing customer loyalty.

Although some studies argue that the quality of products and services, price and brand image are also significant drivers of customer loyalty (Tu & Hsu, 2013), digital marketing tools could help to achieve good service quality through a better understanding of customer needs (Cortez et al., 2020; Fjellström et al., 2020; Routray, 2020), helping to benchmark against prices and building brand credibility (Hassan et al., 2019), Geiger and Finch (2011) argued that some buyers do not see any potential in maintaining relationships with suppliers where their focus is mainly on prices of the item they purchase. However, due to the nature of the industry, customers not only focus solely on the price factor, the overall services and quality should also be taken into consideration.

In summary, although the quality, price and brand image of the products and services offered must be able to meet customer expectations to maintain customer loyalty and retention, RBNs also have a very important role in achieving customer loyalty and retention. Digital marketing tools could further help by enhancing communication and engaging customers' interest, and, in turn, help to build competitive advantages for the SMEs.

2.8.10. Value for money

From the customer perspective, the definition of products and services that offer value for money can be identified as efficiency and effectiveness (McKevitt, 2015). The efficiency level that customers are looking for would be subjective. Brand credibility could affect customers' perception of whether the products represent value for money (Chekalina et al., 2018; Dwivedia et al., 2018).

The customer would consider pricing and customer service levels. Understanding the customer through frequent communication with them and tailoring the customer service level based on the expectations of the customer could increase efficiency (Chuah et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of the products and services could be determined by their quality and whether the products supplied can perform the intended job – that is, meet the highly technical specifications. The industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore that serve customers must have good technical knowledge, understand the customers' requirements and respond to the customer's enquiries. The value for money perspective could also be influenced by the relationship between customers, as the value of the products and services is perceived highly by customers' satisfaction (Hlefana et al., 2020). Thus, building strong relationships with customers could build a competitive advantage (Ismail et al., 2014).

In summary, customers are looking at many aspects of the products and services provided by their supplier, including their quality, pricing, brand credibility and customer service level. These characteristics can be enhanced by the use of digital marketing tools. Thinking about RBNs, the customer would also take into consideration the current relationship they have with their existing suppliers and their past performance; these could help them to determine if the items they are buying represent value for money or not. When customers acknowledge that the product and services provided are value for money, this would create competitive advantages for the SMEs.

2.9. Research gap

The literature review has unveiled the benefits of using RBNs in helping SMEs acquire new customers using informal relationships, from bridging through current networks in social activities (Zhang et al., 2019), then converting such contacts into business relationship. This traditional marketing method is used by most SMEs in the Singapore environment presently. However, in the B2B environment, customer relationships tend to be deeper due to the customisation effort needed (Lilien, 2016). This would suggest that relationships alone cannot sustain the business, especially given the heavy digitalisation occurring in Singapore. Although there has been an increase in studies involving the exploration of relationship-based networks from the perspective of resource-based theory (Burt & Soda, 2021), there is lack of studies conducted in Singapore to date despite the focus on industrial sectors in recent years.

The literature review has also unveiled the benefits of digital marketing tools. However, it is questionable whether the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore would be similar because of the differences in unique business environments affected by the high cost of operation and limited market-size. The current studies mainly focused on using digital marketing tools as standalone tools (see Appendix 1), focusing purely on them as a resource of the company. Because the traditional marketing practice of using RBNs to conduct business is widespread in Singapore, there is a gap in the literature on digital marketing and relationship-based network theory using RBT as the underpinning theory.

In addition, as suggested by Dumitriu et. al. (2019), the current digital marketing literature on building RBNs using digital marketing tools strategically is inadequate. There is also a research gap in identifying the prominent digital marketing tools and the role that digital marketing tools could potentially play in building and maintaining RBNs of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore using the underpinning theory of RBT, the current literature provides an understanding of how RBN helps relational marketing and using digital marketing tools could potentially assist relational marketing or move the selling

towards a more transactional nature instead. As the current practices of using digital marketing tools might also differ from ideal digital marketing capabilities (Herhausen et al., 2020) and this probes this research to uncover the potential gap that was unexplored, especially in the RBN heavily reliant practice in Singapore.

In summary, there is a gap in the current digital marketing literature that has been reviewed in understanding the link between digital marketing tools and RBNs as a resource of the company. An in-depth investigation could help understand how they could create various benefits to the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. In addition, as discussed by Herhausen et al. (2020), there might potentially be a misalignment between the ideal and practical and this study would hope to uncover. In the current literature, there are lack of studies done in Singapore on industrial supplies sector, despite the government's efforts to promote manufacturing in Singapore (Yong, 2021), the failure to look into industrial supplies would mean potential hinder towards the growth of manufacturing in the downstream of industrial supplies.

2.10. Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an understanding of the Singapore environment and how relationship-based networking could benefit the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore by helping them to acquire and retain customers. It also examined the commonly used digital marketing tools and how they can assist SMEs in building capabilities to achieve competitive advantage.

This review also uncovered the impact of the current digital age where many customers are targeted by digital marketing tools. This could affect RBNs and the challenges of applying digital marketing in the business. Therefore, this review has given the thesis a direction: to explore the combination of RBT and RBNs by using digital marketing tools as an enabler to build capabilities that could create competitive advantages.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the research paradigm, philosophical underpinnings, research design and methodology of the thesis. The data collection and analysis methods that were used in the thesis are also explained.

3.2. Research paradigm and design

Moore (2011) defines learning from observing behaviours. There are many potential definitions of a philosophical paradigm (Morgan, 2007). Morgan (2007) further explains that the constitution of paradigm is a series of struggles between competing interest groups, whereas Masterman (1970) identifies as many as 22 terms of research paradigm. Burrell and Morgan (1979) describe an objectivist as one who can view aspects of the world from external reality, and a subjectivist as one whose view of the world is socially constructed and can only be comprehended from the perspective of those directly involved (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This research philosophy is a belief about the way in which data should be gathered, analysed and used (Dudovskiy, 2018) and it also makes certain assumptions about the purpose of research (Mackenzie, 2012) as the nature of reality can be arguable from the subjectivist viewpoint (Stroud, 2000). The research philosophy of the researcher also affects how the researcher applies different strategies to gather and analyse the data to achieve the research objective (Robert, 2010).

In this thesis, the aim and objectives are first, to explore the prominent digital marketing tools; second, to understand how digital marketing affects the SMEs strategically and also what kind of benefits it provides; and last, to find out how effective digital marketing tools are for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore from both the owner-managers' perspectives and the customers' perspectives.

Given that digital marketing tools have been evolving rapidly over the past years, the trends might change due to new, emerging tools (Monnappa, 2021). For this reason, cross-sectional methods are used in this study. During the period of the data collection, the researcher have noted in mind that there might be new digital marketing tools which might gain popularity within the SMEs communities in Singapore. Thus, during the interview, the researcher should verify if the participant are still using the digital or if the digital marketing tools were adopted only recently.

In order to ensure a valid interview and to provide insightful responses to achieve the research aim and objectives, participants must be using digital marketing tools. This created a need to qualify participants' backgrounds before engaging them for the interview phase, to ensure that all participants were in fact using digital marketing tools.

The research looked into their digital marketing presence using web tools such as search engines and website directory to determine if the participant was suitable for the study. This was followed by an interview-qualifying email for owners and managers of the SMEs (Appendix 2) and an interview-qualifying email for the customers that were buying industrial supplies (Appendix 3). Sent before engaging in an interview, these emails ensured that all participants would be able to provide insightful information on the prominent tools of digital marketing and how they affect SMEs strategically to create benefits for the SMEs.

3.2.1. Post-positivism paradigms.

In this thesis, a qualitative research approach is adopted from the social science domain. Understanding of the world is considered to derive from human experiences, which are of great importance as bases for the growth of knowledge (Fox, 2008). In post-positivism, knowledge is generated through careful observation and measurement of the objective reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and obtaining human interpretation of objects, events and trends (Holtz & Odağ, 2020). This paradigm provides the research with an

opportunity to identify and access the causes that influence the outcome (Cao, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the research objective is to identify the prominent digital marketing tools that the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore are using and investigate how the owners/managers' perceptions on digital marketing tools affect their strategy and the effectiveness of the tools. The paradigm adopted explores the objectiveness of what digital marketing tools were used. It also accepts that although there might be prominent tools that are used within the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, each individual might be using them differently and have a different objective even when using the same digital marketing tools.

In order to achieve the research aim and objectives in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore in particularly RO1, a post-positivism paradigm is adopted in this thesis. It requires interpreting the data collected from the participant, being an objective method of identifying the prominent digital marketing tools used. However, in order to investigate into in-depth understanding of how the prominent digital marketing tools were used strategically. According to Bryman and Bell (2007), personal experience was used to reinforce the method applied to study social reality and beyond. This would provide an understanding of the individual (O'Donoghue, 2007) and provide insightful findings regarding the other research objectives in particularly RO2 & RO3, constructivism paradigm is linked this research.

3.2.2. Constructivism paradigms.

The main idea of constructivism paradigm is a theory of cognition which has the idea that knowledge does not have the purpose of producing representation of an independent reality (Fosnot, 2005). This is because constructivists consider the world as constructed by human beings with their context and therefore would defer as individual interpretation were affected by their own views of the world (Fox, 2008). Guba and Lincoln (1998) argued that when the research concerns human activity the constructivist paradigm is best suited paradigm. Hence, as the aim of this study (RO2 & RO3) reveal the

perspective of both owners/managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and the customers perspective, constructivism is an appropriate paradigm to explain why individual stakeholder prefers and adopt digital marketing tools into their business strategy to create sustainable competitive advantage as well as their perception of effectiveness of the digital marketing tools used. Moreover, constructivism also frames the data analysis as a constructed knowledge emerges from the different perspective of owners/managers perspective and the customers' perspective.

3.3. Qualitative research approach

This thesis is explorative in nature. According to Bhaskar (2008), knowledge is viewed as a surface, which must be explored in depth to understand fully, explore the issue and identify patterns from one study that could link to another study (Matowe, 2019; Saunders et al, 2019). For instance, in qualitative interview techniques, the interviewer's role is to encourage each respondent to freely share their story and their emotions as this helps to gain an insight into how people feel and think about the research topic focus (Brennen, 2017). All interviews should achieve the goal of answering the research question (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019), as the aim of this thesis is to explore and understand in-depth how digital marketing tools play a role in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, the research is focused on understanding how the owners/managers perspective and getting to know their experiences in using the digital marketing tools. Therefore, qualitative research method is chosen because it allows the adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the participant. The participant can provide a response in their own words, which can lead the researcher to ask more in-depth questions to better understand the issue. Given the explorative nature of the research, a qualitative research method offers a better understanding (Serapioni, 2021) than quantitative research, where participants are for example, forced to make choices from amongst pre-conceived responses (Mack et al., 2005).

Therefore, the method used was a qualitative approach because the aim of this thesis is to explore and understand in-depth how digital marketing tools play a role in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. However, as the researcher is also a practitioner in the field being researched, there was the potentiality for bias to be present in the research process. For example, participants may have felt obliged to provide a positive response as they have had other business dealings with the researcher and, should this occur, it may affect the research outcome. This could be avoided by letting the participants know in advance that the researcher is totally independent; their input will only be used for research purposes; their responses will be confidential; and the information provided would not be used to affect them in any way.

In addition, as has been argued by many researchers in the social science domain, there might be confirmation bias or culture bias present, thus the research should always be open-minded and focus on the research aim and objectives (Serapioni, 2021). Therefore, to ensure the validity of the research, a more in-depth discussion will be discussed in section 3.9, after the discussion on data collection and analysis.

3.4. Data collection & sampling approach

In this research participants were selected through purposive sampling. This was done in acknowledgement that data collection is crucial in all research and that it is impossible for data analysis to make up for improper data collection (Tongco, 2007). There are many considerations relating to the data collection method, from the sampling collection methods to identifying suitable participants for the study. Finding appropriate participants was not an easy task as SMEs, by their nature, are not easily identified from business directories. Furthermore, in the industrial supplies sector, there is a wide range of different industrial suppliers with different business environments, although there are around ten thousand business entities under the targeted 2 SICC codes, the SICC codes covers a wide range of industrial supplies and it is not possible to further categorised the industrial supplies based on the type of

products they carried. Therefore, there are many other businesses that were not in the interest of this research in the targeted 2 SICC. In order to remove the businesses that are not related to the research in the most efficient way, purposive sampling were applied and based on the research and the understanding of the researcher, companies were identify and qualifying questions (see Appendices 2 and 3) were used in order to verify if the potential participants were appropriate persons and that they could contribute to the research aim and objectives.

As the research involved digital marketing tools and owner-managers of SMEs in the industrial supplies sector in Singapore, the sampling selection criteria needed to be carefully chosen. Participants needed to possess the required qualities and be willing to provide information by virtue of their knowledge and experience (Bernard, 2011). There was no easy access to information on SMEs in Singapore and the range of industrial supplies is very wide. In order to obtain the correct range of industrial supplies for the research, the first steps were to source company information from www.thegreenbook.com and www.yellowpages.com.sg, and then conduct validation checking on the company websites of the potential participants. Firstly, to check on the product range match the abrasive and cutting tools, and to understand the products and services offered was the focus of this study. This was also done to ensure that the potential participants could be found using digital marketing tools, Website marketing/Website directory.

The next step in identifying relevant participants was to establish whether it was likely that they would understand the prominent digital marketing tools, and the benefits, disadvantages and effectiveness of using digital marketing tools in the focus sector. After the companies were identified, attempts were made to contact the owner or manager by email. A qualifying email was sent, requesting contact and asking the owners and managers for an interview. (Refer to Appendices 2 and 3.)

This sampling approach was adopted as the industrial supplies which deals with abrasive and cutting tools are niche in Singapore and in order to achieve

the research objectives, participant has to be using digital marketing tools and could be able to provide valuable insight and experience.

The data collection was structured into three processes. First, a pilot study was conducted to validate the semi-structured interview format. This was followed by actual data collection with the chosen owners or managers to obtain their perspective. Lastly, interviews were conducted with customers for their perspective as a means of validating the data collected from the owners and managers.

3.5. Discussion of research ethics

There were some ethical issues that needed to be addressed about the processes involved in the data collection. As the study involved interviewing participants, it was important that ethical guidelines were established and followed, as discussed below.

3.5.1. Potential ethical problems with interviews and ethical considerations undertaken to support the participants

During the purposive sampling, owners or the managers gave their permission for the research interview to be conducted within the company. This was not to automatically suggest, however, that the particular employees to be interviewed would consent to be involved. It would not have been ethical to conduct the interview without the consent from the participants themselves (Vinson & Singer, 2004). Each individual must be briefed on the purpose of the interview and other issues, such as the strict confidentiality of the information and the commitment that it would not be used for any other purpose. As the interviews could potentially invoke negative emotions, there was also a need to develop a strategy to deal with any such incident in a positive way (Piper & Monin, 2006).

According to Allmark (2009), privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, harm, dual roles, over-involvement, politics and power are the key ethical issues to be considered when in-depth interviews are conducted. These issues must be addressed appropriately throughout the whole research process. In this research, every participant who was to be interviewed was made aware that their identity would be kept anonymous, and their name would not be identifiable (Oswaldo, 2021). In addition, they were able to decline to answer any particular question if they felt uncomfortable. They were assured that the interview data would be stored in a secure place that would not be accessible by any third parties. Once the interview had commenced, the participants were authorised to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable about continuing. The whole process conformed to the Edinburgh Napier University's Code of Ethics and the wellbeing of participants was of the utmost importance.

3.6. The Interviews

The interviews were conducted between May 2020 and March 2021, due to the global epidemic where Singapore has put a temporary halt in the manufacturing and industrial sectors (Baker, 2020). Six managers and four customers were interviewed. As the research is explorative and qualitative in nature, a semi-structured interview was chosen as the main data collection method. Such interviews allow participants to respond in a flexible way, and therefore, the data collected is more in-depth. The experiences of the participants are disclosed, providing a better understanding of the research topic.

3.6.1. Primary data: Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, or by phone call or video conference. As the current COVID-19 pandemic situation made physical interaction difficult, options other than face-to-face interviews were

preferred. The managerial interviews were with the sales manager who used digital marketing as part of their job for customer acquisition and customer retention. That is, interviewees were only those who worked for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and who were currently using digital marketing tools for their customer acquisition and customer retention activities.

This method is consistent with the qualitative concept of understanding the individual perception of digital marketing tools, which may involve personal experience and perception (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). However, as some SMEs do not have clearly defined roles, qualifying questions would be asked at the start of the interview to ensure suitability of the candidate.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for conducting the interviews because they allow participants to freely share their views on the subject. It was expected that the free-flowing nature of the interviews would allow more issues to be identified while having a structure provided direction for the participants to share relevant information. To reduce information bias as the interviews were recorded either using voice recording or note-taking, the transcribed narrations or notes were sent to the respondents for their review to ensure accuracy.

3.6.2. Pilot studies

In this research, before the pilot testing stage, there was an additional pre-test to verify if the interview questions were able to generate the appropriate responses that would address the research aim and objectives. The pre-test stage was undertaken initially with the supervisors of this thesis one month before the pilot testing. This was followed by an interview with a volunteer who was willing to assist in validating the research question one week before the pilot testing. This pre-testing also served as a 'warm up' for the actual interviews and established whether the terms that were to be used in the interview questions were easily understood by the participant or not.

After conducting the pre-test, there were some modifications made to some questions. It was considered that the initial semi-structured interview questionnaire was not strategically structured, the responses gathered were not of sufficient depth and, as a consequence, it was thought unlikely that the research would be able to achieve the intended result. The interview questionnaire was reorganised to address the three research objectives. More potential probes were added to the questions (see Appendix 5) to increase the possibility of more information being gathered from the interviews.

After the pre-test, the pilot studies were conducted successfully: the responses gathered were considered sufficient to address the research objectives. However, even after the pilot studies had been completed, additional potential probes (see Appendix 5) were added as needed.

3.6.3. Data collection: the owners'/managers' perspectives

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the owners or managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Their purpose was to identify and understand the prominent digital marketing tools used by them; to profile their understanding of how the digital marketing tools would assist them in terms of shaping their strategy for the company, and last, to understand the effectiveness of the digital marketing tools used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and how they have benefitted the company holistically.

The interviews were conducted in English, as the participants were comfortable sharing their experiences in this language. Voice recordings were used to capture the interview with the permission of the participants; notes were taken during interviews with the two participants who were uncomfortable about being recorded.

The semi-structured interview with the owners or managers was started by asking them about the different digital marketing tools that they were using currently and the frequency with which they used them. This is to address research objective RO1. It also helped the participants to become more

comfortable about speaking freely during the interview. Once the participant had shown signs of being comfortable and ready to explore more deeply, the interviewer moved to the next question: to understand how the digital marketing tools affected their customer acquisition and retention.

The aim of the question was to understand the effectiveness of the particular digital marketing tools. Ideally the interviewer would probe the participant to share their experience of using the various tools and how the customers responded. This was to address research objective RO2 and RO3.

The interview concluded with questions designed to elicit the participant's views about the effectiveness of using digital marketing tools for customer acquisition and retention. This addressed research objective RO3, and required the participants to clearly state if and how digital marketing tools had helped them in customer acquisition and retention.

As the nature of the interview with the owners/managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore were exploratory in nature to establish the primary data, the length of the interview would be more lengthy than the interview to collect the customer perspective (Refer to Appendix 6; Section 1). This was mostly because the owners/managers would explain their stand on using digital marketing tools and give their experience of how they have been using the digital marketing tools and what responses they have gotten from their customers.

3.6.4. Data collection: the customer perspectives

In addition to conducting interviews to collect data from owners and managers and obtain their perspectives, dyadic approach was taken. The data was analysed and taken into consideration in term of probes for the customer perspectives. This was done for two reasons: to apply a triangulation technique to capture the different perspectives on the application and effectiveness of digital marketing tools and to cross-validate the data to ensure the robustness of this thesis.

There were four responses from the customer perspective. Three participants were based in Singapore and one participant was based in Malaysia. As Singapore is a small country, customers in neighbouring countries such as Malaysia also frequently buy supplies from Singapore. The language used in these interviews was English as participants from both Singapore and Malaysia were comfortable sharing their experience in this language. With the permission of the participants, voice recording was used to capture the interviews with two participants and note taking was used instead with the other two participants as they were uncomfortable with voice recording.

The semi-structured interview with the customers started by asking them questions about their daily tasks, whether they searched for potential suppliers using a digital platform, what digital marketing tools they would normally use to perform their job and how frequently they used such tools. Probes were made to check on the results gathered from the owners and managers. That is, data triangulation was undertaken to check the validity of the data gathered for research objective RO1. Starting with a relatively straightforward question helped the participants to become comfortable so that they would speak more freely.

