

The Impact of Digital Marketing Competencies on Performance of Sales Force

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the sales landscape has grown increasingly complex due to the shifts in behavioral, technological, and managerial practices. The performance of sales teams has been a long-standing topic of interest for both academics and marketing professionals. Understanding the factors that boost the performance of sales force is a key aspect of sales management and can greatly influence a company's success and survival. This study aims to explore the effect of digital marketing competencies on the sales performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ilam city. The research is applied in nature and utilizes a descriptive-correlational approach, with data gathered through surveys. The study's population consists of the sales forces of active SMEs in Ilam city. Given the small size of the population, a census sampling method was employed. After data collection, 132 valid questionnaires were used to be analyzed. The research instrument was a standardized questionnaire, with content validity confirmed by subject matter experts and reliability established through Cronbach's alpha test. Data analysis was conducted using LISREL software. The findings indicated that digital marketing competencies have a significant and positive influence on the sales performance of SMEs in Ilam city. Moreover, technical-specialized, human-behavioral, and analytical competencies were also found to positively impact the performance of sales force. The results of this study suggest that digital marketing skills are critical for improving the performance of sales force. By providing sales teams with the necessary digital marketing tools and strategies, companies can enhance customer engagement and drive sales. Integrating digital marketing into sales operations can lead to better customer interaction, increased lead generation, and improved conversion rates. Sales professionals with digital marketing expertise are better equipped to navigate the evolving digital marketing landscape and meet the changing demands of modern consumers.

KEYWORDS

Digital Marketing, Performance of Sales Force, Sales.

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Introduction

In the modern era, the sales landscape has evolved significantly, driven by changes in consumer behavior, technology advancements, and shifts in management approaches (Han et al., 2018). Sales effectiveness has been a focal point for researchers and professionals in marketing field. Understanding the key elements that contribute to improved sales performance is fundamental in sales management and can play a critical role in a company's competitiveness and prosperity (Asgari, 2018). Undoubtedly, profit growth in the market is one of the main objectives of institutions and economic enterprises. That is, one of the important factors in evaluating the growth and profitability of these institutions is their sales volume (Kim et al., 2017). To achieve a higher level of sales and market share, continuous alignment with customer expectations and needs is the key to success for companies, and success in this endeavor is possible when marketing principles and techniques are employed (Dehdashti Shahrokh & Pour Hosseini, 2013).

One of the newest marketing tactics is digital marketing. In the last decade of the current century, digital transformations have enabled many marketers to produce and distribute more goods and services while reducing costs, requiring them to place the customer at the center of the company's organizational culture and align all sections and functions accordingly, replacing the transactional view with a customer relationship perspective (Kanan, 2017). The emergence and development of the Internet have created new opportunities for marketers to better carry out their current marketing activities (Kardaras et al., 2019). Digital marketing refers to marketing products and services using online tools. These tools are utilized by many multinational and international companies, and their scope has expanded worldwide. The Internet has fundamentally changed the concept and perspective of marketing, significantly impacting the global economy. Additionally, online marketing has altered marketing methods and consumer behavior (Mohammadian et al., 2019).

The emergence of this type of marketing has shifted the marketers' responsibilities from billboard and print advertising to online marketing environments. Today, companies focus on designing web pages instead of advertising their products through television commercials, billboards, magazines, newspapers, and so forth. Digital marketing is the future of marketing management because it is fast, cost-effective, and it provides accurate information to customers in a timely manner (Ronaqi & Maniyan, 2015). Research has shown that many people are attracted to digital advertisements today. Social networks and web environment are not specific to a particular age group, and everyone can view these advertisements on web pages. Nowadays, consumers are not loyal to a specific brand; therefore, with the help of digital marketing, companies can update their products and services to maintain consumer loyalty (Patrick et al., 2018).

To survive in today's business world, companies must adopt online marketing tools for buying and selling, and it can be said that these tools are the golden key to the success of companies (Soleimani & Dadras, 2017). Despite the numerous advantages and applications of the Internet and digital marketing which are widely used, they have not

found their true place in Iran and in many manufacturing and service companies yet due to various reasons such as lack of infrastructure, trust issues, and so forth.

