

Content Marketing and Digital Advertising in Cypriot SMEs: Relevant Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: This empirical study seeks to examine the role of content marketing and digital advertising within Cypriot small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by essentially exploring the degree to which these businesses utilise digital marketing tools. In addition, it delves into the relevant challenges faced by these enterprises located in different regions in Cyprus and the outcomes gained of implementing such digital strategies. More specifically, this research highlights the significance of these advanced strategies in a rapidly evolving business landscape. A qualitative research method was applied interviewing owners and business executives via semi-structured in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that while the majority of the firms investigated by the research team have incorporated social media, email marketing, and search engine advertising into their strategies, a gap in strategic planning, budget allocation, and performance measurement is traced, respectively. Most of them have focused on ad hoc tactics within their digital marketing endeavours, a fact that strategically showcases limitations with regard to their potential for sustained growth and competitiveness, especially when it comes to long-term goal achievement. However, interviewees underscored the considerable opportunities that effective content marketing and targeted advertising may provide with regard to customer loyalty, brand visibility, and sales. The study wraps up by recommending certain key structured digital marketing strategies, suggesting ways to improve training for social media managers, and pushing for better access to resources and analysis tools.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Content Marketing, Digital Advertising, SMEs, Cyprus

1. Introduction

In developing countries, SMEs contribute to 40% of the GDP (Thaha et al., 2021). Technology is advancing day by day, and these businesses have more opportunities (Lykourantzou et al., 2026; Petropoulos., 2025), especially through digital marketing. Digital marketing allows them to promote products and services in a timely, personalized and cost-effective way (Baines et al., 2013). Digital marketing also helps SMEs move from building brand awareness to making sales and better meeting customer needs. In this regard, their ability to learn and adapt is important for future growth (Pradhan et al., 2018). Two of the most prominent digital marketing practices are content marketing and paid digital advertising. Content marketing is based on the production of consistent and valuable content to raise brand awareness by using video blogs and social media (Cheung et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Shahab et al., 2021; Stubb et al., 2019). The success of content marketing is based on the distribution of information through social media networks and search engine optimization (Feng et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2020). On the other hand, digital advertising helps businesses reach their target audience by using measurable techniques to drive website traffic and raise brand awareness, while providing ongoing optimization to improve the return on investment (Apostolopoulos et al., 2025; Blake et al., 2015; Buhalis & Mamalakis, 2015; Goldfarb, 2014). However, for SMEs, especially in resource-constrained environments, it is important to make strategic decisions in terms of how to allocate budgets for organic content versus advertising (Kotler et al., 2021). Previous studies have investigated some aspects of SEO, SEM, and content-based engagement (Panchal et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2022), although limited research has been conducted to compare the long-term effect of content marketing versus the immediate gratification of advertising for SMEs. There is also limited research conducted while considering recent advances in AI-based personalization, user-generated content, influencer marketing, and video advertising.

This study aims to examine how SMEs can use content marketing and paid digital advertising, including PPC, to achieve maximum promotional impact. This will be achieved by studying their meanings, characteristics, and uses, as well as how SMEs select between them depending on their respective industries, audiences and subsequently, resources. The research will also seek to understand how SMEs may benefit from the integration of these strategies in order to increase their effectiveness, awareness, and loyalty, as well as how they may make the most of emerging digital marketing trends in different industries with different

audiences and resources. Moreover, it will seek to understand best practices in this regard in SMEs in Cyprus to increase their growth and competitiveness.

Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions. To what degree do SMEs practice content marketing and paid advertising strategies? What are the main obstacles SMEs encounter in applying these strategies? On top of that, which of these strategies, content marketing or paid advertising, is more effective in SMEs? Lastly, what are the best practices that Cypriot SMEs must consider to make their marketing strategies more effective? Lastly, the answers to these questions will provide recommendations to enhance the digital presence of Cypriot SMEs and make them more effective in their utilization of digital marketing tools.

