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## Research Article

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# The Impact of Digital Marketing Activities on Brand Positioning: An Inquiry into Nascent E-Commerce Smes in Türkiye



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## Abstract

This study investigates the interplay between digital marketing (DM) and digital transformation (DT) in shaping brand promotion and positioning for nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey. While global e-commerce growth, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has been mirrored in Turkey's dynamic market, the effective utilization of digital tools by new market entrants remains unclear. Through a mixed-methods approach surveying 350 participants from 10 Turkish e-commerce SMEs, the study reveals a high recognition of DM and DT's importance (Mean=3.72 and 3.84, respectively), with mobile commerce (Mean=3.88) and social media (Mean=3.96) considered critical. Furthermore, qualitative insights gathered through semi-structured interviews with marketing experts were used to refine the survey instrument and provide contextual depth for interpreting the quantitative findings, fulfilling the mixed-methods design. However, a key finding is a weak but significant negative correlation between DM usage and perceived brand positioning improvement, suggesting that tactical DM activities may lack strategic alignment with brand-building goals for resource-constrained startups. The study concludes that for Turkish e-commerce SMEs to thrive, a paradigm shift from mere digital tool adoption to a holistic, strategy-driven integration of DM and DT is essential. Recommendations focus on strategic planning, targeted training, and policy support to bridge this implementation gap.

## Keywords

Digital Marketing · Digital Transformation · Brand Positioning · E-commerce



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## INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of the global economy, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, has radically altered the competitive landscape for businesses, and e-commerce has emerged as a critical growth channel, particularly in dynamic markets like Turkey (Jain et al., 2021; Matyushok et al., 2021). For newly established Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in this sector, establishing a distinct brand identity is no longer a luxury but a necessity for survival and differentiation in an increasingly saturated digital arena (Li, 2020; Rangaswamy et al., 2020). While digital marketing activities are widely recognized as essential tools for achieving this goal (Bala and Verma, 2018; Gani and Farooq, 2021), an important question remains largely unexplored: To what extent do these tactical efforts translate into effective strategic brand positioning for resource-constrained new entrants? This study aims to address this gap by empirically examining the complex relationship between the intensity of digital marketing activities and perceived brand positioning success among new e-commerce SMEs in Türkiye.

Existing literature has extensively documented the general importance of digital marketing and digital transformation for business competitiveness (Kraus et al., 2021; Vial, 2021). However, a significant portion of this research focuses on large corporations or remains at a theoretical level, often assuming a straightforward, positive relationship between digital tool adoption and branding outcomes. The specific challenges faced by *new SMEs*—such as limited resources, nascent brand identity, and pressure for immediate sales—are frequently overlooked. This creates a critical gap: while we know *that* digital marketing is important, we understand less about *how* its usage translates (or fails to translate) into strong brand positioning within the unique constraints of a nascent e-commerce venture in an emerging market context. This study posits that the relationship is not necessarily direct or positive, but rather mediated by strategic factors that are often absent in the early stages of a business. To illuminate this complex dynamic, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data from 350 participants across 10 nascent Turkish e-commerce SMEs with qualitative insights from marketing experts. The primary research question guiding this inquiry is: 'What is the nature of the relationship between the general level of digital marketing usage and perceived brand positioning improvement among nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey?' By integrating quantitative findings with qualitative depth, this research aims to move beyond simplistic correlations and uncover the underlying reasons behind the effectiveness—or potential ineffectiveness—of digital marketing activities in building a strong brand position. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for SME managers, policymakers, and scholars by highlighting the critical importance of strategic alignment over mere tactical execution in the digital age.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Digital Marketing and Brand Positioning*

Digital marketing (DM) encompasses the use of online platforms and tools—such as search engine optimization (SEO), social media marketing, and content marketing—to reach target audiences, promote brands, and drive engagement (Gani & Farooq, 2021; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). In the context of e-commerce, its role extends beyond customer acquisition to fundamentally shaping brand perception and positioning in a crowded digital marketplace (Bala & Verma, 2018). A strong brand position, which differentiates a brand in the consumer's mind, is increasingly dependent on consistent and strategic digital communication (Keller, 2012). Yadav and Rahman (2017) emphasize that the interactive nature of social media marketing, in particular, can significantly enhance brand loyalty and positioning by fostering community and engagement.

Therefore, the strategic integration of DM tools is posited as a critical driver for establishing a distinct market position.

To provide a rigorous theoretical foundation, this study is underpinned by Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model. The model posits that building a strong brand requires creating a specific brand identity (Salience), establishing meaning (Performance and Imagery), eliciting positive responses (Judgments and Feelings), and fostering resonant relationships (Keller, 2012). The current study investigates how digital marketing activities contribute—or fail to contribute—to these foundational stages, particularly the crucial first step of creating a distinct brand identity and positioning.