Next, questions were asked that related to understanding the customers' perceptions of how digital marketing tools affected potential suppliers and their decisions about qualifying new and existing suppliers. The interviews ended with questions designed to elicit the participants' views on how effective they think that digital marketing tools are in helping them and their suppliers. These questions related specifically to research objective RO3 and were designed to encourage participants to express a clear view about how they have benefitted from digital marketing tools and how they used them to source and maintain their suppliers.

As the nature of the interview with the customers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore were more of a dyadic approach, the length of the interview were shorter as customers interview were more targeted towards understanding the different perspectives in the dyadic relationship between the owners/managers and the customer and customers would be sharing more

on their perspectives on how they have use digital marketing tools that has changed how they worked (Refer to Appendix 6; Section 2).

3.7. Interview design

In order to collect suitable data to answer the research questions, the questionnaire was designed to investigate the three research objectives, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Questions scheduled for interviews with owner-managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore

| Research objectives | Questions | Purpose of question |
|---|---|--|
| Validate that respondent is a suitable candidate. | Could you tell me about your job roles and responsibilities in your company? | To confirm that the respondent is an appropriate person to participate. |
| RO1: To investigate the extent of prominent digital marketing tools used by SMEs. | Could you tell me what digital marketing tool(s) (for example, promoting or maintaining a website, social media, sending emails, e-commerce, etc) you use in your daily job and how you are using them? | To identify and understand the prominent digital market tools and how they are being used. |
| RO2: To investigate the extent to which digital marketing tools benefitted the SMEs and were a strategic tool for them. | Could you provide examples of how the *tools that was indicated by the participant* have helped you in your daily job? | To understand what kind of strategic benefits digital marketing deliver to the SMEs. |
| RO3: To investigate the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and customer retention. | Could you give an example of how customers have responded to your digital marketing efforts? | To understand if digital marketing tools are effective in customer acquisition and retention activities. |
| | Could you also tell me what DM tools your company has applied but which were not effective in acquiring and retaining customers? Why were they ineffective? | To understand if the participant has tried some of the digital marketing tools and failed. |
| To identify other potential issues that were not raised during the interview. | Are there other issues with the use of digital marketing tools that you would like to share? | To explore if there are any unknown issues with using digital marketing tools. |

Note. Compiled and summarised by Author. Refer to Appendix 5 for more details.

Table 4 shows the important probes that were used during the interview to direct the participant to provide their opinion and share their experiences as they related to RO 2. These questions enabled a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences.

Table 4

Important probes scheduled for interview of owner-managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

| Probes | Purpose of probes |
|--|---|
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in terms of getting more customers? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted customer acquisition activities of the industrial supplies SME. |
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in getting your brand more visible in the market? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the brand visibility of the industrial supplies SME. |
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you to get your brand into the global/overseas market? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the industrial supplies SME's initiatives to Go Global. |
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* help you achieve customer satisfaction? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the industrial supplies SME in terms of customer satisfaction. |
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in increasing your sales revenue? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the industrial supplier SME in terms of sales revenue. |

Note. Compiled and summarised by Author. Refer to Appendix 5 for more details.

Similarly, for the participants in the customer interviews, the questionnaire was designed to consistently elicit responses from the participants that were in alignment with the research objectives and to compare with the owner-managers perspectives, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Question scheduled for interview of customers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

| Research objectives | Questions | Purpose of question |
|---|---|--|
| Validate that respondent is a suitable candidate. | Could you tell me about your job roles and responsibilities in your company? | To confirm that the respondent is an appropriate person to participate. |
| RO1: To investigate the extent of prominent digital marketing tools used by SMEs. | Could you tell me what are some of the ways you find new suppliers using digital means (for example, using Google, social media, online directories, etc.) that you are using in your daily job and how you are using them? | To identify and understand the prominent digital marketing tools and how they are being used. |
| RO2: To investigate the extent to which digital marketing tools benefitted the SMEs and were a strategic tool for them. | Could you give any examples of how the *tools that was stated by participant* has helped you in your daily job? | To understand what kind of strategic benefits digital marketing provides to the customer. |
| RO3: To investigate the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and customer retention. | What do you think about supplier who are using *DM Tools Stated* vs suppliers who don't? | To understand if the use of digital marketing tools is effective in increasing customer acquisition and retention. |
| To identify other potential issues that were not raised during the interview. | Are there any other issues with the use of digital marketing tools you would like to share? | To explore if there are any unknown issues with the use of digital marketing tools. |

Note. Compiled and summarised by Author. Refer to Appendix 6 for more details.

Table 6 shows the important probes that were used during the interview to direct the participant to provide their opinion and share their experiences as they related to RO 2. These questions enabled a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences.

Table 6

Important probes scheduled for interviews of customer of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

| Probes | Purpose of probes |
|---|--|
| How appealing would you find a supplier if they used *DM Tools Stated*? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the customer acquisition activities of industrial supplies SMEs. |
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* affects your opinion of their brand credibility? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the brand credibility of industrial supplies SMEs. |
| How do you think about searching for suppliers globally using *DM Tools Stated*? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the industrial supplier SME in terms of Going Global. |
| How do you think *DM Tools Stated* helps in retaining you? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the industrial supplier SME in terms of customer satisfaction. |
| Do you think the products and services offered by a supplier that was found using *DM Tools Stated* were value for money? | To understand how the use of digital marketing tools has impacted the industrial supplies SME in terms of sales revenue. |

Note. Compiled and summarised by Author. Refer to Appendix 6 for more details.

All of these open-ended questions used a technique of follow-up questions in order to encourage interviewees to expand their answers and provide as much detail as possible.

3.8. Data analysis

The data collected on both the owner, manager and customer perspectives were analysed by applying thematic analysis. Although using thematic analysis software could assist to manage data, identify themes, overall efficiency of analysis and identify relationships among generated themes

(Dollah et al., 2017), by providing thematic classification of data based key words. However, many researchers prefer to use manual data analysis because they believe that using technology does not help much in terms of data interpretation (Dollah et al., 2017). Indeed, using software may cause the researcher to become disengaged from the data that has been collected.

On the other hand, manual data analysis might be affected by researcher bias. Software provides a more objective analysis. In order to reduce any researcher bias in the data analysis and to ensure that the data has been accurately transcribed from the recording, a copy of the transcript was emailed to the participants for their review. (A more in-depth discussion of the validity of the research is included in section 3.9.)

Manual thematic analysis was chosen for this research as the amount of data collected was manageable and a manual thematic analysis was considered sufficient. A detailed analysis is discussed in the following sub-section.

3.8.1. Thematic analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using thematic analysis as a method for identifying patterns within the data and ultimately interpreting the various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sandelowski (1995) also stated that 'There are no computations or power analyses that can be done in qualitative research to determine a priori the minimum number of sampling units required'. The main objective of the data gathering is to have sufficient data for analysis and should be in relation to answering the research question (Fugard & Potts, 2015), Braun and Clarke (2013) has suggested interviewing 6 to 10 participants, while other researchers suggested theoretical saturation (Fugard & Potts, 2015).

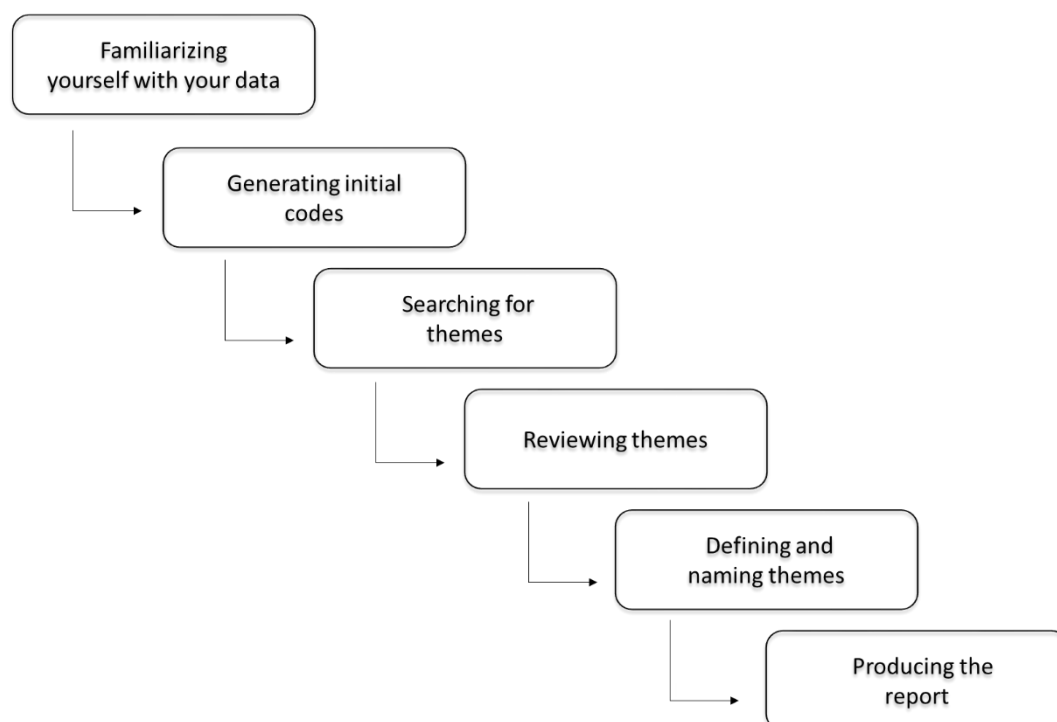
The interviews that were voice-recorded were transcribed within the day of the interview and recording by note-taking were sent over to straight after the interview. This allowed for timely review by the interviewees, which was especially important when there were any doubts about what was said in the

interview or the recording was unclear at any stage of the interview. The researcher was able to doubly confirm the data with the participant to ensure that the data collected were accurate.

Thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns, allowed for organisation and description of the data in detail (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). The data analysis undertaken for this thesis adopted the phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clark (2006) following the process flow illustrated in Figure 3. (A more detailed breakdown is provided in the following sub-section and Appendix 7)

Figure 3

Thematic analysis process



Note. Adapted from *using thematic analysis in psychology* (p.87), by Braun and Clarke, 2006. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

It is important for researchers to be familiar with the depth and breadth of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the process shown in Figure 3, the interviews were all conducted in a compacted timeframe and the recordings

were transcribed on the day of the interview. This ensured that the researcher was familiar with the data. After the recorded interviews were transcribed, the recordings were played back while the transcripts were read to make sure that the transcription was accurate. Whereas, records by note-taking were read repeatedly to ensure notes taken were clear and accurate.

The thematic analysis in this research was strictly guided by the process illustrated in Figure 3. To assist in the familiarising of the interview data, transcription of the interview was done manually by the researcher and then confirmed. Furthermore, reading and understanding of the data were done in various stages: firstly, reading to understand the content, followed by reading with the agenda of addressing the various research objectives.

After further familiarising by repeating reading of the notes taken, transcript, and playing back the recording, manual coding was undertaken. This was done by highlighting the words or phrases that were interesting or important. Different coloured markers were used to classify data for the different research objectives. For example, a blue-based colour was used for highlighting data relating to the first research objective: prominent digital marketing tools. Different shades were used to indicate the nature of the response. For example, a lighter shade was used for positive responses while a darker shade was used for negative responses.

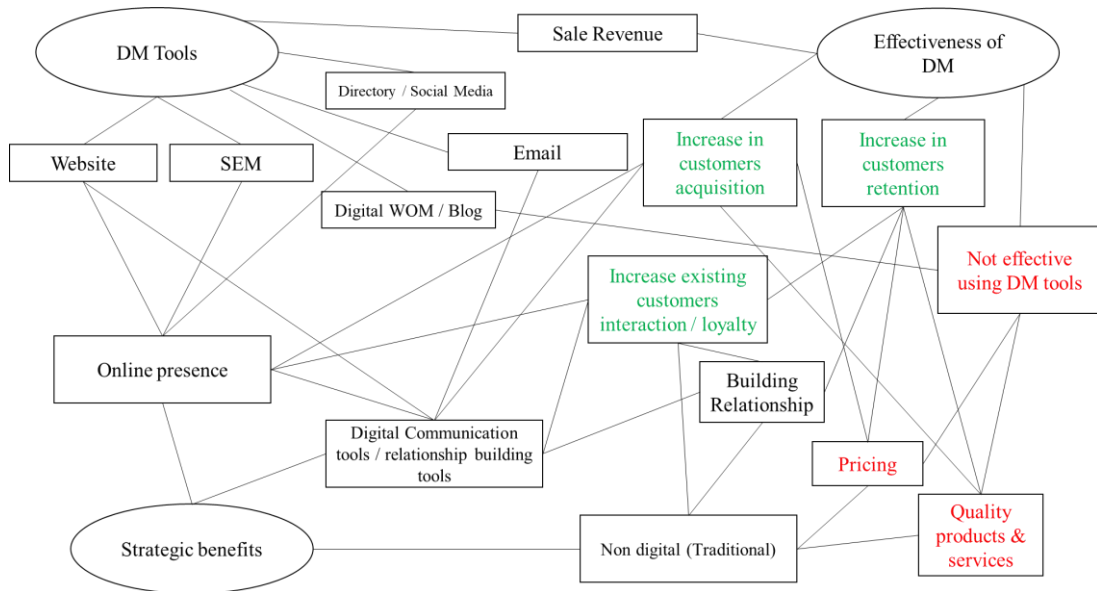
In the process of generating initial codes, a researcher should work systematically through the entire data set giving equal attention to each data item with respect to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was repeatedly executed, as some words might have been missed and might only be identified by going through the data a number of times. When numbers for coding the data were generated, the coding was then compared and grouped into different themes. For example, “using digital marketing tools, it’s a door” and “linking us up” were grouped into the same theme (refer to Appendix 7 for more details).

In this phase, the coding generated will be collated and sorted into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the research objectives being kept in mind. The

data was thematically grouped and coded for ease of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Figure 4

Thematic map.



Note. Thematic map created by Author based on the data analysis results.

In handling the reviewing of themes, a thematic map was created to better illustrate the link between the coding and themes. From figure 4, the map linked the digital marketing tools and how they affected the company strategically as per the three ROs (oval shaped) with the kind of benefits the tools created such as increasing existing customers' interaction/ loyalty and increase in customer acquisition (highlighted in green). The map also shows the limitation of digital marketing tools as there are important factors that are non-digital marketing related such as pricing and quality of products and services (highlighted in red).

After the themes had been reviewed, the theme labels were further refined to make the data easier to understand. The themes needed to be clear, specific and relate to the overall meaning that the analysis provides. For example, "saw your website" and "customer coming in" could be renamed "digital network linkage" instead of "online presence". This change made the theme clearer during the data analysis (refer to Appendix 7 for more details). The thematic

map shows the full story of the data collected together with the final classification of the themes. Further organizing of the themes and other information further enhanced the progress of the thematic data analysis, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Summary of themes and sub-categories.

| Theme | Sub-category |
|---------------------------|---|
| DM Tools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website marketing tools • Search Engine Marketing (SEM) tools • Website Directory / Social Media tools • Email marketing tools • Digital Word of Mouth / Blog Tools |
| Strategic Benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online presence • Digital communication tools/ Relationship building tools • Non-digital benefits (traditional) |
| Effectiveness of DM Tools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in customer acquisition • Increase in customer retention • Not effective |

Note. Thematic map created by Author based on the data analysis results.

After the theme and sub-categories had been completed, it was feasible to develop a clearer understanding of the data gathered from the interviews. Further analysis and the findings are presented and discussed Chapter 4.

3.9. Validity of the research

Given the explorative nature of the research, a qualitative research method offers a better understanding (Serapioni, 2021) than quantitative research, where participants are for example, forced to make choices from amongst pre-conceived responses (Mack et al., 2005). Throughout the collection of data,

the researcher is aware of the different bias that might be present in the research and in order to reduce bias, steps are taken to mitigate the bias.

Firstly, in order to reduce sampling bias, steps are taken to include both genders in the interview. As this industry is a male dominant industrial, getting female respondent is not easy. In this research, there is a good representation of gender to reduce sampling bias. Secondly, in order to reduce confirmation bias, the interviewee questions were carefully craft as such it does not present with any form of “right-answer” and instead probes are crafted to encourage the interviewee to share their personal experience, and this has reduce potential confirmation bias. Thirdly, as this purposive sampling, involved recommendation from the participant, in order to reduce participation bias, the researcher has asked for customers to be interviewed before the interview with the owners/managers and to reinforce the confidentially and anonymity of the research to reduce potential bias. Lastly, to further reduce response bias, during the interview, the researcher have to be careful not to show any form of bias that might influence the participant, the interviews that is recorded and transcribed were also sent back to the respondent for verification.

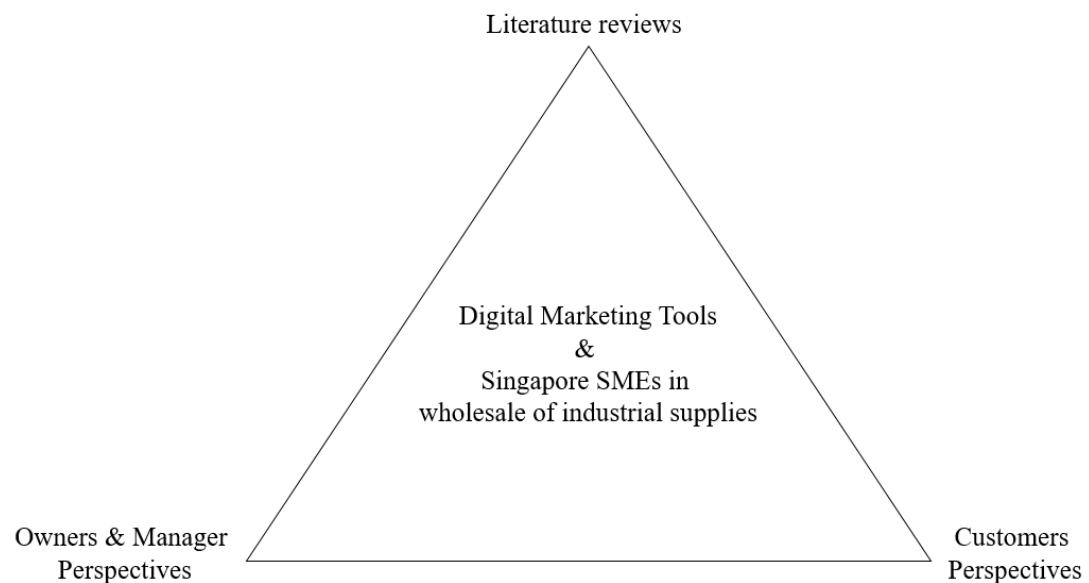
In all qualitative research, it is important to focus on the trustworthiness of the research method (Bouncken et al., 2021), as data and outcomes will vary depending on the participants and researcher (Shah & Corley, 2006). Analysis of qualitative research cannot be judged on repeatability and replicability, which are important factors for evaluating trustworthiness in quantitative research. Boje (2019) explained that this is because qualitative research is based on participants’ narratives of their experiences and their story-telling process, which are dynamic and complex. As such, Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed four trustworthiness principles that are considered important and have been commonly used by qualitative researchers (Nassaji, 2020). They are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility in qualitative research concerns the extent to which the research findings and conclusions could be considered to be believable (Nassaji, 2020). It also means that the findings should reflect the reality of the phenomena that were investigated (Nassaji, 2020). Steps should be taken to verify that the

findings are accurate and are supported by the data (Pitney & Parker, 2009). In this study, triangulation was employed to enhance the credibility of the research. This is one of the methods proposed by Nassaji (2020) to validate the data against other participants. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources. It can help to achieve a more accurate and complete understanding of the issue under investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Serapioni, 2021). The triangulation involved comparing the perspective of owners and managers from the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore with the perspectives of the customers from Singapore and one overseas customer who currently has dealings with industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, and also with the present literature, as show in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Triangulation of three perspectives



Note. Diagram created by Author to showcase the application of data triangulation

Transferability concerns the extent to which the interpretation and the conclusions of the research could be transferred to another similar context (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Nassaji, 2020). However, since qualitative research is interpretive and often participants are not representative of the larger population, the findings cannot be generalisable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985),

although a detailed data set may be sufficient to allow readers to make a judgement about the applicability of the results in a different context (Wildemuth, 2016). In this thesis, the findings and the research methodology are described in as much detail as possible so that additional data sets could facilitate transferability.

Dependability is similar to reliability in quantitative research. It refers to the consistency of data collection tools or measures. This is in contrast to qualitative research, where the study should be reported in a way that a similar interpretation would be derived by others if they were to review the data collected (Nassaji, 2020). Proper documentation of all the activities in the research process can improve dependability when the data gathered could be audited by reviewers or audiences. In this research, the activities and the data analysis have been documented in as much detail as possible to enhance dependability. Personal memos and a reflection journal of the research journey were also written and recorded.