2. Literature Review

The international literature has been interested in Content Marketing in SMEs (Feng et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2020). Content marketing is often described as “the strategic creation and distribution of valuable content to attract, engage and retain clearly defined audiences” (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). However, it is also differentiated as having a focus on trust and relationships rather than content use in more general terms (Mathew & Soliman, 2020). The interest in content marketing for SMEs comes in two forms: cost savings in media and brand assets that grow exponentially (Lou & Xie, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2017). The practical application for firms includes using various content forms (videos, blog posts, white papers, infographics, etc.) for raising brand awareness and stimulating demand (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). Social platforms are central distribution rails which link content quality to visibility and engagement (Ho et al., 2020). Content marketing in SMEs involves valuable content and distribution, and in such cases, the importance of SEO and social media is particularly high (Feng et al., 2021). For high-performing content marketing, content formats need to be adapted to audience needs and consistency is also important (Shahab et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2020). The development of a defined strategy and content alignment with the marketing funnel and measurement systems establish the foundation for content marketing success (Cheng et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2018). SMEs typically activate a strategy that includes search, social, display, and email (Simonetti & Bigne, 2024; Vitalis et al., 2023). Search engine marketing (SEM), integrating search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per-click (PPC) strategies, has the potential to enhance visibility and attract high-intent traffic, as Lee (2018) observed. Combining SEO and PPC with content marketing have a competitive advantage and progressively greater benefits, according to Rohimi (2024). Furthermore, display inventory, encompassing banners and rich media content, enables ad networks to broaden their reach; however, the efficacy of banners hinges on their ability to initially capture audience attention, a point emphasized by Drèze and Husherr (2003). Simonetti and Bigne (2024) also discovered that variations in format and the incorporation of motion elements can help with interaction.

Looking at different online marketing practices, social media ads promote awareness and consideration and are utilised mainly for their accurate targeting capabilities (Vitalis et al., 2023). Native marketing operates through various formats which function within editorial environments but businesses need to maintain transparency for preserving their audience's trust according to Manic (2015). Additionally, display and retargeting operations increase customer retention through high relevance but the practice of showing too many ads leads people to develop “ad blindness” which decreases their effectiveness and reduces their return on investment (Manchanda et al., 2006). Video ads can raise attention and intent when placement, duration, and relevance are well-optimized (Vaiciukynaite et al., 2017). Email serves as an essential CRM tool which helps businesses keep their customers but people tend to resist when they see direct persuasion messages; research shows that providing information through educational methods produces better results (Thomas et al., 2022; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Platform analytics (CTR, CPA) enable granular optimization (Kireyev et al., 2016). A multi-touch approach to customer journey analysis helps businesses understand their campaigns better because customers base their decisions on multiple touchpoints instead of single interactions (Kireyev et al., 2016). When considering the variety of platforms, YouTube can increase brand awareness among younger age groups, but it requires creative content that grabs attention, such as eye-catching thumbnails (Febriyantoro, 2020). TikTok can allow content to spread quickly through short videos, particularly for Gen Z (Dwinanda et al., 2022). Meta properties support engagement and measurable outcomes when content resonates and is well targeted (Sugeng & Chusjairi, 2022; Baek & Morimoto, 2012). Because organic reach has tightened on major platforms, paid support is often necessary to seed distribution, even for content that has potential to perform (Ho et al., 2020). The effectiveness of social media channels is improved through adaptation of content to the unique features of each platform and how users interact with them (Apostolopoulos et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2018; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

3. Methodology

Given the study's aim, to understand how Cypriot SMEs perceive and apply content marketing and paid digital advertising, we adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry privileges depth over breadth, seeking to surface meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences that are not easily reduced to numbers (Gittins et al., 2025). It is particularly suitable in the social sciences for interpreting human experience and context, which reflects to Dilthey's interpretive tradition (Makkreel, 2014). It has also been recommended for unpacking complex social, economic, and entrepreneurial environments (Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007) and is well aligned to entrepreneurship scholarship exploring complex phenomena (Van Burg, 2022). Accordingly, a qualitative, interview-based approach was judged fit for purpose. We employed convenience sampling to facilitate access and cooperation (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), while ensuring participants were "information-rich cases" suitable for in-depth analysis (Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria focused on owners or marketing-responsible staff within SMEs who were actively involved in digital promotion (content and/or ads). Targeted recruitment of participants sharing relevant roles and exposure supports deeper interpretation of the focal phenomenon (Makris et al, 2024).

The final sample comprised 14 SMEs operating across all districts of the Republic of Cyprus (Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Paphos, Famagusta), spanning sectors such as food service, advertising, tourism services, apparel, wellness/medical, legal, IT, retail, real estate/hospitality, media, and financial services. Participants were owners/founders or marketing leads (including in-house and hybrid arrangements with agencies/freelancers). Interviews were conducted in April–May 2025, either face-to-face or via online/telephone, modes considered as valid as in-person for qualitative interviewing (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Most interviews were conducted in Greek, with two in English. Average duration was ~30 minutes. All participants received an information sheet, provided written informed consent, and opted for anonymity. We used pseudonyms (R1–R14) and removed identifying details to protect confidentiality (Orb et al., 2001). Recruitment ceased at thematic saturation (Fusch, 2015). Furthermore, data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews; an established and effective method in qualitative research (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019; Flick, 2018). Semi-structured interviews balance a consistent core protocol with flexibility to probe emergent issues, enabling authenticity and nuance in participants' accounts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Confidentiality and anonymity principles were rigorously applied throughout (Orb et al., 2001).