This issue has increased customer purchasing inclination, with customers showing little attention to this type of purchase and being minimally influenced by it. Although numerous studies have been conducted abroad on digital marketing, very few studies have been carried out in an Iranian context. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the impact of digital marketing on the performance of sales force, which is the ultimate goal of this paper, as it can somewhat fill the scientific gap in this area. Therefore, the main question of this study is if digital marketing competencies have a significant impact on the performance of sales force in small and medium-sized enterprises in Ilam city.

Theoretical Framework

Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is essential in today's interconnected world, utilizing online tools and platforms to effectively reach and engage target audiences. Its importance stems from its ability to connect businesses with customers in a more personalized and interactive way than traditional marketing methods. By leveraging digital channels like social media, email marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and content marketing, businesses can not only boost brand visibility but also drive conversions and foster customer loyalty (Deku et al., 2024).

Moreover, digital marketing provides businesses of all sizes with an opportunity to compete in global markets. Small enterprises can leverage cost-effective digital strategies to reach a wide audience and compete with larger corporations. The ability to track and analyze data in real-time also provides valuable insights for marketers to optimize their campaigns, target specific audiences, and measure the return on investment accurately. In essence, digital marketing has become a cornerstone of modern business practices, offering unparalleled reach, flexibility, and measurability for brands striving to remain relevant and competitive in digital age (Jadhav et al., 2023).

Digital marketing refers to a set of activities aimed at promoting products and services using digital tools. This is a very simple definition of digital marketing; in reality, digital marketing is much broader than other methods used by traditional companies (Apasrawirote et al., 2022). In another definition, digital marketing encompasses the activities for promoting or selling products, services, or offerings in the online space; it specifically refers to marketing conducted over the Internet (Jadavi et al., 2023).

Digital marketing utilizes the Internet, mobile devices, social media, search engines, and other channels to engage consumers. Many marketing experts consider it a novel approach for reaching customers, offering new insights into consumer behavior that differ from traditional marketing methods. Digital marketing focuses on targeting specific audience and building a dynamic, two-way relationship with customers. This includes strategies such as online advertising, email campaigns, job-related tweets, and initiatives that encourage customer feedback.

Digital marketing represents a two-way interaction between companies and consumers (Amiri et al., 2023). In today's world, television advertising, billboards, street advertising, telemarketing, or in-person marketing are no longer the only ways to attract customers. People are spending more time than ever on the Internet and in virtual spaces, making this environment a very suitable place for marketing (Ranjan, 2023). Digital marketing affects the behavior of users and audiences through implementing tools such as websites, emails, and social networks. In fact, the main goal of digital marketing is to sell, especially to increase sales by reaching a wider target audience. In traditional marketing, it may never be possible to reach a wide range of audiences (Zaki et al., 2023).

Performance of Sales Force

The performance of Sales and its management are key strategies for any business (Høgevolde et al., 2024). A sales manager's ability to train and retain sales representatives is vital for both the company's performance and its long-term success. Employee retention in sales remains a major challenge. When sales reps are equipped with the necessary skills for their roles, they are more likely to feel satisfied with their jobs and recognize that their efforts are valued by their employer. This, in turn, decreases the chances of their resignation (Saha & Kar, 2021). The performance of sales involves ensuring that every team member meets the organization's objectives and delivers the desired outcomes.

An effective performance management process for sales teams typically includes training, tracking progress, and fostering the development of new skills (Shin et al., 2023). The performance of sales is the result of customer interactions and the influence a salesperson exerts, achieved through the sales process (Yazdanshenas & Khorsandi, 2020). Historically, sales success relied heavily on verbal communication, with salespeople playing a key role in persuading customers to make purchases. However, in today's unpredictable purchasing landscape, product packaging has become a critical factor in the performance of sales, using visual communication to capture consumer attention and drive buying decisions (Kuo et al., 2023). Implementing a robust management process of the performance of sales is essential for team success. There is often a direct link between the efforts of sales representatives and the measurable outcomes seen by sales managers and the company as a whole (Rodriguez et al., 2022).

Digital Marketing and Performance of Sales

The modern world is experiencing rapid and extraordinary changes, with the pace and scope of these transformations being unprecedented. While change has always been a part of life, the current rate of evolution is remarkable. Organizations, as key elements of contemporary societies, are also swiftly adapting, and improving the performance of sales has become a primary goal for many (Poursalimi et al., 2014). As a result, understanding the factors that influence the performance of sales is crucial, as it provides valuable insights for managers looking to enhance both organizational and employee performance (Marjani & Mosafer, 2017).