Confirmability refers to describing the data and the findings in such a way that the accuracy of the research can be verified and confirmed by others. One useful strategy for achieving confirmability is that rational steps are taken in all the research processes and the decisions made regarding the data coding and analysis are kept and available for any further evaluation and confirmation (Bradley, 1993; Nassaji, 2020). This is different from quantitative research, where the emphasis is on breaking down the research process, so that the quantitative research can be replicated with similar results (Nassaji, 2020). In this research, the decisions and the steps taken were all recorded to improve the confirmability of the data: audiences can review the steps taken in this research and the decisions made.

In summary, steps were taken in this qualitative research to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, in line with the thoughts of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced by using the triangulation technique shown in Figure 5. The semi-structured interview was used with the objective of eliciting in-depth and detailed data to facilitate transferability. All

documentation, processes and steps taken were properly recorded to increase the trustworthiness of this research.

3.10. Methodology Limitation

In the process of the research, there were a number of incidents that occurred in the midst of data gathering. A worldwide pandemic greatly affected how the data were collected. The preferred data collection method was face-to-face interviews. However, government orders to minimise human contact impacted the interview plan and, as a consequence, video conferencing was substituted. Where the participants did not have a device with which to conduct a video call, a phone call was substituted instead. All interviews conducted were done with participants' consent and ethical guidelines were followed strictly. The questions that were asked in both video-teleconferencing and face-to-face interviews were the same to ensure the integrity of the data collected.

Not all potential participants were willing to participate in an interview. Furthermore, as the working language in Singapore is English, it was important that the potential participants were comfortable being interviewed in this language. There was also a time limitation. Because this research was a one-person effort, the interview period was extended to a period of ten months. This was longer than initially envisaged because of the difficulty of finding participants; many attempts to contact potential participants were rejected or unanswered. In order to find overseas participants, participants from Singapore were encouraged to recommend their friends in similar sectors. Those recommendations were all qualified by the same parameters to ensure fairness in the data collection. The flow of all the interviews remained the same to reduce bias.

3.11. Chapter summary

This chapter explains the research process and the paradigm underpinning this thesis. Qualitative research was adopted using purposive sampling to qualify suitable participants from both the owner-manager perspective and the customer perspective. Participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview. A pre-test study and pilot studies were undertaken to ensure that the semi-structured interview was able to elicit data required to fulfil the research aim and objectives.

The data collected were analysed by manual thematic analysis to produce themes and sub-categories, with a thematic map to show the linkage between themes. The analysis was further verified using data triangulation techniques between two different types of participants (the owners and managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as well as overseas customers who currently have dealings with these suppliers in Singapore) and the presently available literature. To increase the trustworthiness of this thesis, data and rationale for decisions were recorded so that the audience would be able to use the findings for further evaluation and confirmation. The ethical considerations and the methodology limitations were also addressed appropriately. Having reviewed the methodology, the findings of this thesis are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND FINDING

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the data presented is derived from data collected using the semi-structured interviews with the owners and managers of industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as well as customers from both Singapore and Malaysia that are currently buying industrial supplies. This chapter profiles the demography of the participants, and then outlines the findings against each of the research objectives from the owner-managers' perspectives and then the customer perspectives. The findings are summarised at the end of the chapter.

4.2. Demographic overview

The semi-structured interview for owners and managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore were all conducted within Singapore. Table 8 is the overview summary of the owners and managers of the SMEs interviewed.

Table 8

Demographic overview of the owners and managers of the SMEs participants.

| Interview # | Roles | Date of interview | How interview was recorded |
|--------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Owner | 22 May 2020 | Voice recording |
| 2 | Manager | 30 Jul 2020 | Voice recording |
| 3 | Owner | 4 Aug 2020 | Note taking |
| 4 | Owner | 4 Aug 2020 | Voice recording |
| 5 | Manager | 1 Dec 2020 | Voice recording |
| 6 | Manager | 24 Feb 2021 | Note taking |

Note. Table created by Author to record owner-manager participants.

The interviewees were the owners and managers that have direct involvement in using digital marketing tools. At the start of the interview, there were confirmation question to validate their involvement in using digital marketing tools to ensure that they were a qualified respondent.

Interviewee 1 is a third generation owner of an industrial supplies company that supplies abrasives. Currently, the company is serving customers from different manufacturing and repair and overhaul industries located in Singapore, He handles all sales and operations and is responsible for using digital marketing tools to assist the business.

Interviewee 2 is a customer account manager of a family-owned industrial supplies company supplying a range of products including abrasives and cutting tools. Currently the company is serving customers from the construction and manufacturing industries located in Singapore. He handles all the sales, enquiries and feedback from customers. He is also in charge of maintaining the company website and business development.

Interviewee 3 is an owner of an industrial supplies company supplying abrasive and cutting tools to the manufacturing, construction, mining, and repair and overhaul industries located in Singapore and Indonesia. He is responsible for all the issues in the company. Currently he handles important customers, operations, and creating business opportunities, such as using digital marketing tools to enhance branding and generate enquiries.

Interviewee 4 is an owner of an industrial supplies company supplying abrasive products to the manufacturing and the repair and overhaul industries located in Singapore and the Philippines. He also handles sales, operations and important customers, as well as marketing using traditional and digital marketing tools to create business opportunities and enhance branding for their company.

Interviewee 5 is a sales manager of an industrial supplies company supplying safety products and a wide range of products for the manufacturing and repair and overhaul industries, including abrasives and cutting tools. They currently serve customers from the manufacturing, oil and gas, repair and overhaul industry in Singapore as well as across Southeast Asia. He is also in charge

of generating ideas about how their digital marketing tools can be used to create business opportunities and branding for their company.

Interviewee 6 is the sales and marketing manager of an industrial supplies company supplying general hardware and safety products as well as cutting tools to the manufacturing and the repair and overhaul industries located in Singapore. He is responsible for serving customers as well as creating marketing content for their various digital marketing tools and using digital marketing tools to acquire more customers.

There are a total of six owners and managers from different SMEs who participated in the interviews. Four of the six agreed to be recorded. Two were unwilling to be recorded, so notes were taken and at the end of the interview, the notes were shown to the participants so that they could verify that the notes accurately recorded what they wanted to express, transcript of the recording were also sent to the participants on the same day of the interview to verify the transcription were accurate.

A total of four customers were interviewed. Two were not willing to be recorded, so notes were taken and then verified at the end of the interview. As Singapore is a small country and neighbouring countries such as Malaysia also regularly buy supplies from Singapore, there was one participant from Malaysia included in this study. He currently buys supplies from industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. His inclusion would provide a better understanding of the context of how industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore work with neighbouring countries. Table 9 (below) is the overview summary of the customers that were interviewed.

Table 9*Demographic overview of the customer participants that purchase industrial supplies*

| Interview # | Roles | Country | Date of interview | How interview was recorded |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 7 | Sourcing Specialist | Singapore | 23 Feb 2021 | Voice recording |
| 8 | Factory Manager | Malaysia | 1 Mar 2021 | Note taking |
| 9 | Sourcing Manager | Singapore | 5 Mar 2021 | Voice recording |
| 10 | Buyer | Singapore | 14 Mar 2021 | Note taking |

Note. Table created by Author to record customer participants.

The customer interviewees were those who were directly involved in purchasing industrial supplies. At the start of the interview, there were confirmation questions to validate their involvement in using digital marketing tools for their sourcing or procurement process to ensure they were a qualified respondent.

Interviewee 7 is a sourcing specialist in the repair and overhaul industry located in Singapore. His company mainly buys abrasive supplies. His daily responsibilities include sourcing for new suppliers as well as maintaining the existing suppliers, ensuring that they are able to fulfil their orders.

Interviewee 8 is a factory manager in the manufacturing industry located in Malaysia. His company mainly buys abrasive supplies and cutting tools. His daily responsibilities include ensuring production schedules, sourcing new suppliers, maintaining existing suppliers, planning and purchasing of materials for the factory.

Interviewee 9 is a sourcing manager in the repair and overhaul industry located in Singapore. His company mainly buys abrasive supplies and cutting tools. His daily responsibilities include managing technical engineers, fulfilling new production requirements, negotiating for cost savings and productivity improvements, sourcing new suppliers and maintaining relations with existing strategic suppliers.

Interviewee 10 is a buyer in the manufacturing industry located in Singapore. Her company mainly buys cutting tools. Her daily responsibilities include sourcing new suppliers as well as maintaining existing suppliers, ensuring that they are able to fulfil their orders.

All 10 participants were interviewed within a timeframe of ten months. Table 10 below summarises the dates on which the interviews were conducted and the type of semi-structured interview that was used, additional information can be found in Appendix 6. There were two types of semi-structured interview conducted: type A for the industrial supplies SMEs and type B for the customers that currently purchase industrial supplies.

Table 10

Summary of the date and type of industry interview conducted

| Interview # | Date of interview | Type of industry interviewed |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | 22 May 2020 | Industrial Supplies |
| 2 | 30 Jul 2020 | Industrial Supplies |
| 3 | 4 Aug 2020 | Industrial Supplies |
| 4 | 4 Aug 2020 | Industrial Supplies |
| 5 | 1 Dec 2020 | Industrial Supplies |
| 7 | 23 Feb 2021 | Repair & Overhaul |
| 6 | 24 Feb 2021 | Industrial Supplies |
| 8 | 1 Mar 2021 | Manufacturing |
| 9 | 5 Mar 2021 | Repair & Overhaul |
| 10 | 14 Mar 2021 | Manufacturing |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise all interviews conducted.

The first five semi-structured interviews were with the owners and managers of the industrial supplies SMEs. Then the primary focus moved to interviews with customers. All 10 participants in the interviews had been working with their company for at least two years and were directly involved in using digital marketing tools. On this basis, they were deemed qualified to be respondents for interview. It was felt that saturation point had been reached as the participant given their responses that does not give more information towards the research question (Guest et al., 2020).

The interviews with the owners/managers were stopped after six interviews as the responses from later participants were similar to those of earlier participants as no new codes emerge from the interviews (Given, 2016), in relation to RO1, the mention of using website for customer acquisition were repeated appearing from interview 4th to 6th and there are no new digital marketing tools mentioned which were similar to interview conducted earlier.

This is constant throughout the other research objectives, where the interview stated that digital marketing tools helps them with greater market awareness which could potential generate into new sales and also helped them in giving better customer services and improving customer relationship. The owners/managers responses homogeneity towards the research questions of the use digital marketing tools they have adopted. The responses in the customer interviews reached a similar stage after four interviews. A more detailed analysis of the data collected is included in section 4.3 (the perspective of the owners/managers) and section 4.4 (the perspective of customers).

4.3. Owners/Managers' perspectives

In this section, the data collected from the owners and managers is analysed in accord with the three research objectives.

4.3.1. Prominent digital marketing tools used (RO1)

In this sub-section, the prominent digital marketing tools used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore are divided into two sub-sections covering customer acquisition and customer retention from the owners/managers' perspective.

4.3.1.1. Digital marketing tools used for customer acquisition

In regards to RO1 – to investigate the extent of prominent digital marketing tools used by SMEs – the owners/managers indicated that the prominent digital marketing tools used for customer acquisition are websites and search engine marketing (SEM) tools, such as Google. Although there are some SMEs that used different tools, such as posting their company profile in business directories or using social media for customer acquisition, most SMEs only used websites and SEM as their main digital marketing tool for customer acquisition. Below Table 11 is the summary of the responses from all the owners and managers.

Table 11

Summary of prominent digital marketing tools for customer acquisition used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore

| Interviewee # | Website | Email | SEM (Google) | Directory / Social Media | WOM / Blog |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | X | | X | | |
| 2 | X | | X | | |
| 3 | X | | X | X | |
| 4 | X | | X | | |
| 5 | X | | X | X | |
| 6 | X | | X | X | |
| Total | 6 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 0 |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the prominent digital marketing tools used for customer acquisition from the owner-managers' perspective.

The data gathered clearly indicates that both websites and search engine marketing are normally used hand-in-hand. Interviewees 4 and 6 mentioned that their website helps them create awareness and allows customers to know that they existed. They used search engine optimization, which is part of the search engine marketing tool kit, to help create awareness on the internet.

Having a website also helps in customer acquisition. Interviewee 2 stated that new customers are repeatedly coming onto their website and sending enquiries and this helps in customer acquisition. According to interviewee 3, there are many more overseas enquiries through their website than local enquiries because of the time difference and locality. Both interviewees 2 and 3 fielded many phone calls from new potential customers who stated that they had seen the product they carried and got the contact information from the website and would like to ask for more details. Interviewee 5 stated that having a website helps them as they are able to publish more details, such as their recent showcase on how their products are being used. Customers that saw their showcase can also fill in their enquiry in the contact form on the website. Interviewee 1 had provided an overview of his perspective on using a website and search engine marketing tools by stating:

Most of the time the customers, when they come to us, the social media, the website actually just leads us to the customer's enquiry. There are times they are not looking for the correct things or things like that. But when we link up with them, then we ask them what they really want, so from there on we can promote our product or services more efficiently. But most importantly, the social media, the website is that they are able to link us to the customers.

This highlighted that as industrial supplies are technical products, potential customers might not find the most suitable products on the websites or from digital marketing tools. They are marketing tools that can create awareness and provide a link to potential customers.

There are other digital marketing tools that were used in customer acquisition. Website directories are one example. According to interviewees 3 and 6, being included in such website directories gives them a worldwide presence and helps them get noticed by potential customers. Interviewee 5 used social media to post interesting showcase of their products; they capture the attention of potential customers and direct them to the company website for more information. These methods are, however, not widely used by industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

There are also digital marketing tools which was not used by any of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore such as email marketing and digital word-of-mouth marketing. All of the interviewee do not use email marketing tools as they think that using email marketing is not effective. Firstly, they believed that their product are highly customised and technical and mass sending of email would be ineffective as they have received many marketing email on a daily basis which were not relate to the current situation. Thus, they would find them disruptive to their daily operations and would not want their potential customers to face the same frustration they are having. According to interviewee 4, the bottom-line for customers to be looking for new products are requirement and sending email does not helps as customers would either search for new products using search engines (SEM) or would contact their current suppliers directly. In addition, as for blog and digital word-of-mouth marketing (WOM), the SMEs feedback that in their opinion, having a blog might not be suitable for B2B context as the customers would not be interested in their blog and they are not able to afford the resources that they would need to create and maintain a blog and to create and maintain capabilities to build digital WOM.

4.3.1.2. Digital marketing tools used in customer retention

Further to RO1, the prominent digital marketing tools used for customer retention are websites and email tools. However, the general response from the interviewees was that although digital marketing tools were used to assist

in customer retention, other non-digital means such as pricing and quality of the industrial supplies which are more important. Most interviewees indicated that using relationship networks, pricing, quality and better customer service were the main factors that contributed to customer retention and that digital marketing tools only act to supplement them, by assisting communication and enhancing the efficiency of customer retention. Table 12 is the summary of the responses from all the owners and managers on this topic.

Table 12

Summary of prominent digital marketing tools for customer retention used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore

| Interviewee # | Website | Email | SEM tools | Directory / Social Media | W-O-M Blog | Others (Non-DM tools) |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | X | | | | | |
| 2 | | X | | | | X |
| 3 | | | | | | X |
| 4 | X | X | | | | X |
| 5 | X | X | | | | X |
| 6 | X | X | | | | X |
| Total | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the prominent digital marketing tools used for customer retention from owner-managers' perspectives.

The data shows that the most widely used digital marketing tools for customer retention are websites and email. Interviewee 4 stated that existing customers would not go to their website or read their email unless they have new requirements, for which they would need to source new products. In this context, customers can go onto their website and search for products and solutions whenever they encounter problems or need additional industrial supplies for their operations. Interviewee 1 shared that customers are normally busy and would normally not want to be disturbed, so, when they encounter a problem they would look on their supplier's website to find products that are

suitable for them, followed by sending an email enquiry or making a phone call to ask for more details.

In addition to customers surfing the company's website, targeted sending of marketing emails to existing customers enhances interaction between suppliers and customers, as shared by interviewee 5. He stated:

We actually pull in together, for example, eight different types of products for rental or equipment sales and we make it into a brochure and we let the salesperson do his own email mass blast to the customers. Surprisingly, the rates that came back are actually quite high.

Some existing customers might only be aware of the particular product that they are currently buying and not know of other products that they might potentially need and that their supplier provides such products. Marketing emails make customers aware of other products that the suppliers carry. If/when they need such products, they would be able to look for these suppliers or their website for more information. Thus the emails improve communications and support customer retention.

However, interviewees 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 shared that although digital marketing tools such as websites and emails help in customer retention, the most important factor that affects customer retention is non-digital marketing. This might include relationship networks, customer service and pricing among other factors. Interviewee 4 stressed the importance of non-digital marketing when he said:

You will need to retain customers through personal relationships and not by e-methods because personal touch is important, visits are important. You can be visited, they know you, they see you, they have confidence in what you sell to them. They say your price is reasonable, you are able to provide them with a good solution. You solve their problem, then they are able to thank you for the solution you provided and then they realise they need you.

The other interviewees 2, 3, 6 also provided insightful experiences, such as: “Over the years, we have been working with the customer and have a good relationship in terms of working together”; “Customers normally prefer to work with suppliers they know”; “Customers continue to buy from us because of our price and service”.

These are the most common sentiments shared by the interviewees 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 to show that in terms of customer retention, the focus on non-digital marketing tools is much higher than on digital marketing tools. SMEs are using digital marketing tools, such as websites and emails, to assist them even though they focus on using non-digital marketing tools for customer retention. Interviewee 5 stated that sending relevant emails to the customer constantly would maintain communication and would open new sales opportunities. However, there are digital marketing tools such as SEM tools, website directory and digital word-of-mouth marketing are not used in customer retention activities.

4.3.1.3. Overview of prominent Digital marketing tools used (RO1)

In summary, prominent digital marketing tools used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore for both customer acquisition and customer retention are website marketing although the other tools differs between customer acquisition and customer retention (see table 13).

Table 13

Summary of prominent digital marketing tools used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore

| Customer Acquisition | Customer Retention |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Website marketing | Website marketing |
| SEM tools | Email marketing |
| Directory / Social Media | Others (Non-DM tools) |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the prominent digital marketing tools used from owner-managers’ perspectives.

For customer acquisition, website marketing tools are the most prominent and favoured by industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as they act as a linkage to new potential customers. Search engine marketing tools support the website by increasing traffic. Being able to be found on the internet by more people means that there are more potential customers visiting the website, which aids in customer acquisition. Websites and search engine marketing tools are used together as a combined package by all interviewees. The typical flow is that a search engine directs potential customers to their website; the potential customer leaves their details and enquiry by completing a form on the website, and then SMEs contact the potential customer to follow up on the enquiry.

Whereas for customer retention, websites and email marketing are the most prominent and favourable digital marketing tools among the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. They act as a tool to enhance communication with their customers and improve communication, and in this they enhance customer retention. However, focusing on non-digital marketing tools, such as relationship networks customer service, pricing and other factors are more highly favoured by the SMEs. The owners and managers feel that in order to have good customer retention, digital marketing tools can only play a small role compared to non-digital marketing activities.

4.3.2. Digital Marketing Tools and Strategic Benefits (RO2)

The prominent digital marketing tools used were investigated and identified as mainly websites and search engine marketing for customer acquisition and websites and emails for customer retention. This section relates to RO2, to investigate the extent to which digital marketing tools benefitted SMEs as a strategic tool.

According to all the six interviewees from the SMEs, website marketing and search engine marketing worked hand-in-hand for customer acquisition, whereas websites and emails were widely used for customer retention. The first step was to create a website with company and product information. This

is followed by generating additional content such as pictures and write-ups on the various products. These are the basics of the website marketing.

Search engine marketing helps by displaying relevant search results. The engines look at the content of the website, so having website content that is relevant is important to search engine marketing. In addition to relying on search engines, paid display advertising is also available. By paying for a “sponsor advertisement”, the search engine displays the company at the top of the search results whenever someone searches on products that are relevant to the industrial supplies.

Second, in terms of customer retention, email marketing and websites work hand-in-hand according to the interviewees. Emails were usually sent to existing customers informing them of new product launches, promotions or case studies that might be of use to them. This helps to increase communication between the supplier and the customer.

Interviewee 2 stressed that: *“Our website will show up on the front page of the Google so that’s why emails will come in from all those places”*. Interviewee 2’s website has an enquiry form that directly converts the customer’s enquiry on the website into email format. He could access the email and reply to the customer’s enquiry directly. This is also consistent with other interviewees, who provided similar experiences, such as: *“I get customer feedback telling me that they found us on the website”*; *“On and off people see the website, people call in, they write you an email. Sometimes, people fill in the form, just to create awareness”*; *“Normally customers will send us an email to ask more about this product because we do have email, contact number, as well as a fill-in page in our website, so they can actually use either means to contact us”*.

Digital marketing is used as a strategic tool, first to create awareness, and then to showcase the products and services of the company, and last, to convert customers to the enquiry stage. It is similar to: *“It’s just a door is an avenue for us where we come to the customer”*, according to interviewee 1. Other interviewees had similar views.