We used qualitative analysis to interpret participant experiences, perceptions, and practices. An abductive stance combined inductive and deductive procedures. Inductively, open coding allowed concepts to emerge from the data without imposing a priori frames, revealing new topics and meanings grounded in participants' language (Bennett et al., 2019; Sousa, 2014; Morse, 1994). Deductively, we also applied a sensitizing framework derived from the literature review and research questions to organize data around theoretically relevant constructs and to enhance validity (Bell & Waters, 2018). We also iterated between our emergent themes and the literature to position findings and identify gaps (Okoli, 2023).

Pattern identification thus proceeded both bottom-up, themes arising directly from data, independent of prior theory (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) and top-down, guided by pre-selected concepts and prior studies (Hayes, 1997). Such abductive blending is widely used to strengthen primary qualitative research (Azungah, 2018). Four overarching themes structured the analysis and later results: content marketing use, digital advertising use, comparative and integrated approaches, constraints and future strategies.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants in the semi-structured interviews

R	Role	Business: Vertical & Type	Business Size	Location	Number of Employees and Years of Operation	Marketing Management
R1	Head of Business Development	B2C, Retail, Electrical Appliances	Medium	Paphos	37 years, 22 employees	Internal marketing department in collaboration with an external consultant
R2	Social Media Manager & Content Creator	B2C, Medicine, Plastic Surgery Clinic	Small	Nicosia	5 years 10 employees	Internal Marketing Department

R	Role	Business: Vertical & Type	Business Size	Location	Number of Employees and Years of Operation	Marketing Management
R3	Marketing Manager	B2B, Regulatory technology	Medium	Larnaca	2 years 32 employees	Internal marketing department in collaboration with an external consultant
R4	Owner	B2C, Hospitality, Cafe, Bar	Small	Larnaca	8 years 4 employees	Internal marketing management
R5	Owner	B2C, Medicine, Wellness. Hyperbaric Treatment with Oxygen (HBOT)	Small	Paphos	1 year 1 employee	Internal marketing department in collaboration with an external freelancer
R6	Chief Operating Officer	B2B, Marketing Agency	Small	Larnaca	4 years 10 employees	Internal marketing department
R7	Owner	B2C, Real Estate, Hospitality	Small	Paphos	3 years 3 employees	Internal marketing department in collaboration with an external freelancer
R8	Head of Communications and Media	B2C, News	Medium	Nicosia	20 years 55 employees	Internal marketing department in collaboration with an external freelancer
R9	Owner	B2C Retail, Clothing	Small	Nicosia	2 years 2 employees	Internal marketing management
R10	Digital Marketing & Communications Manager	B2C, B2B, Legal, Firm	Medium	Limassol	25 years 25 employees	Internal marketing department in collaboration with an agency
R11	Copywriter	B2B, Financial Services	Medium	Limassol	6 years 60 employees	Internal Marketing Management
R12	Account Executive	B2B, Marketing Agency	Medium	Nicosia	35 years 35 employees	Internal Marketing Management
R13	Owner	B2B, IT services	Small	Limassol	10 years 2 employees	Internal Marketing Management
R14	Social Media Manager & Content Creator	B2B, Marketing Agency	Small	Paralimni, Famagusta	2 years 8 employees	Internal marketing department in collaboration with freelancers

Table 2: Thematic Analysis

Coding Frame	Thematic	Summary of Patterns
Content Marketing Use	- Key content usage objectives - Types of content produced - Use of platforms - Content strategy - Frequency of posts - Effectiveness evaluation - Key challenges	- Increase recognition, trust and potential customers (leads), strengthen relationships with the public. - Social media posts in carousels and static images and informative captions, videos, newsletters, articles. - Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn (mainly B2B). - Strategy for increasing recognition and branding, educational content. - Strategy with plans and content themes, combined with spontaneous approaches and trend-based material. - Meta & Social Media Insights, LinkedIn analytics, Google Analytics. - Lack of time and expertise.
Digital Advertising Use	Digital advertising platforms they use	- Facebook, Instagram, Google. - Search ads, Social Media (Meta) Ads, Video Ads