One of the key factors influencing the performance of sales is the application of marketing principles (Yazdanshenas & Khorsandi, 2020). In today's business landscape, digital marketing has become an essential element of a brand's overall marketing strategy. Digital marketing capabilities involve an organization's ability to leverage the Internet and various information technologies to enhance communication with customers. These interactions not only provide customers with access to the organization's information and resources but also offer valuable insights into customer behavior (Soleimani & Dadras, 2017). Digital marketing goes beyond just online advertising and includes activities such as management of customer relationship, sales operations, post-sales support, and marketing research.

Digital marketing adds value in two primary ways: by closely aligning with the company's business processes and by granting customers direct access to the company's resources (Kanan, 2017). It offers numerous benefits, including access to a global market, greater efficiency compared to traditional marketing channels, the ability to provide new services through the Internet technology, and saving both time and costs. Digital marketing also enables continuous, interactive relationships with customers, simplifies choices, supports using text, audio, and video content, delivers a wealth of useful information, uncovers new opportunities, and keeps companies updated on the latest trends (Chkoniya & Matthews, 2019).

Literature review

Several studies have been conducted regarding the variables of the present research, which are summarized below. Babashahi et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study which involved a total of 17 interviews. After collecting the data, the codes related to the written interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the research, following the three stages of open, axial, and selective coding, revealed that the model of digital marketing competencies for managers was formed with 114 codes and 26 concepts across three categories of technical-specialized competencies, human-behavioral competencies, and analytical competencies.

Mohammadian et al. (2019) conducted a study using a meta-synthesis approach based on 2,150 articles. They found that the Internet of Things (IoT) technologies can be applied across seven areas of the marketing mix including product, place, price, promotion, processes, physical evidence, and human resources. Their quantitative analysis showed that research in this field is on the rise, with the majority of applications focusing on promotion, followed by product and process areas. Rahimi et al. (2018) conducted a research study with 74 employees from Alborz Insurance Agency in Ahvaz with results indicating that listening skills within the sales force have a positive and significant effect on adaptive selling behavior and performance of sales. Moreover, adaptive selling behavior positively impacts the performance of sales and partially mediates the relationship between sales force listening and performance.

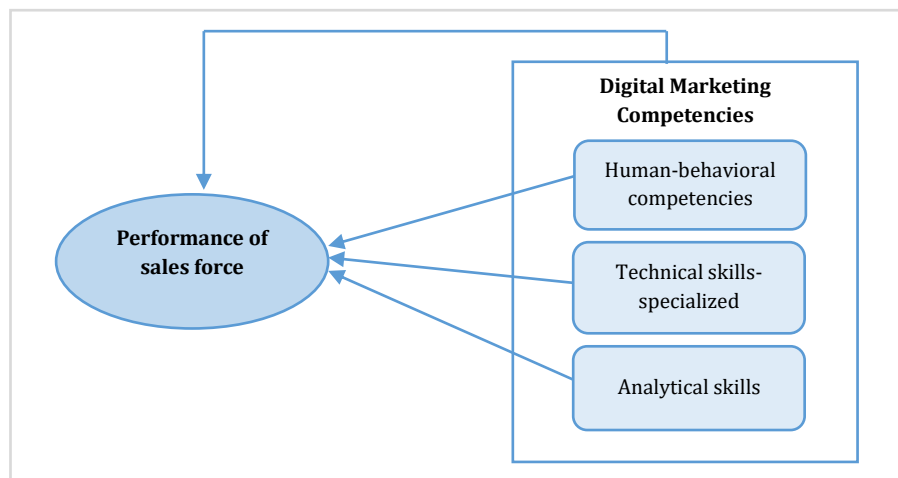
Saberi (2018) who conducted a study among 384 customers of chain stores in Tehran, emphasized that the intelligent use of tools and facilities to enhance production quality and effective promotion is referred to as a knowledge-based process. Utilizing knowledge from the virtual space to achieve this goal is termed the Internet or electronic marketing, which is considered as a modern and successful process. To keep pace with global transformations and achieve success in various aspects of trade and interaction, it is essential to consider this option as an impactful indicator aligned with global standards. Using expertise and creativity in providing successful solutions will play a fundamental role.