This would help the SMEs expand their sales with more enquiries as the company has greater visibility in the search engines. This is especially so if

the company is at the top of a search result. This could help with brand visibility, according to interviewee 6: *“Be on the first page. This is like letting the customers know that we have a very strong presence. I think this more or less will let customers have a good impression.”*

Search results can direct the customer into their website. The website showcases the products and services. This would definitely increase sales as the search engines and website help to generate more leads and enquiries. This made the interviewee’s job easier as customers that have made enquiry are more confident about the company’s products and services.

The common challenges that the SMEs faced were the lack of resources to maintain their websites and the cost of buying advertising from the search engine operators. Therefore, there are lack of resource to implement the use of digital word-of-mouth and blog tools, in the owners/managers perspective, digital word-of-mouth and blog tools are out of their range of the digital marketing activities. According to interviewee 2, their staff are already very busy with daily activities and are unable to maintain the website or even answer some of the website enquiries in a timely manner. And according to interviewees 1 and 5:

“Basically, we just hand it to the consultant to do it.”

“Digital marketing: I can say you need to spend a lot of time and effort to do a proper digital marketing. Currently what we have is only one marketing executive managing this and is a bit overwhelming.”

This shows that SMEs are either lacking resources or the expertise to implement digital marketing strategies. Feedback from the interviewee is about the cost and expertise of implementation. In addition, due to the fact that this industry is very technical in nature, digital marketing has limitations in assisting the business. According to interviewees 4 and 3:

“We need to follow up with offline activity such as visiting the customer, calling the customer and meeting them to provide them with a solution, because no offline, no order.”

“In the industrial business, there are many technical issues we have to solve in order to get the customer to order from us.”

It is common to have an offline follow-up activity, such as physically visiting the customer to make sure the solution matches the customer’s manufacturing or repair processes.

However, there was also feedback that digital marketing was not the strategy that could assist the SMEs in their business. According to interviewees 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6:

“Over the years, we have been working with the customer and have a good relationship in terms of working together.”

“This is also a problem because of the trust issue as we have not seen each other before and maybe the customer will not trust us.”

“Because you will need to retain customers through personal relationship.”

“They will look at their own suppliers to provide them with the solution and stuff.”

“If we have a certain relationship with our customer that we built over the years, because of our good relationship with the customer, they would be more likely to stick to us.”

Those are some of the responses from the interviewees that indicate that the relationship with the customers is a very important factor. Having a good relationship-based network strategy assists in customer acquisition and retention for the SMEs.

In summary, a digital marketing strategy can assist the SMEs create awareness and industrial presence, exposing their products and services in the market and thereby creating good brand visibility and a good impression on customers. However, there are also challenges. The lack of resources available to create a good digital marketing strategy is the most common problem. Another is the lack of expertise related to the implementation of a digital marketing strategy. Other factors, such as the relationship-based network, affect customer acquisition as customers might not want to change

supplier if they have good relationship with their existing supplier. This makes customer acquisition challenging if the company relies just on having a good digital marketing strategy.

4.3.2.1. Digital marketing as an enabler of competitive advantages

This section relates to RO2, to investigate the extent to which industrial supplies SMEs benefitted by using digital marketing tools as a strategic tool. How digital marketing could enable SMEs to gain competitive advantages will also be investigated.

The main digital marketing tools that were used were websites, search engine marketing and emails. These tools are mainly used to create awareness and using digital communication to enhance communication and building relationship between suppliers and customers. Digital marketing has enabled customer acquisition for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as the website and search engine marketing tools have created more opportunity for their products and services to be found. Interviewee 2 shared:

Our website is like an advertisement or more like an awareness for our shop that many people can view freely. Because look at our shop here, even if you were to drive pass the road outside, you might not even notice that there is a shop here. The online presence allows us to tell people that we supply our products here.

In addition, according to interviewees 3, 4, 5 and 6, digital marketing allows their products and services to be noticed. Customers are able to know them and channel their customer enquiries, hence enabling better customer acquisition. In addition, awareness that was created by using digital marketing tools also helps build brand visibility. Interviewees 1, 2 and 6 shared that their websites are always in the top few search result on the first page of the search engines. This has helped their brand visibility and has a very positive effect on their brand. Interviewee 6 shared:

“Continue to appear many times in front of our customers more than our competitors and they would more likely try to enquire from us.”

As their brands are always visible, everywhere, whenever customers have an enquiry, the customer would think of them first. This is similar to the experience of interviewee 5. His company has posted many product case studies and customers who encounter similar issues to those profiled in the case studies would notice them very quickly due to their brand visibility.

As digital marketing is on the internet and, therefore has no geographic limitations, digital marketing has replaced some of their traditional marketing activities according to interviewee 3. These include participating in exhibitions. The cost of exhibitions is high and normally the audience would only be from the country where the exhibition is being hosted or perhaps the countries around the hosting country. This contrasts with the use of digital marketing tools: they can create much more awareness and brand visibility compared to exhibitions at a much lower cost.

According to interviewee 4, using digital marketing tools has brought them sales enquiries from across the world and it has greatly helped them in terms of communicating with overseas customers. However, overseas customers are generally harder to acquire as there is no personal contact. The complex technical requirements of customers make suggesting a suitable product and properly servicing the customer and their requirements challenging for the SMEs.

Using digital marketing with existing customers has a positive effective according to interviewees 1, 4 and 6. Customers would look for solutions only when they encounter some issue or have a new technical requirement. Having a website and good brand visibility would help direct the customer to the website. They are able to get their solution faster, thus enhancing communication and interaction with the customers could build better customer relationship to achieve customer loyalty.

Interviewee 5 shared that using email marketing with existing customers could enhance the communication when a customer might not be aware of the full

range of products and services they offer. Enhanced communication would help them promote more products and services to the customer:

“Email mass blast to the customers: surprisingly the rates that came back are actually quite high because a lot of customers like what we mentioned earlier. They do not know we do rental and equipment sales for industrial.”

This shows that although a customer may actively go to the supplier website to check for product and services, frequent active communication with the customer could improve the customer relationship.

That said, the main factors for obtaining customer loyalty according to interviewees 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are non-digital marketing factors such as good customer service, better pricing, supplying better quality products and having a good relationship. The relationship is important because customers would normally have established their own group of suppliers that they have relationships with and they would not look for new suppliers unless their existing supplier is unable to fulfil their requirements. Digital marketing could only assist with better and easier communication to build customer relationship; the SMEs would need to be physically present to build a relationship with a potential new customer in order to build a RBN with them and service them to achieve customer loyalty.

Interviewee 3 specifically stated that:

Many people also slowly start using the internet to look for things to buy and we have to follow up with the trend so we will not be left behind.

Customers normally prefer to work with suppliers they know as they have worked together before and have proven success. Customers do not go online to search for unknown suppliers unless their current supplier lists are not able to provide them with a solution.

This statement stresses the importance of the RBN that could help the SMEs obtain a competitive advantage. Although digital marketing has changed the way customers look for products and services, they are still very reliant on RBNs to finding products and services.

When asked about the impact of good sales revenues on creating competitive advantage, none of the participants was very sure if they would have any impact. All the participants acknowledged that increasing sales revenue would mean additional resources for them to expand their capabilities. For example, they would expect to have a higher budget for paid advertising on search engine marketing tools or the capacity to hire another digital marketing specialist to help them build their digital marketing tools.

However, the participants also perceived some disadvantages of using digital marketing. Those highlighted by the participants included a lack of people with relevant expertise and a lack of resources to maintain the website or start a blog to gather digital W-O-M. Furthermore, they believed that the customer would prefer suppliers to be physically present to solve problems and they believed that doing so could also build a better relationship with the customer. There are also non-digital marketing factors such as pricing and the quality of the industrial supplies which was believed to be a huge factor affecting their competitive advantages. Thus, many of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore would consider not building digital marketing capabilities given these considerations.

4.3.2.2. Overview of Digital marketing and strategic benefits (RO2)

In summary, Table 14 shows how digital marketing is an enabler for SMEs in relation to different variables according to the framework, and how SMEs could use digital marketing tools to acquire new customers as a consequence of the brand visibility that digital marketing tools deliver. By using digital marketing tools, SMEs are able to enhance communication and start to build relationships that are subsequently developed through RBNs. This helps SMEs to increase customer satisfaction and, therefore, increase sales revenue, which, in turn, provides the budget to further build their capabilities to obtain competitive advantages.

Table 14

Summary of the findings for RO2: To investigate the extent that industrial supplies SMEs benefitted by using digital marketing tools as a strategic tool

| Key Findings | | Variables |
|---|--|------------------------|
| Pros | Cons | |
| Website: Customer could enquire about items directly from our website | Website: Need actual person with technical knowledge to advice customers on the correct industrial supplies. Digital W-O-M / Blog: need extra resource to generate content. | Customer Acquisition |
| Website: Online presence creates awareness. SEM: Being top in search engines gives customers' confidence. | Website: Lack of resources to maintain website. Website: Lack of people with expertise. SEM: High cost of paid advertisement to the search engines operators. | Brand visibility |
| Website: Have no geographic limitations, available 24/7. DM tools: Simplify communicating with overseas customers. | Website: No personal contact. DM tools: Unable to physically look at the problem and suggest correct solutions. | Going Global |
| Website: Available 24/7; allows customer to look for solution anytime. Email: Increase and enhance communication. | Website: Customer wants to see them personally face to face to solve the technical issue. DM tools: Customers look for better pricing, quality and customer service. | Customer Satisfactions |
| DM tools: Increase sales revenue helps expand capabilities | | Sales Revenue |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the finding for Research Objective 2 from the owner-managers' perspective.

However, the challenges of using digital marketing tools, such as a lack of resources and capabilities to implement digital marketing is a constraint for some of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. This is in addition to the owners/managers' perspective that they should continue to be physically present to meet customers. Most of the owner-managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore are in favour of using digital marketing tools to build their capabilities and develop competitive advantages.

4.3.3. Effectiveness of digital marketing tools (RO3)

The investigation relating to RO3 – the effectiveness of digital marketing tools for customer acquisition and customer retention – focused mainly on websites, search engine marketing and email marketing.

According to interviewee 1, having an online presence has significantly increased customer acquisition capabilities. Having their brand visible in an online search using a search engine, which many customers are using to look for new products and services, “opens the door” for the supplier to the customer. Instead of using traditional sales activities such as cold calling and a door-to-door approach to acquire new customers, digital marketing tools are “able to link us to the customers”, establishing a connection between the supplier and the customers. In addition, existing customers that have new requirements can get answers from the digital marketing tools the instant they need them. This would also enhance customer satisfaction.

Interviewee 2 also shared that digital marketing tools have become part of their business strategy for customer acquisition. They create an online presence, which results in a significant increase in new customer enquiries that usually convert into a sale. He said:

“New customers are repeatedly coming onto our website, sending enquiries to our email. Most of the customers I could say are a straight sales conversion because the products we sell are like you need it.”

Because of the nature of industrial supplies, customers only start looking for products when they need them. Having good brand visibility could help generate more sales. With regards to customer retention, although digital marketing tools could enhance communication, interviewee 2 believed that the best strategy for improving customer retention was using non-digital marketing methods, such as better pricing, quality, lead times and service. There was also a concern that customers are unable to cope with digital marketing tools as some of their employees are not familiar with them. This situation would result in drop in the standard of service.

According to interviewee 4, although digital marketing tools are effective in generating more customer enquiries, there is more to be done. Rather than being a direct sale, an enquiry only serves as a link between the supplier and the customer. It must be followed up with other sales activity. He said:

“We need to follow up with offline activity such as visiting the customer, calling the customer and meeting them to provide them with solutions, because no offline, no order.”

As industrial supplies are technical in nature, a customer’s requirements might not be straightforward. Hence, offline visiting to the customer site is needed in order to solve their issue and acquire them as a customer. In using digital marketing tools for customer retention, interviewee 4 said:

“They go to our website, they see what they want to buy and then they call me and I will advise them of our solution and how to use it.”

However, interviewee 4 also shared that digital marketing tools are not very effective as the customer focus is on the bottom line. Digital marketing is heavily reliant on the customer knowing their requirements. Some customers who have requirements would call them directly instead of using a digital marketing tool to communicate with them.

Overall, interviewee 4 felt that digital marketing was not very important in customer acquisition and retention, although digital marketing is “good to have”. He said:

I think that using networks and relationships makes it easier to get more sales because I think it’s more natural if you have a problem to solve, you call your friend, your supplier, somebody that you know to help. So, this point is super important: you must be already there in his contact list. If not, it will be hard.

This quote from interviewee 4 shows that RBNs are still a very important factor in the current environment. Digital marketing is just an additional tool to support them in customer acquisition and retention.

Interviewee 6 shared that digital marketing helps them other than in generating leads: it also helps with increasing the probability of customer acquisition. Communication is easier using digital marketing tools; appearing on the top page of a search engine search helps their brand to be visible to more customers, which not only increases their leads, it also helps by building their reputation within the industry:

I think this more or less will let customer have a good impression. For example, you walk on the street. You see McDonalds always appearing in your brain. When you are hungry, you will also think of McDonalds.

Having good brand visibility not only helps in generating leads but also helps enhance the brand image and the company's reputation within the industry. This would allow the supplier to engage with customers more advantageously due to their reputation and increase customer acquisition. However, for customer retention, better service, pricing and relationships are more important factors rather than having good digital marketing tools. Communication can improve using digital marketing tools, and thereby contribute to offering better service. The most important factor in customer retention is having good pricing and having a relationship with the customer:

"If we have a certain relationship with our customer that we built over the years, because of our good relationship with the customer, they would more likely to stick to us."

This shows that in terms of customer retention, building a good relationship is very important for SMEs to focus on. By having good service, pricing, communication and branding, the SMEs could build their RBNs faster and better using digital marketing tools to assist them.

Interviewee 5 supports the idea of using digital marketing tools for customer acquisition and retention as digital marketing enables them to generate more leads. The leads that digital marketing generate have an acquisition success rate of around 50% greater than their expectations:

So far our digital marketing effort is still insufficient and we still need to put in more time and effort to actually focus on the digital marketing.

Currently the success rate of 50% to us is very good as we expected the conversion rate to be only 20%. Twenty per cent from those leads is already considered a good number and to get 50% is actually – we are quite satisfied, because the lead generation from this is still very low, so we are actually wanting to boost our leads from this portion.

As the SMEs don't have many resources to allocate to digital market efforts, they feel that their effort is still insufficient but the results exceed their expectations. However, they feel that in terms of business-to-business relationships, digital marketing is more helpful for customer retention (as it helps them to engage with existing customers) rather than the acquisition of new customers.

“Because a lot of customers for example company to company, they actually had their own pools of suppliers etc ...”

“Mostly they will look at their own suppliers to provide them with the solution and stuff.”

This shows that having an RBN is very important for both customer acquisition and customer retention, and that the SMEs shouldn't rely just on using digital marketing tools.

This was further reinforced by interviewee 3, who said that he believed that a human touch is best for building relationship-based network:

We cannot increase our sales because in the internet world, you don't know me, I don't know you.

This is also a problem because of trust issues: as we have not seen each other before, maybe the customer will not trust us. They pay a deposit for the orders and we also will not trust the customer to pay up after they receive our goods.

Customers normally prefer to work with suppliers they know as they have worked together before and have a proven success.

This indicates that people do not trust the internet if they have not met each other before. So, although digital marketing is starting to assist SMEs with

customer acquisition and retention, there are limitations. By using relationship-based networks, greater trust can be built and this increases customer acquisition and retention.

4.3.3.1. Overview of effectiveness of digital marketing tools (RO3)

In summary, Table 15 shows that digital marketing helps customer acquisition by creating higher brand visibility, which provides a linkage between the suppliers and the customers. Moreover, using RBNs could increase trust and improve customer acquisition further in order to complete the customer acquisition process, this can be assisted using digital marketing tools.

Table 15

Summary of RO3: The effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and customer retention

| Customer Acquisition | |
|--|---|
| Effective | Ineffective |
| Enable higher brand visibility, increase traffic flow and enquiry rates. | Technical requirement needs to be solved physically after looking at the process in the factory. |
| Being at the top of search engines helps build branding and improve enquiry rates. | Physical follow-up needed to gain trust with the customers. |
| Website could help to convert enquiries to make sales easier. | Customers would prefer to approach suppliers they are familiar with and have a relationship with. |
| Customer Retention | |
| Improve customer interaction for better customer service. | Using non-digital (traditional) means; having the better pricing. |
| Improve customer loyalty through using better communication | Using non-digital (traditional) means; providing better quality products and customer service. |
| Using digital marketing tools to build relationship | |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the findings for research objectives 3 from the owner-managers' perspective.

Although using digital marketing tools helps enhance communication, deepen relationships, provide better service for the customer, resulting in higher customer satisfaction and leading to better customer retention, there are some factors that digital marketing doesn't address. These include pricing and the quality of the industrial supplies they offer.

4.4. Customer perspectives

In this section, the data collected from customers will be discussed and analysed in alignment with the three research objectives.

4.4.1. Prominent digital marketing tools used (RO1)

In this section, the prominent digital marketing tools used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore are considered in two sub-sections covering customer acquisition and customer retention from the customer perspective.

4.4.1.1. Digital marketing tools used for new suppliers

The prominent digital marketing tools used by customers to find new suppliers are websites and search engines. However, according to interviewee 8,9,10 as the customers, they prefer to deal with suppliers that they already have relationships with. Below (Table 16) is the summary of the responses from all the customers' perspective.

Table 16

Summary of prominent digital marketing tool used by customers buying industrial supplies from new suppliers in Singapore.

| Interviewee # | Website | Email | Search Engines | Directory / Social Media | WOM / Blog | Others (Non-DM tools) |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 7 | X | | X | X | | |
| 8 | X | | X | | | X |
| 9 | X | | X | | | X |
| 10 | X | | X | | | X |
| Total | 4 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 3 |

Note. Table created by Author to record the digital marketing tools that were used by the customers for new supplier acquisition.

The data collected from the customers indicated that most customers were using a search engine (particularly Google) to find products and services when they need to look for a new supplier. After they found potential suppliers, they go to the supplier's website to look at the products and services offered. Customers also prefer to look to their current suppliers that they have relationships with and are more likely to engage them directly using a phone call, email or check their website to look for the products and services they require.

According to all interviewee, customer's typical process when they are looking for new products and services is to first check their current supplier list – suppliers that they already have a relationship with. If their current list doesn't have a suitable supplier, they then continue searching for alternative suppliers using Google. They would normally check the first few results that Google has given them and then check for appropriate products on the new supplier's website and initiate contact with them.

According to all interviewee the ideal website should have sufficiently detailed product and service information to enable them to make a decision. It would

be even better if all other information such as pricing, lead time, technical specification, and all other information related to the products and services are available. Customers are usually busy and when looking for a new supplier, they want the job to be done as quickly as possible.

4.4.1.2. Digital marketing tools used for existing suppliers

The prominent digital marketing tool used by the customers is visiting the supplier’s website. However, the factors affecting customer retention do not only focus on digital marketing capabilities of the suppliers. Below (Table 17) is the summary of the responses from the perspective of all the customers.

Table 17

Summary of prominent digital marketing tools used by the customer buying industrial supplies from existing suppliers in Singapore.

| Interviewee # | Website | Email | Search Engines | Directory / Social Media | WOM / Blog | Others (Non-DM tools) |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 7 | X | | | | | X |
| 8 | X | | | | | X |
| 9 | X | | | | | X |
| 10 | X | | | | | X |
| Total | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |

Note. Table created by Author to record the digital marketing tools that were used by the customers for retention of existing suppliers.

The data collected from the customers’ perspective shows that in regards to the factors they would consider to continue buying from their existing supplier are non-digital marketing tools related such as pricing, supply chain and the lead-time for the industrial supplies. These are the main considerations for the customer. The website is something that, according to interviewee 8 & 10, provides a better understanding of the product:

I would like to think that the marketing for online stuff is for me to make the connection to have some understanding of the supplier.

We would normally go to their website and take a look at their product or call them directly or email them directly.

However, according to interviewee 8, they would not prefer to look at the supplier's website even when they need to find some information:

"If I've got time, I might go to the supplier website to find things."

According to interviewee 7 & 10, they usually look at other factors, such as pricing, quality, and the supplier's lead times to determine if they want to continue ordering:

Digital marketing has no part to play in how we select suppliers because, at the end of the day, different corporations have different objectives. Happen so that my objective here is costing. So we go for the lowest cost.

I think the most important part in retaining me is the pricing and also the lead time and quality of product. No point having a supplier that has very good marketing but supply product that is of lousy quality.

Interviewee 8 also shared that they have a preference for suppliers that they have a relationship with as they have known each other for a period of time:

"We have very good relationship along the years. They know us, we know them. We support each other."