Coding Frame	Thematic	Summary of Patterns
	- Ad formats they consider most effective - Ad management - How the budget is determined - Methods for evaluating effectiveness - Changes in strategy in recent years	- Internal management, in collaboration with an external partner. - Fixed for some campaigns. Varies depending on seasonality, offers, and goals. - Impressions, Reach, CPC, CTR, Conversions, ROAS. - Video Content, Personalized advertising, targeted campaigns, investment in Google Ads.
Comparative/Integrated Approaches	- Understanding the importance of organic vs. paid marketing - Ideal budget allocation percentage - Practices considered most effective for combining strategies - Differences in organic and paid performance - Specific results in terms of recognition, traffic, sales - Examples of successful campaigns	- They work together, paid is more effective, and organic builds trust. - Organic marketing builds trust and relationships, while advertising brings speed and traffic. Paid advertising brings immediate visibility. 90% organic, 10% paid. 60% organic, 40% paid. - Consistency, authenticity, and good knowledge of the audience. Content strategy, content pillars, KPIs. - Corporate organic content that shows people, on a more personal or influencer level, has better engagement quality. Paid content has immediate impact and can bring results with potential customers, but not always quality ones. - Significant improvement in recognition, traffic, and sales - Campaigns, videos, reels, and targeted ads.
Constraints and Future Strategies	- Key constraints in the implementation of digital marketing - Identification of support needs - Assessment of adequate information for SMEs on best practices - Practices to be followed by SMEs in Cyprus - Trends expected to dominate in the coming years - Ways to adapt to changing requirements	- Limited budget for advertising and advanced tools, difficulty competing with larger marketing teams. - Training in video creation, Google Ads, SEO, AI. - Insufficient information. - Understanding the audience, investing in quality content and training in digital marketing, being open to hiring marketers or consultants. - User-generated or employee-generated content, human-centric personalized content, video, micro-influencers, AI. - More personalized, interactive, and automated, dependent on artificial intelligence. Videos will be at the top.

4. Findings

4.1 Current Usage of Content Marketing in SMEs

Cypriot SMEs actively combine content marketing with paid ads, using formats such as carousels, images, short-form video (Reels, TikTok), Stories, newsletters, blogs, and occasional webinars. Content mixes educational tips, seasonal offers, testimonials and behind the scenes material. Instagram and Facebook are most used in B2C, LinkedIn in B2B, YouTube for long-form content and TikTok for younger audiences. The posting strategies of different organizations show distinct patterns because some companies use planned schedules which include weekly and monthly content themes while others share content based on random opportunities.

"We follow a monthly content calendar, with weekly blog articles and 3–5 social media updates per week" (R10).

"We also use Reels and TikTok videos and send newsletters to previous guests with offers" (R7).

"We publish social media posts featuring the projects our agency has run and other behind-the-scenes content, as well as fun office challenges to drive engagement and help people get to know us. We also write articles on our own platform and publish them on other well-known platforms. (R12)"

4.2 Paid Advertising Practices

Google Search Ads are preferred for high-intent conversions, while Meta (Facebook/Instagram) supports reach and retargeting. LinkedIn is used selectively for B2B but seen as costly in Cyprus. Ad management is mainly in-house, with occasional consultant input; monthly budgets range from €200 to €3,000.

"Our goal is best served by Google Ads because there is search intent. They bring the best ROI" (R3).

"We use Facebook and Instagram Ads because they give us easier access to the local audience" (R4).

4.3 Challenges Faced

The main constraints are limited budgets, time, and expertise, compounded by algorithm changes and larger competitors. Many SMEs struggle to balance marketing with other responsibilities.

"The main challenge is lack of time, since the person handling marketing has other responsibilities" (R4).

"Limited budget for advertising and advanced tools and difficulty competing with larger teams" (R10).

4.4 Measurement and Outcomes

SMEs track their business performance through GA4 and platform analytics systems and their CRM software which they use from time to time. Core KPIs include CTR, CPC, conversions, and ROI/ROAS. The conversion rates for Search Ads perform well while video content helps brands reach more people and get better engagement. The production of organic content establishes trust between businesses and their audience yet it fails to reach large audiences when companies do not pay for promotion.

"We monitor CPC, CTR, conversion rate and ROI to assess performance" (R10).

"Google Analytics, Instagram Insights, and CRM help us track leads and campaign performance" (R8).

4.4.1 Effectiveness of Organic vs. Paid

Participants view organic and paid as complementary. They believe that organic builds trust and long-term engagement, while paid ensures visibility and immediate results.