Ghotbifar et al. (2016) identified and analyzed the factors contributing to skill gaps in digital marketing among 226 employees of communication companies. Their findings revealed that operational strategic factors and environmental factors had a direct and positive influence on the creation of skill gaps in digital marketing within the studied companies. Among these, the environmental factors such as social and cultural conditions, religion, technology, and economy had the most significant impact. Additionally, it was found that the largest skill gap among the companies was in communication principles, while the smallest gap was in future forecasting.

In a 2024 study, Deku et al. explored how digital marketing influences the business performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in emerging markets with results indicating that digital marketing positively impacts the business performance of these companies. Similarly, in another study, Jadhav et al. (2023) focused on the role of digital marketing in transforming small and medium-sized companies with results showing that it leads to positive changes in their performance. Raj and Vee (2021) studied factors that improve the relative performance of sales forces in an Indian insurance industry, identifying marketing strategies, brand positioning, and digital advertising as key elements influencing the performance of sales. Kardaras et al. (2019) conducted another research study to emphasize on the role of social networks in digital marketing. The participants were 400 customers of service companies in Albania. Their study showed that digital marketing positively impacts the innovation and overall organizational quality. Patrick et al. (2018) examined the effect of online marketing strategies on hotel performance in France. The findings showed that these strategies enhance the performance of seven-star hotels significantly. Kaku (2017) explored the impact of digital marketing in mobile industry, revealing that digital marketing tools significantly boost electronic advertising and trust, contributing to improved strategic sales for companies.

Based on the theoretical foundations and empirical background presented, the conceptual model of the current research is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of the Research Study



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Based on the conceptual model of the research, a total of four hypotheses (one main hypothesis and three sub-hypotheses) were formulated to be examined in this study. The research hypotheses are formulated as follows:

- Digital marketing competencies significantly affect the performance of sales force (Main Hypothesis).
- Technical and specialized competencies in digital marketing significantly impact the performance of sales force (Sub-Hypothesis 1).
- Human-behavioral competencies in digital marketing significantly influence the performance of sales force (Sub-Hypothesis 2).
- Analytical competencies in digital marketing significantly contribute to the performance of sales force (Sub-Hypothesis 3).

Methodology

This research study is categorized as an applied study based on its objectives and is classified as descriptive-correlational in terms of its methodology. The data collection method employed is survey-based. The study's statistical population consists of 150 sales representatives from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ilam city. Given the relatively small size of the population, a census method was utilized for sample selection. As a result, 150 questionnaires were distributed, and 132 were deemed valid for analysis.

In this study, a field method was employed to collect the information relevant to answering the research questions. Additionally, library methods such as studying books, articles, journals, research proposals, and online databases were utilized for compiling and writing the literature review and theoretical foundations. The primary data collection tool in this study is a questionnaire. The overall framework of the questionnaire and the questions related to each variable are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Questionnaire Questions

Variable	Dimensions	Many questions	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
Performance of sales force	-----	6	0.79
Digital Marketing Competencies	Technical-Specialized Competencies	4	0.82
	Human-Behavioral Competencies	4	0.76
	Analytical Competencies	4	0.85
The whole questionnaire	-----	18	0.88

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

To assess the validity of the questionnaire, expert opinions and professors' evaluations were sought, emphasizing its content validity. The questionnaire was approved by 10 faculty members from the management department of Tehran University. To assess the reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated, with results presented in Table 1. Since the Cronbach's alpha values for all variables and dimensions exceeded 0.70, the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed. Furthermore, the data analysis in this study was conducted using LISREL software.

Findings

In this section, we will first examine the normality of the data using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, along with the sample adequacy test (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The results of these tests are reported in Table 2.

Table 2.
Results of Normality and Sample Adequacy Tests

index (KMO)	Bartlett's Test sig	Variables	Number of items	"Significance Level of K-S"	the result
0.85	0.001	Performance of Sales Force	6	0.88	The data distribution is normal
0.93	0.000	Technical-Specialized Competencies	4	0.94	The data distribution is normal
0.76	0.000	Human-Behavioral Competencies	4	0.90	The data distribution is normal
0.79	0.000	Analytical Competencies	4	0.67	The data distribution is normal

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

As shown in the above table, the significance level for all variables is greater than 0.05; therefore, with 95% confidence, the hypothesis of normality of the data is confirmed for all variables. Additionally, the acceptable value for the KMO index is greater than 0.50, and the significance level in Bartlett's test should also be less than 0.05.