These responses show that pricing is the main concern of customers, followed by the level of support that existing suppliers are able to provide. Digital marketing tools such as websites are widely used to assist with communication to improve customer support levels. However, RBNs also play a role in customer retention, as customers are more willing to work with suppliers they know and have a relationship with already.

4.4.2. Digital Marketing Tools and Strategic Benefits (RO2)

The data collected shows that the prominent digital marketing tools that were used by the customers to search for new suppliers are websites and search engines are used to enhance the online presence of the suppliers. The prominent digital marketing tool that was used by customers for existing suppliers is the supplier's website as the website could help the customers to understand the supplier better and could also enhance their interaction. When searching for a new supplier, customers always keep in mind their RBN and look for a supplier within their network before going to the open market. However, according to interviewee 7, customers will only continue to buy from their existing supplier if the non-digital marketing factor such as pricing and the level of support is good enough.

Customers have objectives that they need to fulfil as a purchaser of industrial supplies. Because the products they purchase are used for manufacturing, repair and overhaul, the technical specification of the industrial supplies must match the requirements of their manufacturing or repair and overhaul processes. The data collected from the interviewee 8 shows that non-digital marketing factors such as the quality of the industrial supplies is taken into as a big consideration:

If I need some low grade item, like sharpening stone, any brand will do. Even a Chinese brand I can accept. But if you're talking about precision drill bits, I cannot anyway accept those lousy brands because if the tool has a problem, even a small problem, my product goes to scrap. If big problem, sometimes my worker gets injured and I need to pay for their hospital bills and they can't work.

As the manufacturing, repair and overhaul requirements vary from scenario to scenario, the complexity of the process is a factor. That is, although quality is deemed to be a non-digital marketing requirement when purchasing industrial supplies, different technical requirement scenarios mean different results. The supplier's level of customer support is also important as manufacturers require industrial supplies to be consistent and they cannot afford to have disruptions

to the supply chain. Customers require close support on the supply chain. When suppliers use digital marketing to enhance communication, customers are able to check the details of the industrial supplies instantly, and at any time in the day, this would help in building better customer relationship. Digital marketing tools are able to provide information in the quickest possible way according to interviewee 9:

I think the main advantage is that it allows one to make the connection quickly and, of course, to quickly identify if there are any opportunities. If we were to email you or have to call you, usually there is a delay in the response. One thing is that with email, a supplier might take time to reply. If we call, we can't always reach, or we need to call at a good time. Then we can't make a fast decision on whether to proceed further.

The data collected from customers indicate that suppliers need to update their website and provide accurate information for the customer to refer to. If the website has adequate information for the customers, it greatly assists customers to make fast decisions. This, in turn, makes the supplier more appealing to the customer and is effective customer acquisition for the supplier.

Customers also prefer to purchase from a supplier that they already know and have a relationship with. As interviewee 10 shared: *"It's easier to buy from an existing supplier."* Interviewee 10 further explained that there are many concerns about finding new unknown suppliers because they have not worked with them before and they don't have a relationship. Working with a supplier that the customer knows enhances the synergy: *"They know us, we know them. We support each other."* This shows that when there is a relationship-based network, both supplier and customer are more willing to go the extra mile to help each other, ensuring the best outcome for both parties.

4.4.2.1. Digital marketing as enabler in competitive advantages

Digital marketing tools can also build competitive advantage in the eyes of the customer, as discussed. When a supplier has a website, the customer is able

to go to it for more information about the product they need as the website helps to build online presence. Therefore, a supplier website that has enough information about the products and services appeals to the customer. Interviewee 7 said:

I have come across a supplier that has all the information that I need in their website. Because at times, I would even use it for product information, my own knowledge, or just extracting information I need from the website and even before I call this supplier.

All customer interviewees said that they would personally prefer websites that are able to provide information that would be enough for them to understand the products. This might include technical specifications and pricing among other information that they need to make a purchase decision as quickly as possible. This is appealing to customers as they are generally busy with their daily tasks and would hope to be able find the product they need as quickly as possible, this means that website acts as a digital communication tools to enhance communication. However, according to interviewee 9, although a great deal of information on the website is appreciated, the website should be easy to use: the information need to be presented in a neat and tidy manner, and the user should be able to navigate easily to get what they want.

The credibility of the supplier's brand of products and services is heightened if the brand is widely seen or always appears in the top of search engine results. Interviewees 7, 8, 9 and 10 said:

For supplier wise, if they are in the top if the search engine, it would show that they are genuine and probably been around for quite some time.

In the internet, I think if Google can come out in the top, they should be good. If not, how will they be at the top?

I mean, let's say for example, 3M. You see 3M all over your life you know. Use it at home, use it at work, even in the coffee shop, so it's everywhere and they have very strong marketing. Online, likewise, a lot of people would do advertising there. So I guess when you see a brand

and somehow have a good impression of it because you understand them better, where they are in your life, both your work life and personal life. The thing is that it adds maybe a bit of a legitimacy to your product or your brand that you know. You do have an official presence, wide presence compared to someone who doesn't even have a website.

I think if we keep seeing the supplier or brand everywhere we go, by right they should be good. If not, why would their brand always appear?

The common response from the customers is that online presence such as the website of the supplier appearing at the top of the search engine results greatly improves brand credibility. Customers perceive top ranking in a search engine search to mean lend legitimacy to the products. And when the branding is always in front of the customer, according to interviewee 9, the customer will have a better impression of the brand. They feel that they understand it better and they perceive the brand as a credible brand.

In the digital world, geographic limitations are no longer a big issue. Because the customer has many requirements of the industrial supplies due to their technical specification, some industrial supplies are difficult to find locally, according to interviewee 7. The customer can take advantage of suppliers from around the world to help them fulfil their requirements. Interviewee 8, who is based in Malaysia, said:

“Countries like Singapore, USA, Europe and Japan – I think I can buy more in peace because I know they have good quality.”

Digital marketing tools helps customers to find reliable suppliers internationally. It also helps suppliers to go global. Customers are able to find suppliers more quickly and easily, and this benefits both the supplier and the customer. According to interviewees 7, 8 and 10, they are able to use digital marketing tools to get quotations from supplier all around the world. If the pricing matches their requirements, they may even be able to achieve some cost reduction: they would normally use a quotation from one supplier to negotiate with another supplier to get a better price.

Apart from helping customers to find suppliers, digital marketing tools also help to build customer loyalty and improve customer retention. They help enhance the communication between the supplier and the customers. For example, using a website helps customers to search for their required products and services faster when their existing supplier's website has information ready for the customer. This improves the supplier's customer support level, which, in turn, improves customer satisfaction. Interviewees 8 and 10, for example, said that they do go to the website to check for information for some products and are happy if they are able to find it quickly.

However, the factors that are more important in affecting customer retention are non-digital marketing, such as support, pricing, quality and having a relationship-based network. Digital marketing tools can help to improve support by enhancing communication between the parties and helping to build the relationship-based network. The other factors – pricing and the quality of the product offered – are unable to be assisted by digital marketing tools.

Apart from just focusing on pricing separately, customers consider the holistic advantage of the product. According to interviewees 8 and 10, they are not only looking at pricing alone when selecting suppliers; they also look at factors such as lead time, delivery and support. Although they have to work to a budget, they generally have no problem finding products that meet their lead time, delivery, support and pricing requirements that are within their budget. This shows that customers do not look at pricing alone: they take a holistic view of the performance of the supplier. In other words, they need to feel the product they are purchasing is value for money.

4.4.2.2. Overview of Digital marketing and strategic benefits (RO2)

In summary, digital marketing tools are able to assist the customer to find suitable suppliers as summarised below (table 18) and the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore could benefit from understanding the customer perspective to gain strategic benefits.

Table 18

Summary of the findings for RO2: To investigate the extent that industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore benefitted by using digital marketing tools – from the customer perspective.

| Key Sharing | | Variables |
|--|---|-----------------------------|
| Pros | Cons | |
| Website: Able to help make connections with the supplier quickly. Website: Technical information available on the website helps with fast decision making. | Website: Rather work with current supplier because of relationships and their solution has proven workable before. | Product and Services appeal |
| SEM: Appearing in the top results of the search engines search shows better product and services. SEM: Appearing at the top of search engine search results means brand is widely recognised. | | Brand Credibility |
| Website: Has no geographically limitations. DM tools: Able to benchmark pricing globally and open up better sourcing. | | International Appeal |
| Website: Available 24/7 allows viewing and answering some questions at any time. Email: Increase and enhance communication. | Supplier evaluation: Pricing, quality, customer support and supplier-customer relationship are non-digital marketing related. | Customer Loyalty/ Retention |
| DM tools: Able to benchmark pricing and open up better sourcing for better quality, cheaper pricing or better supply chain. | Products are being evaluated by the pricing, quality and supply chain of the suppliers and are not affected by digital marketing tools. | Value for Money |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the finding for Research Objective 2 from the customer perspective.

Having a supplier’s website that display much of the information the customers need and they are able to make a decision faster when they need to, thus improving product and services appeal. SEM tools also help to enhance credibility as appearing in the top results of search engine search gives customers peace of mind to engage with the supplier. In addition, websites have no geographic limitations and help customers search for a wider range of suppliers globally. This may enable them to make better choices and

improve their search for a better supplier. Digital marketing tools also help in enhancing communication, and thus, in improving customer service and support. This, in turn, helps to build better relationships that create and maintain relationship-based networks and ultimately improve customer loyalty. However, customers' decisions about purchasing from new suppliers are still heavily affected by pricing, quality, customer support and relationship-based networks, which are not directly affected by digital marketing.

4.4.3. Effectiveness of digital marketing tools (RO3)

The investigation into the effectiveness of the digital marketing tools used by the customer shows that when finding new suppliers, the most commonly used digital marketing tool is a search engine. Using the results of a search engine search, the customer is able to go to the website of the supplier to obtain more information on the products and services they are looking for. Normally customers would only go into the search results of their enquiry ranked among the first few. This also proves that the top few results of a search engine search would normally have created an impression of good brand credibility. According to interviewees 7, 8 and 10, being ranked at the top of the search engine search results would make a supplier look more credible:

“It would show that they are genuine and probably been around for quite some time.”

“In the internet, I think if Google can come out in the top, they should be good. If not, how will they be at the top?”

“They should be good. If not, why would their brand always appear?”

This shows that from the customer's perspective, the top results that appear in a search engine search would normally be considered to be the more credible suppliers. In addition, appearing in a search engine search and having a website would make the supplier known to the customers, as customers have no way to know that the supplier existed unless they could find them. Interviewee 7 said:

I think I shared this portion earlier that I think digital presence today is very very important because right from the start my approach is that when I have a sourcing request, the first thing I would do is Google. Suppliers with zero digital presence might have the best pricing, but I don't know because they are not on Google or other digital means. Even if the supplier that has a digital presence actually buys from the one that doesn't and sells it to me, I won't know. And I will still buy from the supplier that has the digital means as they give me the information I need.

This statement shared by a customer shows that because most customers are using digital means to look for suppliers, as this is fastest for them, suppliers should have some form of digital presence. It would be best to have some proper digital marketing tools that allow their products and services to be known to customers.

The other advantage of website marketing tools for both finding new suppliers and for interacting with existing suppliers is that the website is always available. Customers are able to find important information whenever they need it. Interviewee 9 said:

I think the main advantage is that it allows one to make the connection quickly and, of course, to quickly identify if there are any opportunities. If we were to email you or have to call you usually there is a delay in the response. One thing is that with email, a supplier might take time to reply. If we call, we can't always reach them, or need to call at a good time. Then we can't make a fast decision on whether to proceed further.

When the customer is able to access information any time they need it, they are able to make decisions in a timely manner. This enhances customer acquisition for the supplier. It also improves communication between the customer and existing suppliers, increasing customer satisfaction and, hence, improving the relationship with the customer, leading to enhanced customer retention.

All the interviewees disclosed that in order to have effective customer retention, they hoped that suppliers would be able to provide good pricing, offer good

support to them and also maintain a good relationship with them. Having a website helps increase customer support. However, digital marketing tools would not be able to assist with other factors such as the pricing of their products and services.

Table 19

Summary of RO3: The effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and customer retention from the customers' perspective.

| Looking for new suppliers | |
|---|---|
| Effective | Ineffective |
| Using the internet to search for new suppliers whenever there is a requirement that existing suppliers do not meet. | Would prefer to approach existing suppliers who are familiar and with whom they have a good relationship. |
| Having a website enables suppliers to be found easily and make known to everyone that they exist. | Decisions about using new suppliers depend on price, quality and service. |
| Searching for the top suppliers in the search engine search helps filter the supplier quality. | |
| Having a website that has appropriate information enables quick decisions about using the suppliers. | |
| Retaining existing suppliers | |
| Creates interaction to improve supplier-customer interaction and supplier-customer loyalty. | Decisions about retention of existing suppliers depend on non-digital marketing factors such as price, quality products and services. |
| Having a website that has appropriate information helps answer any possible enquiry quickly, improving supplier-customer interaction / loyalty. Ultimately improving customer retention | The supplier-customer relationship built offline is important. |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the finding for Research Objective 3 from the customer perspective.

Table 19 shows that although customers would always prefer to approach existing suppliers that they have a good relationship with, they would use the internet whenever they needed to find new suppliers. Having a website helps the supplier to be found by the customer easily. Having adequate information on the website also assists customers to make quick decision about the appeal of the products and services. In addition, being at the top of the results of a search engine search could improve brand credibility and, in turn, improve the chances of a customer reaching out to the supplier. With regards to retaining suppliers, digital marketing helps in creating better communication and better customer service to build customer loyalty and retention, although pricing and quality are other factors the customer considers when deciding to retain a supplier. Using digital marketing tools can assist in building better customer service and communication to achieve a better supplier-customer relationship, thus creating an RBN.

4.5. Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter has uncovered that the prominent digital marketing tools used by owners/managers for customer acquisition are websites and SEM, and for customer retention, websites and non-digital marketing tools such as pricing, quality products and services.

The digital marketing practices that affect company strategy and build competitive advantages include using digital marketing tools to increase awareness through online presence, improve communication with customers, and increase brand visibility and credibility. This would help the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to go global and expand internationally, increasing the appeal of their products and services. This would assist the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore in helping to increase customer acquisition for potential customer as well as increase customer retention through increasing customer interaction and building customer relationship and loyalty.

However, digital marketing can only assist the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to a certain extent. Factors such as pricing and quality of the products supplied are important factors for customer acquisition and retention. There was no evidence to indicate that using digital marketing tools influenced these factors. In addition, industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore lack the resources to build digital marketing capabilities and preferred physical face-to-face meetings with customers in order to provide technical solutions and build a relationship with the customer.

The interviews with customers showed that the prominent digital marketing tools used for finding new suppliers were websites and search engines. Visiting a website enables customers to make a connection with a new supplier quickly. If there is technical information on the website, customers are able to make decisions quickly. Search engines are used to identify good suppliers, as they filter the supplier websites and rank them. However, customers still prefer to work with suppliers that have an RBN with and they also take pricing, quality and services of the supplier into account in their decision – factors that are not directly affected by digital marketing tools.

Overall, digital marketing tools are important to both the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and their customers, as they act as a link to connect new suppliers and potential customers and help improve communication between existing suppliers and customers.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the data are discussed. The chapter is structured to discuss the findings for each of the three research objectives separately. This is followed by a chapter summary that appraises the discussion holistically.

5.2. Prominent digital marketing tools (RO1)

In this section, the prominent digital marketing tools used by the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore are considered with regard to customer acquisition and then customer retention.

5.2.1. Prominent digital marketing tools for customer acquisition

The results of combining input from both the owners/managers' perspective and the customers' perspective concerning customer acquisition, are summarised in Table 20.

Table 20

Combination of owners/managers' perspective and customers' perspective with regards to the prominent digital marketing tools used for customer acquisition.

| Interviewee # | Website | SEM (Google) | Directory / Social Media | Email | W-O-M/ Blog | Non-digital (traditional) | Roles |
|---------------|---------|--------------|--------------------------|-------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | X | X | | | | | Owners/ Manager |
| 2 | X | X | | | | | Owners/ Manager |
| 3 | X | X | X | | | | Owners/ Manager |
| 4 | X | X | | | | | Owners/ Manager |
| 5 | X | X | X | | | | Owners/ Manager |
| 6 | X | X | X | | | | Owners/ Manager |
| 7 | X | X | X | | | | Customer |
| 8 | X | X | | | | X | Customer |
| 9 | X | X | | | | X | Customer |
| 10 | X | X | | | | X | Customer |
| Total | 10 | 10 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | |

Note. Table created by Author to combine the summary for both the owner-managers' perspective and the customers' perspective for prominent digital marketing tools used for customer acquisition (RO1).

The result from both the owners/manager and customer perspectives is that the prominent digital marketing tools used by industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore are website marketing and search engine marketing (SEM). These two tools work hand-in-hand in helping the industrial supplies SMEs to become noticed by customers and converting potential customers to customers. Similarly, from the customer perspective, customers mainly used search engines to find supplier websites when they have a requirement to purchase industrial supplies that their current suppliers do not sell.

According to Leung and Mo (2019), search engines are commonly used by companies to direct customers to their website. On their website there is

information to help customers obtain the information they need in the shortest possible time (Rowley, 2008). In addition, search engines are not bound by geographic limitations, so their use helps to create awareness both locally and globally, this was supported according to the interview findings.

Website content is also an important factor in customer acquisition as the website supposed to act as a linkage between the supplier and customers. Basic product information and contact methods must be easily found if a customer is to connect to the suppliers (Scheers, 2018; Veronica et al., 2018).

However, both the owner-managers and the customers said that the customers would normally approach their current supplier first before attempting to find new suppliers for the industrial supplies they needed. As highlighted by Rocca (2020), relationships are important, especially in the business to business (B2B) environment, so having a good RBN could help a customer to identify suppliers that would be beneficial to them. Both the owner-managers and the customers talked about RBNs and acknowledged that such networks would be what they would use first when they have a new industrial supplies requirement. However, if the item required is totally new and the customer's network does not include any suitable suppliers, the customer would find suppliers using the search engines. They would normally go to the website of the top few results by the search engine search. On the website, they would look for the item they required and then send an enquiry from the website or contact the supplier using the information found on the website

Although SEM tools are the commonly used to direct traffic into the website, directory and social media are also used by some industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and their customers. Directory acts similar to SEM tools as customer such as interviewee 7 would rely on directory to look for new suppliers. The social media similarly could target certain demography (Makrides et al., 2020) which makes the digital marketing tools much more efficient with the limited amount of resource that can be used for digital marketing (Ainin et al., 2015). However, due to the nature of the industrial supplies, the data collected does not favour the use of social media for customer acquisition as

There are also literatures that states email marketing is the most useful of the digital marketing tools (Charlesworth, 2018) and the cost of using email marketing tools is low (Rosokhata et al., 2020). However, the data gathered shows that it is not the case in Singapore. According to Turunen (2021), customers may be unhappy about email marketing communications they receive if they perceive that such emails do not add value to them. From the data collected from the interview with both owners/managers and the customers stated that they would not look at marketing email sent by an unknown person and would normally classify the email as a spam mail and this would end up disadvantaging the company (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004).

The use of digital word-of-mouth in the literature suggested its effectiveness (Leung & Mo, 2019). However, it was not the case in Singapore as firstly, according to the owners/managers, the resources needed to create content to post in their website is too much and in the industrial supplies, technical knowledge is needed in order to come out with appropriate content. Therefore, there is a resource gap of implementing blog. In addition, Sharma et al. (2020) suggested that digital word-of-mouth by customer who leave feedback after their purchase could help supplier improve brand credibility. However, according to the customers, they would not have time to go into surfing the supplier's website or leave any feedback, this shows the weakness of the digital word-of-mouth tool in the context of the industrial supplies in Singapore.

Lastly, customers also pointed out that a bulk majority of their decision come of engaging the suppliers and making a purchase from the suppliers comes from a non-digital marketing aspect such as the industrial supplies is of the best pricing they could find in the market, or has the best quality that they could use, interviewee 8 & 10 also mentioned that the customer services and the supply chain should also be aligned to their requirement. Similarly, Suherna (2021) suggested that good customer services could help build customer relationship to achieve customer loyalty. This could build a RBN structure where can help to promote long-term cooperation (Varadarajan, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021).

5.2.2. Prominent digital marketing tools for customer retention

The results of combining input from both the owners/managers' perspective and the customers' perspective concerning customer retention are summarised in Table 21.

Table 21

Combination of the owners/managers perspective and the customer perspective with regards to prominent digital marketing tools used for customer retention.

| Interviewee # | Website | SEM | Directory / Social media | Email | W-O-M / Blog | Non-digital (traditional) |
|---------------|---------|-----|--------------------------------|-------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | X | | | | | X |
| 2 | | | | X | | X |
| 3 | | | | | | X |
| 4 | X | | | X | | X |
| 5 | X | | | X | | X |
| 6 | X | | | X | | X |
| 7 | X | | | | | X |
| 8 | X | | | | | X |
| 9 | X | | | | | X |
| 10 | X | | | | | X |
| Total | 8 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 10 |

Note. Table created by Author to combine the summary for both the owner-managers perspective and the customer perspective for prominent digital marketing tools used for customer retention (RO1).