"Ads bring immediate results, whereas organic helps with branding and audience retention" (R4).

"Both are essential, organic content has very little reach without paid advertising" (R1).

4.5 Case Patterns and Strategy Shifts

B2B businesses use LinkedIn and SEO for their marketing efforts which they schedule using organized calendars. Local B2C businesses use short-form videos and geo-targeted Meta ads (Facebook and Instagram adverts). Many SMEs have shifted from boosting posts to structured, full-funnel campaigns, with budgets split differently by sector (e.g., 60-70% organic vs. 30-40% paid or heavily paid-focused for performance targets).

"Instead of simply boosting posts, I moved to creating more structured campaigns with specific goals and better targeting" (R5).

"We have adjusted our strategies to place emphasis on video-first content and to follow changes in social media algorithms" (R14).

4.6 Emerging Trends

Human-centred content, short-form video, UGC, micro-influencers and AI-assisted creation are seen as future priorities by the professionals.

“Human-centred content showcasing customers or employees will prevail” (R1).

“AI-based personalisation, influencer marketing and UGC will dominate in my opinion” (R11).

“More personalized videos with people speaking and micro-influencers will have a bigger impact locally” (R6).

5. Discussion

Our results align closely with established work showing that SMEs benefit most when they treat content and paid media as complements rather than substitutes. International guidance (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014) frames content as the long-term engine of trust and search visibility, while paid channels supply controllable reach and short-term demand capture, precisely what our participants described. The growing video-first emphasis and the use of short-form formats mirror global best practices, as do the reported gains from Search Ads for high-intent traffic and Meta for broad reach and retargeting. Best-practice playbooks also stress measurement discipline and iterative optimisation (clear KPIs, A/B testing, funnel tracking). Here, Cypriot SMEs show progress, using GA4, platform analytics, and in a few cases CRM, yet they still trail the more mature “data-driven” benchmarks seen internationally. Finally, our findings that organic visibility now often depends on paid amplification indicates the need for broader industry observations and practitioner surveys.

In Cyprus’s small and relationship-driven market, limited budgets and lean teams shape SME marketing choices. In this light, Meta and Google Resource constraints drive reliance for their cost control and targeting and LinkedIn’s higher CPMs restrict its use to selective B2B goals. The execution of campaigns faces obstacles because business owners must handle daily operations while marketing activities continue and their lack of skills in analytics and video production and PPC advertising hinders their work. The natural decline of organic reach becomes more severe for accounts which have fewer following because businesses need to pay for advertising to keep their online presence in the current environment. SMEs experience multiple advantages from their customer accessibility, well-established community relationships and genuine business approach which makes human-centered storytelling, UGC and micro-influencer collaborations most effective. Organizations which want to grow through data-based methods need to establish CRM systems and GA4 platforms for their operations.

6. Conclusion

Digital marketing is shown to be integral to SME growth. Cypriot SMEs in our sample recognise marketing as a core function and are investing in digital tools, though adoption remains limited by budgets, skills gaps and organisational resistance (Peter & Vecchia, 2020; Sharabati et al., 2024).

Moreover, the main discovery shows that content and paid advertising function as complementary elements which work together. Content serves to build audience trust while it establishes enduring value which paid media delivers instantaneously through its reach and performance metrics. Specifically, organizations selected Google to reach customers who showed strong purchase intent but they used Meta for broad audience exposure and follow-up advertising and LinkedIn served specific business-to-business marketing needs. Short-form video was shown to be the most effective format, supported by other media. Authentic, human-centred storytelling drove engagement (Lopes et al., 2022), with trends such as AI-assisted creation, UGC and micro-influencers expected to develop as trends.

Measurement practices are improving, with GA4 and platform analytics common, though analytical depth is constrained by resources. SMEs combining up to date content with targeted paid campaigns and KPI tracking reported growth in awareness, traffic and thereafter, sales.

Taking everything into account, SMEs in Cyprus are leaning toward hybrid approaches. Paid media offer speed and broad reach, while organic content builds trust. However, more precise planning, meaningful upskilling and established processes (such as content calendars) are required for further development. This study contributes to digital marketing literature by emphasising how small-market enterprises may align consistent,

audience-relevant content with tactical sponsored ads, prioritising authenticity and improving through experimentation and learning cycles.

Ethics Declaration

We hereby declare that no ethical clearance is required for the research / not applicable.

AI Declaration

We hereby declare that no AI usage has been carried out throughout the conduction of the study and the preparation of the relevant manuscript.

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