Based on the results obtained in Table 2, it can be concluded that the sample adequacy for the present research is in a favorable condition. The results of the correlation test between the research variables are reported in Table 3.

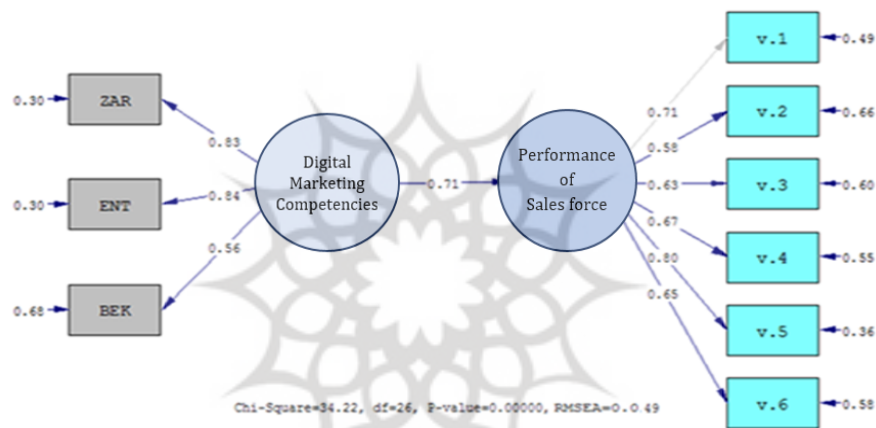
Table 3.
Correlation Matrix between Independent and Dependent Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
Sales Force Performance	*	0.77	0.87	0.84
Technical-Specialized Competencies	*	*	0.86	0.80
Human-Behavioral Competencies	*	*	*	0.81
Analytical Competencies	*	*	*	*

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

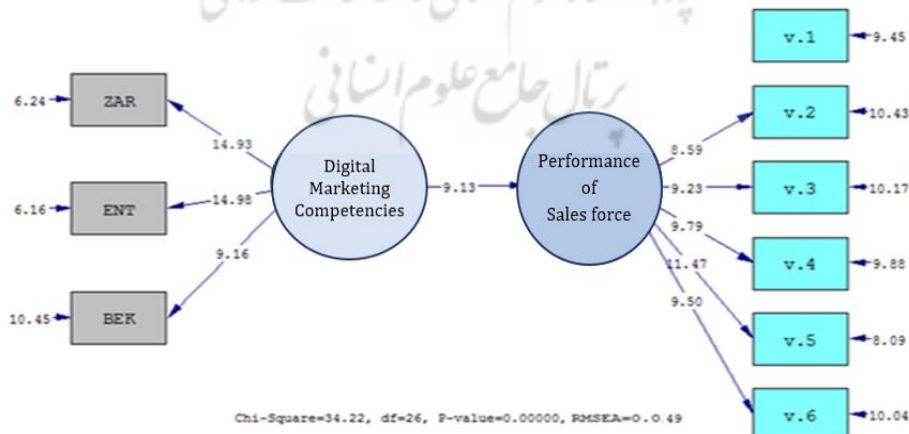
As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficients between the research variables are positive and significant. To test the research hypotheses, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed. In this study, two different models were used to test the main hypothesis and the sub-hypotheses.

Figure 2.
The Structural Model of the Main Research Hypothesis in Standard Estimation Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Figure 3.
The Structural Model of the Main Research Hypothesis in the Significance Coefficients Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

To evaluate the model's goodness of fit, some specific indices were utilized, as shown in Table 4. The calculated values of these indices were compared with the acceptable thresholds, and the findings demonstrate that the model fits satisfactorily.

Table 4.

Comparison of the Goodness-of-fit Indices of the Main Research Hypothesis

Indicators	Permissible value:	Calculated coefficients of the main research model	The result
GFI	Greater than 0.9	0.90	good fit
AGFI	Greater than 0.9	0.91	good fit
RMR	The closer to zero, the better	0.09	good fit
NFI	Greater than 0.9	0.94	good fit
IFI	Greater than 0.9	0.96	good fit

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Table 4 displays the status of the indices for the structural model related to the main research hypothesis. A comparison between the calculated coefficients and the acceptable range shows that the model's goodness-of-fit indices are suitable. The findings concerning the main research hypothesis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.