As shown in Table 21, website marketing is the prominent digital marketing tool used mainly for customer retention. Most owners/managers has used email marketing for customer retention, although the customers said that they did not think email marketing tools had much impact on them as the customer has no time to look into the email marketing content sent by the suppliers but appreciate the email when they have new requirement for industrial supplies. This helps to outreach to the customers effectively with the added benefit of being able to engage the customers when needed (Turunen, 2021).

Both the owners/managers and the customers see the website marketing tool as useful in customer retention because it helps to improve the level of customer service. Similarly, Nikunen et al. (2017) also stated that customer value being able to go onto a supplier's website and look for information directly, enabling them to make fast decisions, enhancing their perception of the supplier's customer service. This shows that in the website marketing tool that have adequate content helps owners/managers to improve customer satisfaction and ultimately helps in customer retention.

However, there are non-digital marketing factors such as pricing, quality products and services that plays a big part in customer retention, both owners/managers and customers deem pricing of the industrial supplies as an important factor of consideration apart from digital marketing tools. This is further reinforced by Tu and Hsu (2013) that price, quality of products and services are the main factor to retain customer. Therefore, customer retention also rely heavily on non-digital marketing factors as in the customers perspective, the products supplied must be of good quality and they should be able to use the tool appropriately before considering to continue building supplier-customer relationship.

According to all the customer interviewee website do not have geographic limitations. This makes it easy for customers to look for new suppliers and to benchmark prices globally (Constantinides, 2006) – creating a potential problem for current suppliers. Therefore, customers will be influenced positively towards their current supplier if that supplier's website repeatedly appears near the top in the results of the customer's internet search. This may be sufficient to cause a customer to continue with their current supplier – thus customer retention is enhanced.

5.3. Digital marketing tools as the enabler for competitive advantage (RO2)

Digital marketing tools have helped industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to have a greater digital presence and enabled them to display their products and

services, providing customers with more information. By using a combination of SEM and website marketing, SEM is able to create a higher awareness level and direct more traffic to the website (Makrides et al., 2020), where enquiries from potential customers can be converted into sales for the company. This occurs because customers commonly use search engines to find new suppliers in order to improve pricing and quality and access better support levels. In addition, customers may have new requirements that their current suppliers cannot help them with. Customers are more comfortable buying from existing suppliers, especially those with whom they have a relationship, having worked with them before (Zhang et al., 2021). As they have had a successful experience with the supplier or be aware of the supplier's reputation (Yeh et al., 2020). Thus, they are heavily reliant on their RBN to determine which supplier they would approach when they have a new requirement or a new target to achieve. However, according to Forkmann et. al. (2022), relationships are not built overnight: they require time and opportunity for individual social activities to occur. This shows that in order to build RBN, it is a long process and requires many resources which the use of digital marketing tools could enhance customer relationships (Ancillai et al., 2019).

Digital marketing tools used in customer retention only assist in improving communication. From the customers' perspective, support and service levels are highly valued. Digital marketing tools could indirectly help to improve customer relationships (Ancillai et al., 2019) and, in the long run, help to build an RBN provided the supplier offers consistent support and service.

The findings show how the variables digital marketing capabilities could help the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore build sustainable competitive advantages. The combined summary of the finding showing the pros and cons of the digital marketing tools that could enable the capabilities (table 22) are as follows.

Table 22

Combined summary of the findings for RO2: To investigate the extent that industrial supplies SMEs benefitted by using digital marketing tools as a strategic tool

| Key Findings (Pros) | | Variables |
|---|--|--|
| Owners/managers | Customers | |
| Website: Customer could enquire about items directly from our website | Website: Able to help make connections with the supplier quickly. Website: Technical information available on the website helps with fast decision making. | Customer Acquisition / Product and Services appeal |
| Website: Online presence creates awareness. SEM: Being top in search engines gives customers' confidence. | SEM: Appearing in the top results of the search engines search shows better product and services. SEM: Appearing at the top of search engine search results means brand is widely recognised. | Brand visibility / Brand Credibility |
| Website: Have no geographic limitations, available 24/7. DM tools: Simplify communicating with overseas customers. | Website: Has no geographically limitations. DM tools: Able to benchmark pricing globally and open up better sourcing. | Going Global / International Appeal |
| Website: Available 24/7; allows customer to look for solution anytime. Email: Increase and enhance communication. | Website: Available 24/7 allows viewing and answering some questions at any time. Email: Increase and enhance communication. | Customer Satisfactions / Customer Loyalty/ Retention |
| DM tools: Increase sales revenue helps expand capabilities | DM tools: Able to benchmark pricing and open up better sourcing for better quality, cheaper pricing or better supply chain. | Sales Revenue / Value for Money |
| Key Findings (Cons) | | Variables |
| Pros | Cons | |
| Website: Need actual person with technical knowledge to advice customers on the correct industrial supplies. | Website: Rather work with current supplier because of relationships and their solution has proven workable before. | Customer Acquisition / Product and Services appeal |
| Website: Lack of resources to maintain website. Website: Lack of people with expertise. SEM: High cost of paid advertisement to the search engines operators. | | Brand visibility / Brand Credibility |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Website: No personal contact. DM tools: Unable to physically look at the problem and suggest correct solutions. | | Going Global / International Appeal |
| Website: Customer wants to see them personally face to face to solve the technical issue. DM tools: Customers look for better pricing, quality and customer service. | Supplier evaluation: Pricing, quality, customer support and supplier-customer relationship are non-digital marketing related. | Customer Satisfaction / Customer Loyalty/ Retention |
| | Products are being evaluated by the pricing, quality and supply chain of the suppliers and are not affected by digital marketing tools. | Sales Revenue / Value for Money |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the finding for Research Objective 2 from both the owners/managers' and customers perspective.

From the owner-manager perspective, using digital marketing tools helps with customer acquisition; from the customers' perspective, it increases the appeal of products and services. The interviews conducted with the owners/managers showed that using website marketing and SEM tools allowed the customer to look at their product and services. Therefore, the customer could enquire directly about the industrial supplies that they would need, as mentioned by Fraccastoro et al. (2021), digital marketing tool can help to establish new relationships between individuals and businesses, helps to improve customer acquisition.

Similarly, from the customer perspective, customers are able to look at the technical information provided by the industrial suppliers, which allows them to make fast decisions about whether to purchase the product or not. If they want to purchase the product, they are able to connect to the supplier in the quickest and simplest way by inputting their information on the website.

According to Vieira et al. (2019), using website marketing and good SEM techniques helps in customer acquisition as compared to using the traditional method to acquire customers. This is because digital marketing tools help in facilitating the customer decision-making process (Habibi et al., 2015) when

the information presented on the digital marketing tools is relevant to the customer (Nuryakin, 2020), and the customer is able to gather information quickly (Scheers, 2018). The customer is thus able to make a decision quickly, and this improves the appeal of the products and services.

In this context, however, the owners/managers needs to make extra effort to ensure that the website is up-to-date and the technical information about the industrial supplies is accurate and neatly displayed. Customers want to find information quickly and easily in order to make a fast decision. The owners/manager that inputs information to the website needs to have the appropriate technical expertise in order to accurately and effectively display the relevant information for the customer.

Using digital marketing tools overall enables customer acquisition and increases the appeal of products and services as it assists the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to showcase their products and services on the internet. This is advantageous because the internet is available throughout the whole year to assist customers to find the industrial supplies they need. Digital marketing tools effectively match the industrial supplier effort with the customer behaviour of looking for new suppliers on the internet.

Using digital marketing tools acts as an enabler for brand visibility from the owners/manager's perspective and increases brand credibility from the customer's perspective. The interviews conducted with owners/managers show that their website will be found by search engines, giving them an online presence. If the website has the right information and uses SEM tools, it will appear near the top of the results from a search engine search, which helps their brand visibility. Similarly, from the customer perspective, a website that appears at the top of the search engine results normally means that the brand is widely recognised and this adds to the brand's credibility. According to Routray (2020), digital marketing tools can enhance brand visibility and build brand credibility. Having good brand visibility can affect the customer's perception of the brand's credibility. In one interview with a customer, the interviewee said that if they see a brand frequently, that has a positive impact on their perception of the credibility of the brand.

However, the challenges that the owners/managers face with using digital marketing tools to enhance brand credibility is that they have difficulty finding people with digital marketing expertise. Maintaining SEM tools to build brand visibility can be very expensive and there's no guarantee that investing resources in increasing brand visibility would make good business sense.

Overall, the data collected shows that using digital marketing tools can increase brand visibility and brand credibility, make it more likely that the SMEs are noticed by customers and improve the customers' perception of the brand.

Because digital marketing tools have no location limitations (Scheers, 2018), they enable the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to achieve a global presence, create an awareness of their brand globally (Makrides et al., 2020) and connect them to the global market. This, in turn, increases brand visibility, brand credibility and customer acquisition (Aini & Hapsari, 2019; Makrides et al., 2020).

The owners/managers say that having a global digital marketing presence helps them to expand the enquiry pool across different countries, and with digital marketing tools, communication across national borders is made easier. However, there are some limitations to this potential, the main one being a lack of physical presence. The owners/managers believe that being physically present near customers is important as it gives customers a sense of confidence that they are going to order the correct products for the needs of their manufacturing process. A physical face-to-face meeting allows the customer to feel more at ease in dealing with the supplier. As interviewees 3 said: *"In the internet world, you don't know me, I don't know you."* There was also some feedback that some customers would not be willing to pay before receiving their goods and similarly, suppliers would not be willing to ship the products until they have been paid.

Customers, however, say that they would not be too concerned about the lack of a physical presence as long as the brand is credible enough. They would perform some checks on the background of the supplier before deciding to procure anything from them. That said, the customer would actually prefer the item to be locally available as trans-border transactions usually introduce

greater complexity into the supply chain and service would usually not be as fast. There may also be time differences or limitations on the communication methods available to them.

Interestingly, from the customers' perspective, the use of digital marketing tools could disadvantage industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. This is a consequence of the uniqueness of Singapore, where business costs are high. Digital marketing tools enable customers to benchmark pricing globally, comparing them with prices quoted by Singapore-based SMEs. Furthermore, if the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore don't have a strong presence in the digital market, search engine results might put other, overseas suppliers ahead of them in the results of a search. This creates extra competition for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

Owners/managers say that using digital marketing tools has enabled them to reach a global market using internal resources. However, digital marketing tools have also enabled foreign competitors to compete in the small Singapore market. Nevertheless, the owners/managers believe that digital marketing tools are needed as an internal resource of the company in order to create competitive advantage and enable them to compete effectively in both local and global markets.

Using digital marketing tools also enhances customer interaction, customer retention and customer loyalty. According to the responses from the owner-managers, their pricing, service level and quality of their products are important. But being an established supplier has also helped them to build a solid relationship with their customers over the years, given that their supplies and service level have been meeting the customers' requirements. Digital marketing tools help the SMEs to provide faster customer service and solutions as well as increasing and enhancing communication with the customer, this has help increase existing customer's interaction and building relationship and increasing customer retention.

Customers shared more on how they evaluate their suppliers based on their pricing, service level and quality. They also value the relationship with the supplier. With a positive past experience of the supplier's service level and

quality, they would normally go to their own preferred supplier rather than taking a risk by exploring new suppliers. Customers did welcome the digital marketing tools that make communication easier: sometimes a decision has to be made quickly and having good digital marketing tools helps the customer to find the information they need in order to make a decision. This indirectly improves the service level of that supplier.

In accordance with the study by Hassan et al. (2019), customer retention and loyalty can be built using digital marketing tools by enhancing communication with the customer (Aini & Hapsari, 2019), gathering feedback and understanding the needs of the customer (Routray, 2020; Varadarajan, 2020). However, the fundamental priority of customer retention and loyalty is relationships (Hlefana et al., 2020). Relationships can be built by ensuring customer interaction to provide better services (Bahadur et al., 2018; Jokela & Söderman, 2017), which can be enhanced using digital marketing tools (Hassan et al., 2019; Nikunen et al., 2017) and understanding the customers' needs (Cortez et al., 2020; Fjellström et al., 2020; Routray, 2020). This was agreed by the customer that they would appreciate to find information that are related to what they are looking for in the website quickly. In order achieve this, the website content must also be optimised to make finding information easier.

Overall, using digital marketing tools does not seem to have a direct impact on customer retention and loyalty. However, using digital marketing tools helps to enable industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to improve communication and improve the customer service experience. This, in turn, enhances the RBNs of the company. In RBT, RBNs are a very important resource of the company, so this would help in building competitive advantage for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore (Burt & Soda, 2021).

Lastly, we review the owners/managers' perspective of using digital marketing tools as enablers for sales revenue. Although most of the interviewees agree that using digital marketing tools help them in increasing sales revenue, they acknowledge that using digital marketing tools does not directly generate sales revenue for them. It only acts as a "door" to the customer and from there, the technical sales person in-charge would need to follow up with the customer,

build a solution and develop the relationship with the customer in order to complete the sales process and increase sales revenue. Using digital marketing tools has helped them to open up initially to the customer, giving them a “chance” to interact with the customer and, from there, build a relationship and ultimately improve sales revenue.

Improving sales revenue could help the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore gain competitive advantage (Nuryakin, 2020). In the resource-based approach, SMEs are generally lacking the resources to create competitive advantages (Harrigan, et al., 2010; Ziółkowska, 2021). An increase in sales revenue can help the company build capabilities to create competitive advantages.

From the customer perspective, customers are not looking at pricing alone. The overall package of the company is much more important for the customer: they want their suppliers to provide value for money industrial supplies. They benchmark the market pricing for the particular industrial supplies they need and follow by comparing them against factors such as pricing, quality products and services, this rejected the argument that the market is moving towards transactional selling (Ahearne, 2022). Using the internet, digital marketing tools have enabled them to look for many different suppliers across the globe quickly and benchmark pricing and the other factors to determine if the item is value for money. This shows that, in recent years, digital marketing tools have slowly replaced other methods that customers use to retain suppliers and look for new suppliers. From the customer perspective, value for money is also highly reliant on the supplier’s relationship with the customer and customer satisfaction (Hlefana et al., 2020). Having a strong relationship with the supplier allows the customer to view the supplier as providing a better service level and can help to improve their perception of value for money.

In summary, the use of digital marketing tools has changed the expectations of customers and how business is conducted. It has created both advantages and disadvantages for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Using digital marketing tools has helped to increase the resources of the companies and helped to improve their relationship-based networks. It also creates a threat for those industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore that do not use digital

marketing tools: they lose out to the competitors that use digital marketing tools.

5.4. Effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and retention (RO3)

In light of how using digital marketing tools enables the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to build different capabilities to obtain competitive advantages, the findings of this study also reveal a weakness. That is the absence of digital marketing tools in the current competitive business environment. An understanding of the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in terms of customer acquisition and retention would help owner-managers to make better decisions on how they adopt digital marketing tools to build their competitive advantages. The table 23 summarised both perspectives showing the effectiveness of the digital marketing tools used.

Table 23

Summary of RO3: The effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and customer retention

| Effective | Ineffective |
|---|---|
| Customer Acquisition (owners/managers perspective) | |
| Enable higher brand visibility, increase traffic flow and enquiry rates. | Technical requirement needs to be solved physically after looking at the process in the factory. |
| Being at the top of search engines helps build branding and improve enquiry rates. | Physical follow-up needed to gain trust with the customers. |
| Website could help to convert enquiries to make sales easier. | Customers would prefer to approach suppliers they are familiar with and have a relationship with. |
| Looking for new suppliers (customers perspective) | |
| Using the internet to search for new suppliers whenever there is a requirement that existing suppliers do not meet. | Would prefer to approach existing suppliers who are familiar and with whom they have a good relationship. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Having a website enables suppliers to be found easily and make known to everyone that they exist. | Decisions about using new suppliers depend on price, quality and service. |
| Searching for the top suppliers in the search engine search helps filter the supplier quality. | |
| Having a website that has appropriate information enables quick decisions about using the suppliers. | |
| Customer Retention (owners/managers perspective) | |
| Improve customer interaction for better customer service. | Using non-digital (traditional) means; having the better pricing. |
| Improve customer loyalty through using better communication | Using non-digital (traditional) means; providing better quality products and customer service. |
| Using digital marketing tools to build relationship | |
| Retaining existing suppliers (customers perspective) | |
| Creates interaction to improve supplier-customer interaction and supplier-customer loyalty. | Decisions about retention of existing suppliers depend on non-digital marketing factors such as price, quality products and services. |
| Having a website that has appropriate information helps answer any possible enquiry quickly, improving supplier-customer interaction / loyalty. Ultimately improving customer retention | The supplier-customer relationship built offline is important. |

Note. Table created by Author to summarise the findings for research objectives 3 from the owners/managers' and customers perspective.

According to the owners/manager perspectives on customer acquisition, using digital marketing tools is effective in building brand visibility, creating awareness in the market and building a bridge between them and the customers. Using digital marketing tools also helps them respond to customer needs: by displaying the basic information needed for customers to consider

the product on their website, they make the sales process easier and enhance the suppliers' capacity to serve their customers. Similarly, from the customer perspective, the internet has made searching for new suppliers easier. Suppliers that use digital marketing tools appear in the results of internet searches, which make them easier for customers to find. Having their company appear in the top results of a search engine search gives the customer confidence in the quality of their product and services.

The content of the website also makes a big difference in helping the customer to make decisions. They often need more information to make a decision, and according to Vieira et al. (2019), customers would normally look into the product specification on a website before any decision is made.

However, there are challenges that would make using digital marketing tools ineffective for customer acquisition. The owners/managers commented that their products are highly technical and they need to be physically present in the customer's factory and review the customer's technical processes if they are to provide a solution. In addition, being physically present and meeting the customer face-to-face builds trust and instils the customer with confidence. Both the owner-managers and the customers agreed that the customer would normally prefer to look to current suppliers with whom they have a relationship for any new supplies. This was further reinforced by Kuo et al. (2020). The customers, however, also said that the factors that would weigh most heavily in a decision about a new supplier were pricing, quality and the service and that they didn't necessarily have a need for the supplier to meet them face-to-face – which differed from the perception of owners/managers.

With regard to customer retention, both owners/managers and customers perceive the use of digital marketing tools as helping to create connections, improve service and build relationships, this is further endorsed by Arli et al. (2018) that technological advancement could help enhance relationship selling, companies could leverage technology to enhance relationship-based network to build a successful business network relationships. In addition, Fjellström et al. (2020) also added that improved communication and service helps customer retention (Hassan et al., 2019; Palmatier et al., 2006). However, the

customers also pointed out that having a supplier with a comprehensive website could help them to find the information they needed quickly, without the need to call them or arrange a meeting with them. This helps reduce the response time and improve the level of customer service holistically.

According to all the interviewees with the customers, the pricing, products and services play a very big factor in customer's decision to retain the existing suppliers, this is aligned with Geiger and Finch (2011) whom argued that some buyers do not see any potential in maintaining relationships with suppliers where their focus is mainly on prices of the item they purchase, this also reinforces Ahearne (2022) findings that the market is moving towards transactional selling. Although the pricing, products and services are not directly affected by digital marketing tools, they could be affected indirectly. According to Fjellström et al. (2020), improved communication can assist to create a better customer service experience (Aini & Hapsari, 2019), and thus provide customer satisfaction. This would help to build a positive supplier-customer relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006) and in turn, building better customer satisfaction and also expand the RBN of both the supplier and the customers.

The owners/managers said that a disadvantage in using digital marketing tools that can make the tools ineffective is that a relationship with the customer is best built by having actual face-to-face communications. They believe that relationships with established and potential customers are very important (Arli et al., 2018). Using an RBN gives them significant potential to retain customers (Hlefana et al., 2020). However, according to Pandey et al. (2020) companies need to understand their customer needs and preferences as they differ before implementing the digital marketing tools and adopt the tools appropriately to build a sustainable competitive advantage (Järvinen et al., 2012).

In addition, both the owners/managers and the customers noted the importance of suppliers fulfilling customer expectations on pricing, product quality and service in order for customers to consider retaining the supplier-customer relationship. Tu and Hsu (2013) identified pricing and service as

important aspects of customer retention and that service could be enhanced by using digital marketing tools (Cortez et al., 2020; Fjellström et al., 2020; Routray, 2020). However, there is sign of weakness according to the owners/managers that they would need an expert in digital marketing or additional employees to manage the digital marketing tools correctly as person who manages the digital marketing tools would need to “know what they are doing”. This shows that even with the availability of digital marketing tools, studies shows that SMEs does not keep up with the pace of digital development and therefore could not fully utilize digital marketing tools to the fullest potential (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

This study shows that using digital marketing tools could effectively assist industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as digital marketing tools enable various internal and external resources of the company and help to build a bridge between supplier and customer, to create awareness and improve brand visibility. Herhausen et al. (2020) highlighted although digital marketing could to building a competitive advantages, there are many gaps between the practice and the ideal situation. That said, some of the factors that affect customer acquisition and retention are unable to be improved by using digital marketing tools. Nevertheless, customer service could be improved and the quality of the brand could be made known with digital marketing tools.

In summary, using digital marketing tools could effectively assist the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Digital marketing tools enhance various internal and external resources and can improve customer acquisition, brand visibility, going global, customer satisfaction and customer retention. Using digital marketing tools also helps to create a “bridge” for building an RBN and connecting the supplier and the customer.

These days, when customers has high reliance on finding suppliers by using digital means, digital marketing tools offer a solution for the customers. They allow suppliers to be found easily by customers. This is especially important when the market is small and competitive, with both local and global competition. The industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore would benefit from using effective digital marketing.

5.5. Chapter summary

The chapter has presented and discussed what the prominent digital marketing tools are and how they can affect the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Website marketing and search engine marketing are the prominent digital marketing tools used. They have helped to create strategic benefits for suppliers by enhancing brand visibility to create awareness on the internet and to link with customers, thus improving customer acquisition. However, a website should contain relevant information so that customers can understand the products and services the supplier offers.

The overview framework helps the discussion by linking the literature on RBT and RBN structures using digital marketing to build the internal and external resources of the company. The discussion also covers the effectiveness of using digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and retention and how effective digital marketing tools are for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Website marketing and search engines marketing have been used effectively to increase brand visibility. Increased brand visibility leads to an increase in customer enquiries and customer acquisition and an improvement in customer service, which indirectly helps to build a better relationship with the customer. However, using digital marketing tools for customer acquisition and customer retention has its limitations: industrial suppliers need to maintain a certain product quality and their products need to match with the customer's technical requirements. Pricing of the industrial supplies also plays a big factor in both customer acquisition and retention. This chapter has also highlighted the weaknesses and potential threats of using digital marketing tools in the company to develop competitive advantages.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6. Introduction

This final chapter will reflect on the achievement of the research aims, followed by a review of the contribution to the knowledge in this field and the limitations of the study. Suggestions for future research are also discussed. The chapter concludes with final thoughts about the subject studied.

6.1. Achievement of Research Aim

This research was undertaken on the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore and their customers between May 2020 and March 2021. It aimed were to investigate the prominent digital marketing tools used (RO1), explore their role as a strategic tool for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to gain competitive advantages using digital marketing (RO2) and understand the effectiveness of digital marketing tools in customer acquisition and retention.

In addressing RO1, the finding of the interviews conducted is that the prominent digital marketing tools that the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore use are websites and SEM tools for customer acquisition. Although RBNs influence customers, digital marketing has influenced customer to check the website of their existing suppliers before going to internet search engines to search for new suppliers. Therefore, websites were deemed to be the prominent digital marketing tool, used alongside RBNs, for customer retention. Pricing and quality are among other important factors in customer retention, and they are not directly impacted by the use of digital marketing tools. However, having good brand visibility can help to improve a potential customer's perception of quality, thus improving the prospect of customer acquisition.

In addressing RO2, the study found that using digital marketing tools enhances a company's customer acquisition capability, brand visibility, access to global markets and level of service, leading to greater customer satisfaction. These internal resources also generate better sales revenue. All of these outcomes can contribute to building sustainable competitive advantages.

In the context of digitalisation taking place in recent years (Ng, 2021; Tan, 2020), customers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore that do not restrict themselves to local Singapore suppliers have become heavily reliant on using digital means to search for better suppliers. These methods include using search engines and using their own relationship-based networks to look for new suppliers that offer better pricing and product quality. On the other hand, the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore that have digital marketing capabilities have a competitive advantage over those who don't as using digital marketing tools can build the company's external resources. These may include having greater customer appeal, building brand credibility through having high brand visibility and having an international.

Using digital marketing tools also helps to provide better communication between suppliers and their customers. This results in enhanced customer satisfaction, which builds customer loyalty and, thus, improves customer retention. These outcomes affect the extent to which a customer perceives the supplier's products and services to represent good value for money and this, in turn, helps the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore by creating a competitive advantage.

However, due to the limited resources of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, the owners/managers would not see the benefits of using digital marketing as they might need to invest additional resources to build digital marketing capability which would deter them from using digital marketing tools to generate competitive advantages.

Lastly, in addressing RO3, the investigation of the effectiveness of using digital marketing tools for improving customer acquisition and customer retention shows that, although for customer acquisition, the use of digital marketing tools is effective in creating awareness and helping to increase brand visibility,

customers still prefer to deal with existing suppliers and look at the commercial issues, such as pricing and quality. A potential supplier often relies on having a physical follow-up meeting to gain a potential customer's trust and confidence and to build an RBN with them. However, from the customer's perspective, they would almost always look for new suppliers using digital means, which shows the importance of customer acquisition by using digital marketing tools and having a digital presence, according to Fraccastoro et al. (2021) digital marketing tools can help to establish new relationships between individuals and businesses.

Using digital marketing tools for customer retention is less effective as customers prefer to look to existing suppliers to offer better pricing, better quality and better service to them and build a positive relationship with them (Arlı et. al., 2018). Using digital marketing tools can only play a small role, such as enhancing communication between the customer and the supplier, which helps to improve customer service and build a relationship with the customer which was further reinforced by Ancillai et al. (2019) that most research shows that digital marketing tools affect customer relationships. However, digital marketing tools are also a double-edged sword: they empower the customer to readily perform searches using search engines to benchmark the products and services offered by their existing suppliers, this was further argued by Ahearne (2022) that with the help of digital marketing tools, potentially the market could move towards transactional selling as information is more easily available. Therefore, the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore need to have a plan for the use of digital marketing to help them to generate competitive advantages.

In summary, the research aims and objectives of this study were achieved. The research found that digital marketing tools can be used as a bridge to create RBNs for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. Digital marketing tools are an internal resource of the company, enabling the development of other company resources. Those resources help to enhance RBNs and effectively help the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore to achieve competitive advantages. Not having digital marketing capabilities would place them at a disadvantage compared with their competitors both locally and

globally. However, there is a need to track the performance of the digital marketing tools and would likely incur additional costs for the owners/managers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore

6.2. Contribution to Knowledge

Currently, there is a lot of literature on digital marketing (refer to Appendix 1.) that has unveiled the benefits of using digital marketing tools to acquire new customers and enhance current customer relationships through better communication and understanding, ultimately helping SMEs to achieve competitive advantages (James, 2020; Krings et al., 2021). However, the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore operate in a market that involves their customers' manufacturing processes, which have complex technical requirements, non-digital factors such as pricing and quality of the products, and the use of RBNs. This shows that more work has to be done due to the complex needs of B2B businesses (Pandey et al., 2020).

This thesis contributes to the knowledge in this field by combining resource-based and relationship-based networks as the unpinning theories to investigate the perspectives of the owners/managers and customers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore on digital marketing. It also explains the strengths, weaknesses and potential threats of using digital marketing tools in the Singapore industrial supplies environment.

The findings of this research with regards to RO1 are that the prominent digital marketing tools are websites and search engine marketing. Used concurrently, they can help to create a "bridge" to connect suppliers and customers, as customers rely heavily on using digital marketing tools to search for new suppliers. In addition, digital marketing tools also enhance communication and provide information to any customer at any time and in any location. This adds to the current digital marketing literature (Appendix 1) by uncovering the most prominent digital marketing tools for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. The findings also uncovered other prominent digital marketing tools such as digital WOM which was mentioned in various literature but were not used in

the environment here. This would add value to the current literature as it highlighted the potential gap between the literature available and the current situation in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore.

With regards to RO2, using digital marketing tools has helped to build brand visibility for the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, which builds the internal resource of the company. This also affects the external resources of the company creating competitive advantages according to Järvinen et al. (2012) the SMEs would need to understand the nature of the tools before implementing the digital marketing tools and adopt the tools appropriately to build sustainable competitive advantages. The findings also illustrate the challenges that digital marketing faces in Singapore, where RBNs play an important role to maintain and expand their customer base. There is also a need to maintain a balance between RBNs strategy with other strategies (Geiger & Finch, 2011).

The findings also contribute to the building of the conceptual framework, which contributes to resource-based and relationship-based network theory. The conceptual framework contributes to the allocation of resources to the various focus of the organisation to meet customer expectations to create efficiency towards joint success, building sustainable competitive advantages. Such resource allocation could help SMEs to optimise their resource, as the use of digital marketing tools could enhance sales. Having a website could also act as another salesperson who was not bound by working hours and geographic limitations could enhance brand visibility for customer acquisition and also provide a quick solution for the current customer that might have problems with the products which helps customer retention. This would effectively help SMEs to use their limited resources more efficiently.

With regards to RO3, the effectiveness of digital marketing tools was explored. The results indicate that even though in Singapore RBNs are used widely, there are indications that using digital marketing tools is making an impact on how business is done, the study reveals that although the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore have implemented digital marketing tools into their strategies, they would also need to understand and keep up with the

development and the use of digital marketing tool such as hiring additional talent or to have an objective towards using the digital marketing tools which were further endorsed by Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) findings that SMEs that could not keep up with the digital marketing development could not fully utilise the digital marketing tools.

Lastly, the resources of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore might not allow the owners/managers to fully implement digital marketing as they might need to invest additional resources to build digital marketing capability, the benefits of digital marketing tools must give a promising result. For the owners/managers to feel “worth the money” from their investment into building digital marketing capabilities which most of the SMEs would be benchmarking against their sales revenue. This would determine if the digital marketing tools are valued for money for them, the SMEs owners/managers had also responded positively to digital marketing tools citing that even though they did not explicitly track the performance of the digital market tools against the sales revenue that they created, generally they knew that digital marketing tools have helped them.

Overall, the findings of this thesis provide the reader with a better understanding of the use of digital marketing tools by industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore where digital marketing could assist in better resource allocation and building competitive advantages. The methodology showcased data triangulation using the dyadic approach, which enhanced the trustworthiness of the research and contributed to methodological knowledge.

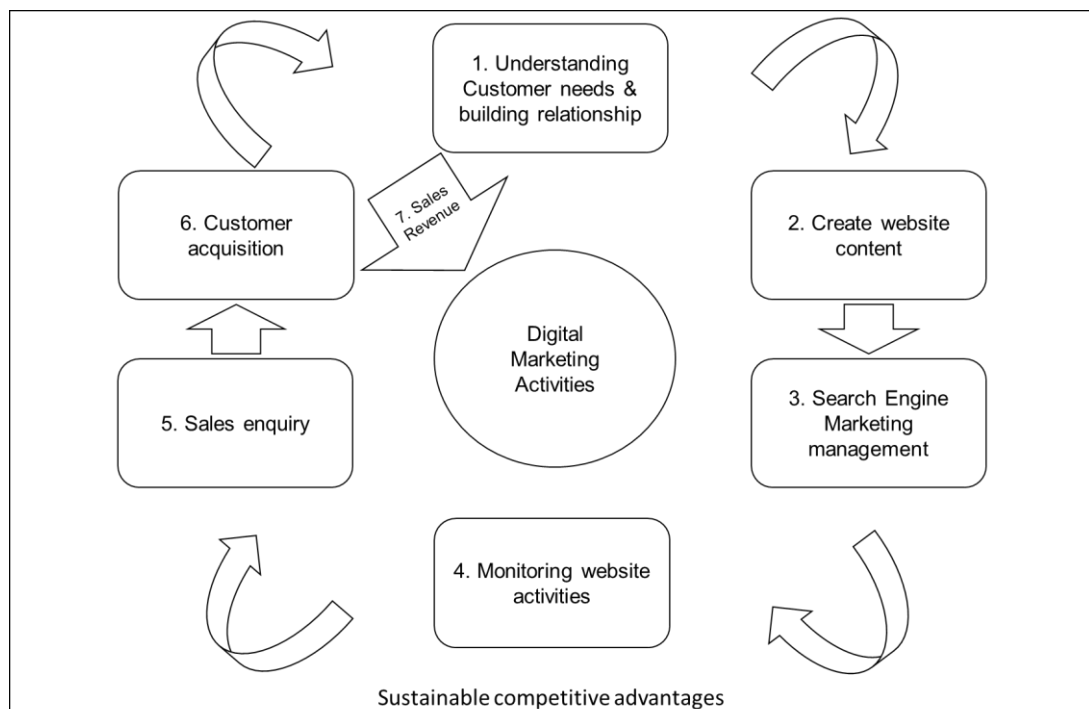
6.3. Contribution to Practice

This research offers two main contributions to practitioners in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as well as similar business-to-business (B2B) trade in other industries. First, the research provides insight into the prominent digital marketing tools used in the industry and how effective they are. This helps to guide practitioners to deploy only those tools that are effective, conserving the limited resources of the SMEs. With regards to RO1, the digital

marketing tools that owners/managers should adopt are website marketing and SEM marketing for customer acquisition. Website marketing could also help in customer retention, as the findings suggest that having a website with relevant information available to customers could help improve customer service levels and hence assist in customer retention. Figure 6 shows an action framework that acts as a guideline for practitioners who does not have an idea of how to adopt digital marketing capability.

Figure 6

Digital marketing action framework.



Note. Outline of suggestion of implementation of digital marketing, by Author.

Figure 6 builds on the findings of this research. The cycle starts from #1, understanding the customers' needs, the needs of the customer could be gathered by having feedback from existing customers or external research done by research companies, having to understand the needs of the customer, SMEs owners/managers would be able to understand what kind of content they would need. In #2, create the website with content that could fulfil the needs of the customers, it should also include information about and technical specifications of the supplier's products, this would help to address the gaps between the customer's perspective and the information offered in the website.

After the website is set up, #3 search engine marketing activities need to be undertaken to ensure that the website is ranked in the top few of a search engine search, this is to create brand awareness and help to build brand credibility from the customer perspective. Once both activities are completed, #4 active monitoring of the website is needed to ensure that #5 sales enquiries from potential customers are responded to quickly so that #6 customers can be acquired and #7 sales revenue can be generated, by having an increase in sales revenue, a portion of the sales revenue generated by referring to this action framework could be used to create better digital marketing activities to further expand digital capabilities such as creating new website content, maintaining the website content ensures that customers can access the latest information, thus building sustainable competitive advantages. As Herhausen et al. (2020) highlighted that even though digital marketing could help RBN to build a competitive advantage, there are many gaps between the practice and the ideal situation. Therefore, tracking the performance of digital marketing tools is important to understand how digital marketing tools could help to bring in additional sales revenue.

Secondly, due to the challenging nature of mapping actual business activities to strategic benefit using digital marketing, with regards to RO2, the research also showcases how using DM tools benefits the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore strategically and leverages its internal and external resources to help the company achieve sustainable competitive advantages. Using digital marketing tools as stated in Figure 6 helps to enhance brand visibility both locally and globally, which improves customer acquisition and ultimately creates sustainable competitive advantages.

Similarly, using digital marketing tools could also assist companies because it improves brand credibility, international appeal and brand visibility. However, digital marketing is a double-edged sword: customers are using DM tools to explore products and services that represent the best value for money for them, although DM tools could help the customers to search for other suppliers that have more value for money proposition, they would also look at the non-digital marketing aspect such as customer services, pricing and product quality.

Therefore, DM tools are essential to creating a sustainable competitive advantage.

However, this research found that some DM tools are less effective for industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore. These include business directories and social media, as customers would normally use search engines to search for new suppliers. Existing customers do not normally read email marketing materials sent by suppliers. Instead, they prefer to go to the supplier's website directly to check for any products and services they need. In addition, this research also found that although DM tools could assist to create sustainable competitive advantages, the DM tools could not replace the traditional way of doing business in the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore as owners/managers and customers are still heavily reliant on building relationship network, pricing and quality of the products that are still the main consideration towards the decision making of the customers.

The SMEs that already have digital marketing capabilities could also explore enhancing their website content and realigning their digital marketing objectives as finding suggested that having an objective as to what digital marketing tools could fill in the resource gap would allow better resource allocation. In light of the perspective of the customers, the owners/managers should focus on the content and gather more feedback from the customers. This would help the SMEs to build better interaction and improve customer relationships which in the long run help to achieve better customer retention and build more RBNs.

In summary, SME practitioners in the field of industrial supplies in Singapore could use this digital marketing and relationship-based network knowledge to continuously innovate to generate a competitive advantage (Nonaka & Takechi, 1995). However, this research is not limited to this market niche only: it could also be used by other business-to-business industries of similar nature to great benefit.

6.4. Limitations of the Study

The methodology's limitations have already been addressed in this thesis. As this thesis has adopted a post-positivism and constructivism philosophical approach due to time and manpower constraints. Due to the size of the industry, quantitative surveys were not able to be used to research prominent digital marketing tools. However, using a semi-structured interview approach meant that other in-depth data could be gathered as well. In Singapore, most SMEs were not willing to be interviewed, especially with the interview being recorded, as they would not want to be quoted for fear of making an inappropriate comment. This further limits the study.

As this research is limited to a very specific focus on the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore, due to the nature of the industry where specific technical expertise is needed in the industry, generalizability might not be possible towards the other industry which does not have this trait.

While these limitations meant that it was not possible to produce a large amount of data for RO1 – to identify the prominent digital marketing tools used – the semi-structured interview that was used was sufficient to make identification possible. This approach also provided a focus on the benefits and effectiveness of using digital marketing tools. It was felt that the qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview was appropriate to investigate RO1.

In addition, due to the ongoing global pandemic, there were various restrictions on conducting face-to-face interviews. This was considered a limitation of the research as interview participants might feel uncomfortable speaking via telecommunication and video conferencing and are less likely to fully express their views with ease.

Nevertheless, given the findings, the research undertaken, augmented by semi-structured interviews with both owners/managers and customers was sufficient to achieve the research aims and objectives of the project.

6.5. Suggestions for Future Research

This research was conducted using the underlying theory of resource-based and relationship-based network theory. There are several other theories such as marketing theory and strategic theory could be used to examine the impact of using digital marketing tools. Further research could be based on marketing theory or strategic theory to examine the benefits and effectiveness of industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore using digital marketing tools.

Although this research is targeted specifically at industrial supplies and is not able to generalize to sectors of totally different traits. However, further research could extend towards exploring the industrial supplies SMEs in the South East Asian region to understand a larger context, given that the culture of Singapore is different from that of neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. The research can also be generalized into a similar industry such as electronic manufacturing or chemical manufacturing as those industry requires technical expertise and post similar traits.

In this study, purposive sampling was chosen, which may have led to a lack of representativeness. A mixed methodology could be applied to identify the prominent digital marketing tools using a random sampling approach. A larger database would provide more reliable findings, this would reinforce the prominent digital marketing tools that the industrial supplies SMEs are using. This could be followed by semi-structured interviews to explore in depth the strategic benefits and the effectiveness of using digital marketing tools. The digital marketing action framework (Figure 7) could also be used to explore in-depth the effectiveness of the framework in assisting practitioners to set up their digital marketing capabilities.

Other proposals for future research could include understanding the competitive advantages that using digital marketing tools has enabled, and how the competitive advantages affect the company's performance and company growth. According to Nonaka & Takechi (1995), knowledge created can be used to create continuous innovation to generate competitive

advantage. This has significance for the future of this research and the amount of new knowledge that could be created through further research.

6.6. Final Thoughts

SMEs have been recognised as an important sector in the economy by many countries around the world. Singapore is no exception. The rising adaptation of using digital marketing tools has been a double-edged sword: it could create both advantages and disadvantages for companies. It is only through understanding the benefits and challenges of the present that companies can adopt a strategy to continuously create competitive advantages to stay competitive in the current competitive market environment where digitalisation has created disruption and changed the way business is traditionally conducted.