Results of the Examining the Main Research Hypothesis

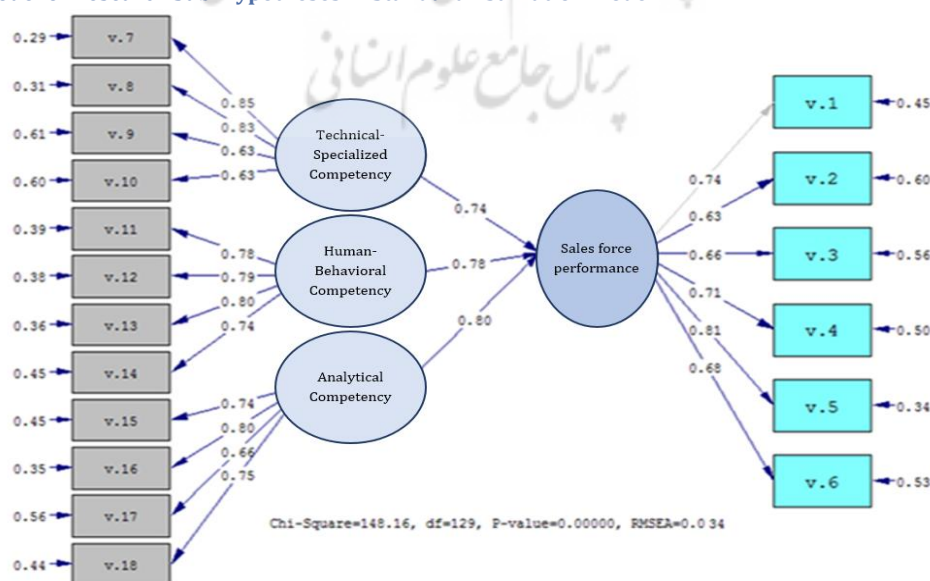
Standard coefficient	T-value	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Test result
0.71	13/9	Digital Marketing Competencies	Performance of Sales force	Rejection H0

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

According to Table 5, the standard coefficient between digital marketing competencies and the performance of sales force is 0.71. With a t-value of 9.13, which exceeds the threshold of 1.96, the main research hypothesis is supported. This indicates that digital marketing competencies have a direct, positive, and significant influence on the performance of sales force of small and medium-sized enterprises in Ilam city.

Figure 4.

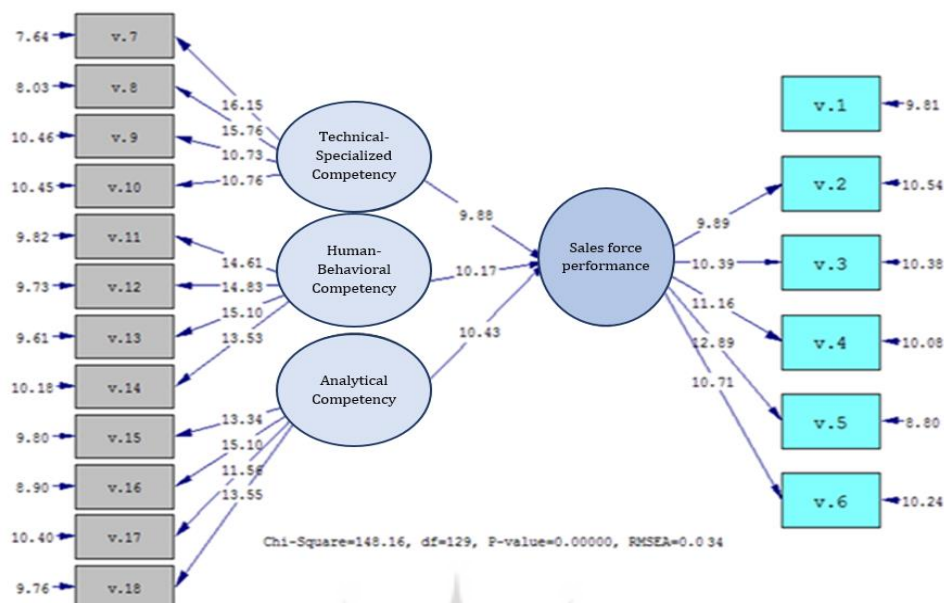
Structural Model of Research Sub-Hypotheses in Standard Estimation Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Figure 5.