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<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052512>

Appendix 1 – Literature Grid

| Year | Author | Title | Digital Marketing tools | | | | |
|------|-----------------|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| | | | Website | Search Engine Marketing (SEM) tools | Website Directory / Social Media | Email | Digital Word of Mouth / Blog Tools |
| 2011 | Chordas | Digital Display - Many agents are adding digital tools to their marketing mix to boost leads and create greater brand awareness. | X | X | X | | |
| 2013 | Khan & Siddiqui | The Importance of Digital Marketing. An exploratory study of the perceptions and effectiveness of digital marketing amongst marketing professionals in Pakistan | X | X | X | | X |
| 2015 | Cizmeci & Ercan | The Effect of Digital Marketing Communication Tools in the Creation of Brand Awareness by Housing Companies | X | | X | | |
| 2017 | N kunen et al. | Micro-Enterprises' Digital Marketing Tools for Building Customer Relationships | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2018 | Negoit et al. | Digital Marketing Tools Used by Companies | X | X | X | X | |
| 2018 | Veronica et al. | Traditional versus Online Marketing for B2B Organizations: Where the Line Blurs | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2018 | Scheers | Internet Web Marketing Challenges of South African SMEs | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2019 | Aini et al. | Interests Influence of Digital Marketing Product Sales in Exports by SMEs in Bandung | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2020 | Kumar | Digital Marketing: Its Impact on B2B in India – A Study | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2021 | Krings et al. | Industrial Marketing Management: Digital Media Optimization for B2B Marketing | X | | X | | X |

Appendix 2 – Qualifying email for SMEs Owners/Managers

Interview qualifying email (to be sent out for appointment making)

Dear Sir/Madam,

Good day to you, I am Kwee Yong CHIN, doctoral student currently doing a postgraduate study / research at Edinburgh Napier University.

If you meet the following 3 criteria:

- Company Incorporated in Singapore with:
 - At least 30% local shareholding
 - Group annual sales turnover of less than \$100 million
 - Employment size of not more than 200 workers

- Currently in the wholesales industrial trading supplying the following products:
 - (MRO products) Maintenance, Repair and Operations products used for:
 - Indirect material for manufacturing or repair operations such as:
 - Abrasives – Grinding and sanding processes (Grinding Stones, Honing Stones, Sanding Belts, Blasting Media, Lapping compound)
 - Cutting tools – turning, milling, drilling, boring, facing processes (Inserts, Drills, Reamers, End Mills, Broach, Boring bar, taps)

- Currently using digital marketing tools for their customer acquisition and/or retention.

The use of digital marketing tools is referred as using:

- Blog
- Facebook
- E-commerce
- E-mail
- Search engine marketing (Online advertisement)
- Website
- content marketing for SEO
- Pay-per-click(PPC)

Kindly reply to this email, so that I would be able to potentially invite you for an interview.

Kindly also note that interview will only be conducted upon acknowledgement of **Interview Consent Form**, attached in this email, if you feel uncomfortable during any part of the process including replying this email, kindly ignore this email.

Your Sincerely,

Kwee Yong, CHIN
Postgraduate Student
Student ID: 40411999
Tel: [REDACTED]

Appendix 3 –Qualifying email for Customers buying from Singapore SMEs

Interview qualifying email (to be sent out for appointment making)

Dear Sir/Madam,

Good day to you, I am Kwee Yong CHIN, doctoral student currently doing a postgraduate study / research at Edinburgh Napier University.

If you meet the following 3 criteria:

- Currently in buying industrial supplies of the following products:
 - (MRO products) Maintenance, Repair and Operations products used for:
 - Indirect material for manufacturing or repair operations such as:
 - Abrasives – Grinding and sanding processes (Grinding Stones, Honing Stones, Sanding Belts, Blasting Media, Lapping compound)
 - Cutting tools – turning, milling, drilling, boring, facing processes (Inserts, Drills, Reamers, End Mills, Broach, Boring bar, taps)
- Currently buying it from any SMEs in Singapore with the following criteria:
 - Company Incorporated in Singapore with:
 - At least 30% local shareholding
 - Group annual sales turnover of less than \$100 million
 - Employment size of not more than 200 workers
- Currently using digital marketing tools for sourcing currently or new suppliers.

The use of digital marketing tools is referred as using:

- Blog
- Facebook
- E-commerce
- E-mail
- Search engine marketing (Online advertisement)
- Website
- content marketing for SEO
- Pay-per-click(PPC)

Kindly reply to this email, so that I would be able to potentially invite you for an interview.

Kindly also note that interview will only be conducted upon acknowledgement of **Interview Consent Form**, attached in this email, if you feel uncomfortable during any part of the process including replying this email, kindly ignore this email.

Your Sincerely,

Kwee Yong, CHIN
Postgraduate Student
Student ID: 40411999
Tel: [REDACTED]

Appendix 4 – interview consent form

Interview Consent Form

Research title:

Exploration into how digital marketing tools affects customer retention and acquisition for SME(s) in the wholesale of industrial product (B2B) in Singapore

Edinburgh Napier University requires that all persons who participate in research studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

1. I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of digital marketing to be conducted by Kwee Yong CHIN, Student id: 40411999, who is a postgraduate student at Edinburgh Napier University.
2. The broad goal of this research study is to understand the role of digital marketing can be as a strategic tool for SMEs in the wholesales industrial products (B2B) SME in Singapore to acquire and retain customers. Specifically, I have been asked to be interviewed to share my experience with regards to the topic mentioned above, which should take no longer than 1 hour and 30 minutes to complete.
3. I have been told that my responses will be anonymised. My name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.
4. I also understand that if at any time during the interview I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave. That is, my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from it without negative consequences. However, after data has been anonymised or after publication of results it will not be possible for my data to be removed as it would be untraceable at this point.
5. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
6. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the interview and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

Participant's Signature/ Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent form for my records.

Researcher's Signature/ Date

Appendix 5 – interview questionnaire

Semi-structure Face-to-face /video / phone interview structure (SME Owners/Managers)

Section 1: Interviewee & DM Tools Verification (Research Objective 1)

- a) Could you tell me about your job roles and responsibilities in your company? What are some of the task you are required to do?
- b) Could you tell me what are the some digital marketing tool(s) for example, promoting or maintaining website, social media, sending of email, e-commerce, etc... that you are using in your daily job and how are you using them?

Section 2: DM Tools Verification (Research Objective 2 & 3)

Customer Acquisition

- a) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in terms of getting more customers?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has helped you achieve customer acquisition?
 - ii) How has the *DM Tools Stated* affect the business competitive edge in terms of Customer Acquisition?

Brand Visibility

- b) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in terms of getting you brand more visible in the market?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has helped you achieve brand visibility?
 - ii) How has the *DM Tools Stated* affect the business competitive edge in terms of Brand Visibility?

Going Global

- c) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in terms of getting you brand into the global/overseas market?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has helped you to go global/overseas?
 - ii) How has the *DM Tools Stated* affect the business competitive edge in terms of Going Global?

Customer Satisfaction

- d) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* help you towards customer satisfaction?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has helped you achieve customer satisfaction?
 - ii) How has the *DM Tools Stated* affect the business competitive edge in terms of Customer Satisfaction?

Sales Revenue

- e) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* assist you in increasing your sales revenue?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has helped you increase your sales revenue?

- ii) How has the *DM Tools Stated* affect the business competitive edge in terms of Sales Revenue?

Cost Efficiency

- f) How do you think using *DM Tools Stated* is cost efficient for you?
 - i) How cost efficient do you think *DM Tools Stated* is?
 - ii) How has the *DM Tools Stated* affect the business competitive edge in terms of Cost Efficiency?

Section 3: DM Tools effectiveness (Research Objective 3)

- a) Could you give an example of how the customer response to your digital marketing efforts?

Are there other issue with the use of digital marketing tools you would like to share?

Thank you for your valuable time.

Semi-structure Face-to-face /video / phone interview structure (Customers)

Section 1: Interviewee & DM Tools Verification (Research Objective 1)

- a) Could you tell me about your job roles and responsibilities in your company? What are some of the task you are required to do?
- b) Could you tell me what are the some of the way you find new suppliers using digital means? For example, using google, social media, online directory, etc... that you are using in your daily job and how are you using them?

Section 2: DM Tools Verification (Research Objective 2 & 3)

Customer Acquisition / Product & Services Appeal

- a) How appealing would you find the supplier would be if you were to find them using the *DM Tools Stated*?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has made the supplier appealing to you?
 - ii) How has the suppliers' business competitive edge generated by *DM Tools Stated* affects your choice of supplier in terms of appeal against other suppliers?

Brand Visibility /Brand Credibility

- b) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* brand visibility can affects your opinion of their brand credibility?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has helped you identify their brand credibility?
 - ii) How has the suppliers' business competitive edge generated by *DM Tools Stated* affects your choice of supplier in terms of Brand Credibility against other suppliers?

Going Global / International Appeal

- c) How do you think about searching for supplier globally using *DM Tools Stated*?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* make the international sourcing appealing?
 - ii) How has the suppliers' business competitive edge generated by *DM Tools Stated* affects your choice of supplier in terms of international sourcing appeal against other suppliers?

Customer Satisfaction / Customer Loyalty / Retention

- d) How do you think *DM Tools Stated* helps in retaining you?
 - i) How effective do you think *DM Tools Stated* has affect your loyalty and retention?
 - ii) How has the suppliers' business competitive edge generated by *DM Tools Stated* affects loyalty and retention against other suppliers?

Value for Money

- e) How do you think the products and services offered by supplier that were found using *DM Tools Stated* were value for money?

- i) How effective is using *DM Tools Stated* to find products and services that were value for money?
- ii) How has the suppliers' business competitive edge generated by *DM Tools Stated* affects the value of product / services they offered against other suppliers?

Section 3: DM Tools effectiveness (Research Objective 3)

- a) Overall, how do you think about supplier who are using *DM Tools Stated* vs supplier who doesn't appeal to you?

Are there other issue with the use of digital marketing tools you would like to share?

Thank you for your valuable time.

Appendix 6 – interviewee details

Section 1: Interviewee group: Singapore SMEs Owners / Managers

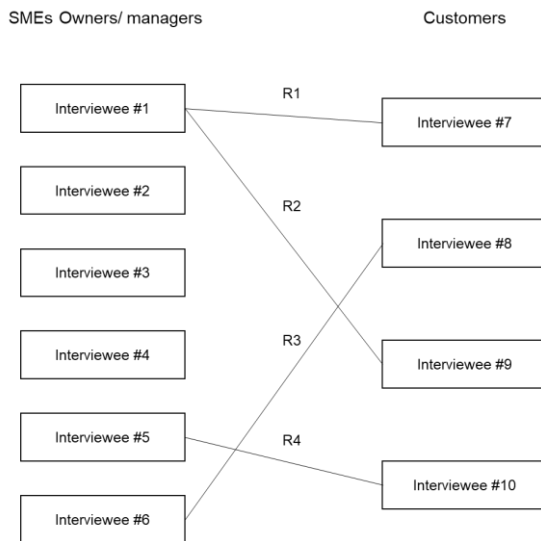
| # | Industry | Size * | Gender / Nationality | Competitiveness | Location | Length of Interview |
|---|---------------------------|--------|----------------------|--|---|---------------------|
| 1 | Abrasives | 7-10 | Male / Singaporean | Good digital presences; easy to find in multiple search engines & online directories. Local Sole Distributor of Germany products well-known in Aerospace & Oil and gas industry | Light Industrial area (Central Singapore) | 38mins |
| 2 | Hardware & Abrasives | 8-12 | Male / Singaporean | Decent digital presences; found in top search engines. Local distributor of many brands. Established in wide range of industry in Singapore | Light Industrial area (Central Singapore) | 50mins |
| 3 | Cutting Tools & Abrasives | 15-25 | Male / Singaporean | Good digital presences; found in top search engines & online directories. Local distributor of many brands. Established in wide range of industry across the world especially Southeast Asia | Light Industrial area (East Singapore) | 62mins |
| 4 | Abrasives | 4-9 | Male / Singaporean | Decent digital presences; found in top search engines. Distributor of their own brand. Established in wide range of industry across Singapore & Philippines | Light Industrial area (East Singapore) | 48mins |
| 5 | Safety & Cutting tools | 15-20 | Male / Singaporean | Good digital presences; found in top search engines & online directories. High presences in Southeast Asia. | Heavy Industrial area (West Singapore) | 55mins |
| 6 | Cutting Tools | 10-12 | Male / Singaporean | Decent digital presences; found in top search engines. Distributor of their many brands. Well Known in wide range of industry across Singapore & Malaysia | Light Industrial area (West Singapore) | 46mins |

**Size refers to employment size including the owners of the SME.*

Section 2: Interviewee group: Customers of the industrial supplies SMEs in Singapore & Malaysia

| # | Industry | Country (Location) | Gender / Nationality | Years of procurement experience | Length of interview |
|----|-----------------------------|--|----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| 7 | Aerospace Repair & Overhaul | Singapore (North: Aerospace Park) | Male / Singaporean | 5 years | 43mins |
| 8 | Manufacturing | Malaysia (Johor Bahru) | Male / Malaysian | 15 years | 38mins |
| 9 | Oil & Gas Repair & Overhaul | Singapore (West: Heavy industrial area) | Male / Singaporean | 8 years | 42mins |
| 10 | Contract Manufacturing | Singapore (North: Heavy industrial area) | Female / Malaysian | 6 years | 40mins |

Section 3: Relationship between Supplier & customers



* Customer was recommended by the SMEs owners/ managers interviewee.

| # | SMEs owners/ manager | Customer | Relationship |
|----|----------------------|-----------------|--|
| R1 | Interviewee #1 | Interviewee #7 | Supplier-customer relationship for around 3years. |
| R2 | Interviewee #1 | Interviewee #9 | Supplier-customer relationship for around 5years. |
| R3 | Interviewee #6 | Interviewee #8 | Supplier-customer relationship for around 10years. |
| R4 | Interviewee #5 | Interviewee #10 | Supplier-customer relationship for around 8years. |

Appendix 7 – Thematic analysis process

Familiarizing
yourself with your data

Transcription in 3 steps

- Listening to the audio 1-3 times before transcribing.
- Transcribing as the audio is playing & pausing the audio for transcription to catch up with the audio when needed.
- Listening to the audio and reading the transcript at the same time to ensure the transcription is done accurately.

Generating initial codes

Reading and picking out codes that relates to 3 ROs:

| interview # | Coding | interview # | Coding |
|-------------|--|-------------|--|
| 1 | online presence on the website | 2 | get address from website |
| 1 | Using Google | 2 | saw this on website |
| 1 | found us on website | 2 | an advertisement to create awareness |
| 1 | indirect | 2 | online presense |
| 1 | linking | 2 | Customer use google |
| 1 | looking into our website | 2 | found me on website |
| 1 | link us up | 2 | email and send us what they looking for |
| 1 | it's a door | 2 | our staff are already trying to cope with many orders daily and we don't need to go and search for extra sales |
| 1 | avenune | | |
| 1 | door | 2 | we need to advise them and to link them up rather than just a direct sales |
| 1 | we come to customer | 2 | do not really look into rapid expansion for customer based because I dun want them to backfire to us |
| 1 | convert to regular sales | 2 | awe do not have that much resource and manpower as doing all this would require more manpower |
| 1 | saw your website | | |
| 1 | usually they won't go and find for more information if nothing wrong with them | | |
| 1 | we can link up, linking them up and then propose to them the correct product that they are actually looking for. | | |

* Part of the data is shown

Searching for themes

Customer acquisition tools : Website

| interview # | Coding | Themes | interview # | Coding | Themes |
|-------------|---|----------------------|-------------|--|----------------------|
| 1 | online presence on the website | DM tools: website | 5 | Secondly, we have our own website. | DM tools: website |
| 1 | found us on website | DM tools: website | 5 | we want our customer to go to our website to look at other case study that maybe relevant to them. | Strategic of website |
| 1 | looking into our website | DM tools: website | | | |
| 1 | saw your website | DM tools: website | 5 | back to our website. | DM tools: website |
| 2 | found me on website | DM tools: website | 5 | fill up page in our website | Strategic of website |
| 2 | get address from website | DM tools: website | 5 | we need to improve on our website | Shortfall of website |
| 2 | saw this on website | DM tools: website | 5 | there a lot of things we will need to input to our website | Strategic of website |
| 3 | Most customers from overseas know us because from our website | DM tools: website | 5 | we are actually building up our 2nd phase of our website | Shortfall of website |
| 4 | people see the website, people call in, they write you email, sometime, people fill in the form | Strategic of website | 6 | We have our website | DM tools: website |
| | | | 6 | website helps us in letting potential customer know we are around | Strategic of website |
| 4 | The website is not something that will generate sales, but it will create awareness, people know that we are in the industry, we get to know us | Strategic of website | 6 | The website and directory is like walking advertisement for me | Strategic of website |
| 4 | have a form in our website for people to fill in | Strategic of website | 6 | we have website | DM tools: website |
| 4 | mainly the website is to create awareness on certain product we are selling or certain new thing | Strategic of website | 6 | Our website have titled ourselves to be an top international supplier | Strategic of website |
| | | | 6 | our website have more people coming in | DM tools: website |

Reviewing themes

Customer acquisition tools : Website

| interview # | Coding | Themes | interview # | Coding | Themes |
|-------------|---|----------------------|-------------|--|----------------------|
| 1 | online presence on the website | DM tools: website | 5 | Secondly, we have our own website. | DM tools: website |
| 1 | found us on website | DM tools: website | 5 | we want our customer to go to our website to look at other case study that maybe relevant to them. | Strategic of website |
| 1 | looking into our website | DM tools: website | | | |
| 1 | saw your website | DM tools: website | 5 | back to our website. | DM tools: website |
| 2 | found me on website | DM tools: website | 5 | fill up page in our website | Strategic of website |
| 2 | get address from website | DM tools: website | 5 | we need to improve on our website | Shortfall of website |
| 2 | saw this on website | DM tools: website | 5 | there a lot of things we will need to input to our website | Strategic of website |
| 3 | Most customers from overseas know us because from our website | DM tools: website | 5 | we are actually building up our 2nd phase of our website | Shortfall of website |
| 4 | people see the website, people call in, they write you email, sometime, people fill in the form | Strategic of website | 6 | We have our website | DM tools: website |
| 4 | The website is not something that will generate sales, but it will create awareness, people know that we are in the industry, we get to know us | Strategic of website | 6 | website helps us in letting potential customer know we are around | Strategic of website |
| 4 | have a form in our website for people to fill in | Strategic of website | 6 | The website and directory is like walking advertisement for me | Strategic of website |
| 4 | mainly the website is to create awareness on certain product we are selling or certain new thing | Strategic of website | 6 | we have website | DM tools: website |
| | | | 6 | Our website have titled ourselves to be an top international supplier | Strategic of website |
| | | | 6 | our website have more people coming in | DM tools: website |

Defining and naming themes

Customer acquisition tools : Website

| interview # | Coding | Themes |
|-------------|---|-------------------|
| 1 | online presence on the website | DM tools: website |
| 1 | found us on website | DM tools: website |
| 1 | looking into our website | DM tools: website |
| 1 | saw your website | DM tools: website |
| 2 | found me on website | DM tools: website |
| 2 | get address from website | DM tools: website |
| 2 | saw this on website | DM tools: website |
| 3 | Most customers from overseas know us because from our website | DM tools: website |
| 3 | Secondly, we have our own website. | DM tools: website |
| 5 | back to our website. | DM tools: website |
| 6 | We have our website | DM tools: website |
| 6 | we have website | DM tools: website |
| 6 | our website have more people coming in | DM tools: website |

| interview # | Coding | Themes |
|-------------|--|----------------------|
| 5 | we need to improve on our website | Shortfall of website |
| 5 | we are actually building up our 2nd phase of our website | Shortfall of website |

| interview # | Coding | Themes |
|-------------|---|----------------------|
| 4 | people see the website, people call in, they write you email, sometime, people fill in the form | Strategic of website |
| 4 | The website is not something that will generate sales, but it will create awareness, people know that we are in the industry, we get to know us | Strategic of website |
| 4 | have a form in our website for people to fill in | Strategic of website |
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| 5 | we want our customer to go to our website to look at other case study that maybe relevant to them. | Strategic of website |
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| 5 | there a lot of things we will need to input to our website | Strategic of website |
| 6 | website helps us in letting potential customer know we are around | Strategic of website |
| 6 | The website and directory is like walking advertisement for me | Strategic of website |
| 6 | Our website have titled ourselves to be an top international supplier | Strategic of website |

DM Tools

- Website marketing tools
- Search Engine Marketing (SEM) tools
- Website Directory / Social Media tools
- Email marketing tools
- Digital Word of Mouth / Blog Tools

Producing the report

| Interviewee # | Website | Email | SEM (Google) | Directory / Social Media | WOM / Blog |
|---------------|---------|-------|--------------|--------------------------|------------|
| 1 | X | | X | | |
| 2 | X | | X | | |
| 3 | X | | X | X | |
| 4 | X | | X | | |
| 5 | X | | X | X | |
| 6 | X | | X | X | |
| Total | 6 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 0 |

Customers that saw their showcase can also fill in their enquiry in the contact form on the website. Interviewee 1 had provided an overview of his perspective on using a website and search engine marketing tools by stating:

Most of the time the customers, when they come to us, the social media, the website actually just leads us to the customer's enquiry. There are times they are not looking for the correct things or things like that. But when we link up with them, then we ask them what they really want, so from there on we can promote our product or services more efficiently. But most importantly, the social media, the website is that they are able to link us to the customers.

This highlighted that as industrial supplies are technical products, potential customers might not find the most suitable products on the websites or from digital marketing tools. They are marketing tools that can create awareness and provide a link to potential customers.