The Structural Model of the Sub-Hypotheses in the Significance Coefficients Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

The goodness-of-fit indices of the structural model of the sub-hypotheses are reported in Table 6. The results indicate a satisfactory fit of the model.

Table 6.

Comparison of the Goodness-of-fit Indices of the Structural Model of the Sub-hypotheses

Indicators	Permissible Value	Calculated Coefficients of the Sub-Hypotheses Model	The result
GFI	Greater than 0.9	0.96	good fit
AGFI	Greater than 0.9	0.99	good fit
RMR	The closer to zero, the better	0.07	good fit
NFI	Greater than 0.9	0.92	good fit
IFI	Greater than 0.9	97/9	good fit

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Based on the structural model of the sub-hypotheses of the research in standard estimation mode and significance coefficients, the results of examining the sub-hypotheses of the research are reported in Table 7.

Table 7.

The Results of Examining the Sub-hypotheses

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Standard coefficient	T-value	Test result
Technical skills – specialized	Performance of Sales force	0.74	88/9	confirmation
Human-behavioral competencies	Performance of Sales force	0.78	17/10	confirmation
Analytical skills	Performance of Sales force	0.80	43/10	confirmation

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Based on Table 7, the standard coefficients between the independent and dependent variables have all been found to be positive. Additionally, considering the t-values obtained for all three sub-hypotheses, which are greater than 1.96, it can be concluded that technical-specialized competencies, human-behavioral competencies, and analytical competencies in digital marketing have a direct, positive, and significant impact on the performance of sales force of small and medium-sized enterprises in the city of Ilam.

Discussion and Conclusion

The reliability of any research study is largely determined by the results it produces and their relevance in practical terms. This study sought to explore the effect of digital marketing competencies on the performance of the sales force in small and medium-sized enterprises in Ilam. Following the introduction and clarification of the topic, four hypotheses were developed—one main hypothesis and three sub-hypotheses—based on the theoretical framework and conceptual model of the study. After gathering the data using a standardized questionnaire and analyzing it through LISREL software, the findings confirmed all four hypotheses.

The main hypothesis of this study revealed that digital marketing competencies significantly and positively influence the performance of the sales force in small and medium-sized enterprises. These competencies allow sales teams to access global markets more effectively through digital platforms and modern techniques. According to Kordaras et al. (2019), utilizing digital marketing enables sales forces to better promote their brand and enhance the brand recognition, which in turn boosts the products' sales. Babaei and colleagues (2020) also highlighted that digital marketing competencies can equip sales teams with more effective methods for negotiating and closing deals with customers.

The sub-hypotheses of the research further confirmed that technical-specialized competencies, human-behavioral competencies, and analytical competencies in digital marketing all have a direct, positive, and significant impact on the performance of sales force in small and medium-sized enterprises in Ilam. In this regard, digital marketing not only helps sales teams utilize technology efficiently but also improves their interactions with customers. Kannan (2017) emphasized that digital marketing competencies enhance the speed and efficiency of the sales process, directly contributing to increased sales and revenue. Moreover, Chakania and Matthews (2019) pointed out that with digital marketing competencies, the sales force can respond more quickly and effectively to competitors, thereby enhancing business competitiveness.

Based on the results obtained, the following recommendations are suggested:

- One of the main challenges of digital commerce is the issue of ethics and adherence to ethical standards. Therefore, it is recommended that managers create appropriate legal conditions to provide a suitable environment for ethical behavior among sales staff.
- Self-development and improvement of individual capabilities of the sales force in

establishing constructive communication with customers and having the necessary knowledge to respond to questions, requests, and guidance for customers are recommended.

- Senior managers of small and medium-sized enterprises are advised to enhance their skills in analyzing and understanding markets, as well as in identifying environmental opportunities and threats.

To guide and assist future research conducted by other researchers in this field, it is suggested that this research be examined in other industries and different geographical areas.

In conducting this study, the researcher faced limitations, some of which are unavoidable due to the nature of this type of scientific research in human domain. Since this research was conducted in a small segment of a large statistical population, generalizing its results to similar sectors and organizations should be done with caution. Another limitation of the current study is the small sample size and the possibility of bias in the results and how to generalize the results to other companies.



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