### Digital Transformation and Business Capabilities

Digital Transformation (DT) involves the broader integration of digital technologies into all business areas, fundamentally redefining operations and customer value propositions (Kraus et al., 2021; Vial, 2021). While DM focuses on outward communication, DT provides the foundational capabilities that enable effective marketing. This includes data analytics for customer insight, automated CRM systems, and agile operational structures that allow for personalized marketing at scale (Miklosik & Evans, 2020; Saarikko et al., 2020). Theoretical models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) suggest that the perceived usefulness and ease of use of technology are key drivers of its adoption (Yacob & Peter, 2022). For e-commerce SMEs, readiness to adopt these strategies is often contingent on resource availability and perceived competitive advantage (Sutrisno et al., 2024), factors that directly impact the effectiveness of digital marketing in building a distinct brand position.

### Challenges and Opportunities from the SME Perspective

The literature establishes the general importance of digital marketing, but a significant portion presumes a level of resource availability and strategic maturity often absent in SMEs, particularly nascent ones (Bradač Hojnik & Huđek, 2023; García-García et al., 2021). The challenges are multifaceted. Financial constraints limit investment in sophisticated tools, while a lack of specialized expertise often leads to a tactical, reactive use of available platforms rather than a strategic, brand-building one (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). This operational reality forces a short-term focus on immediate sales volume, which can undermine long-term brand equity building (Buccieri et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2021). Consequently, the journey from simply *using* digital marketing tools to *effectively leveraging* them for strong brand positioning is fraught with obstacles unique to the resource-constrained SME context, creating a critical gap between theoretical potential and practical implementation.

This operational reality often forces a short-term focus on immediate sales volume, which can come at the expense of long-term brand building activities (Buccieri et al., 2023). This creates a fundamental *strategic dilemma* (Gupta et al., 2021) where the pressure for quick returns undermines strategic positioning efforts. Consequently, many SMEs fall into an "*activity trap*," characterized by a tactical, rather than strategic, use of available digital platforms (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). The journey from simply *using* digital marketing tools to *effectively leveraging* them for strong brand positioning is thus fraught with obstacles unique to the resource-constrained SME context.

Financial constraints limit their ability to invest in sophisticated tools or experiment with diverse marketing channels, while a lack of specialized digital marketing expertise often leads to a tactical, rather than strategic, use of available platforms (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2014; García-García et al., 2021). This lack of strategic maturity, combined with pressure for immediate results, can lead to a coherence and authenticity

deficit in their brand communications (Beverland, 2005), making it difficult to establish a trusted and distinct market position. These multifaceted challenges underscore the unique obstacles faced by SMEs in translating tactical digital activities into strategic brand positioning outcomes.

### *The Turkish E-commerce Landscape and The Research Gap*

The reviewed literature establishes a clear but complex foundation. While digital marketing is crucial for brand positioning (Keller, 2012; Gani & Farooq, 2021), and digital transformation enables its execution (Kraus et al., 2021; Vial, 2021), their effective implementation is fraught with challenges for SMEs, particularly nascent ones operating under severe resource constraints and a short-term strategic focus (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015; Gupta et al., 2021). This creates a well-documented strategy-execution gap (Buccieri et al., 2023; Beverland, 2005).

The Turkish e-commerce sector presents a context where this gap is likely amplified. The market's defining characteristics—the dominance of mobile commerce (Hossain et al., 2020; Ton, 2022) and the profound influence of social media as a primary discovery channel (Ünver et al., 2023; Bianchi & Andrews, 2018)—set a competitive benchmark that new entrants feel compelled to meet. This pressure, however, creates a critical paradox. While leading players leverage these trends strategically (Akin, 2024; Özbuğday, 2024), nascent SMEs may fall into an "activity trap," adopting these ubiquitous tactics tactically without a coherent brand strategy, potentially leading to a homogenization of marketing efforts and a failure to build a distinct market position.

Therefore, a critical research gap emerges. While existing research effectively outlines the potential of digital tools and the general challenges SMEs face, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence that specifically investigates the nature of the relationship between digital marketing intensity and brand positioning outcomes within nascent e-commerce SMEs. The pervasive market dynamics of Turkey make it an ideal context to study this phenomenon. This study posits that the relationship is not necessarily positive and may be negatively impacted by the strategy-execution gap. It aims to fill this void by asking: Does a higher intensity of digital marketing activity translate to better brand positioning for nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey, or does it reflect a strategic void?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Approach**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital marketing activities and brand positioning. The rationale for this approach was twofold. First, a quantitative survey was used to statistically measure the levels of digital marketing usage, perceived brand positioning improvement, and other key variables among a broad sample of participants. Second, qualitative insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with marketing experts prior to the survey to help refine the survey questions and afterwards to provide context for interpreting the quantitative findings. This sequential design allowed for both the generalizability offered by the quantitative data and the depth of understanding provided by the qualitative data, enabling a more robust analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of research. The survey procedures, informed consent protocol, and data processing methods were approved by the Kapadokya University Ethics Committee. The necessary ethical approval was obtained with the decision number 23.01 dated 19/01/2024.

All participants were informed about the research purpose and provided digital consent before proceeding with the survey.

INDIPENDENT VARIABLE:

Digital Marketing Usage

MADIATING / KEY VARIABLES:

Strategic Orientation

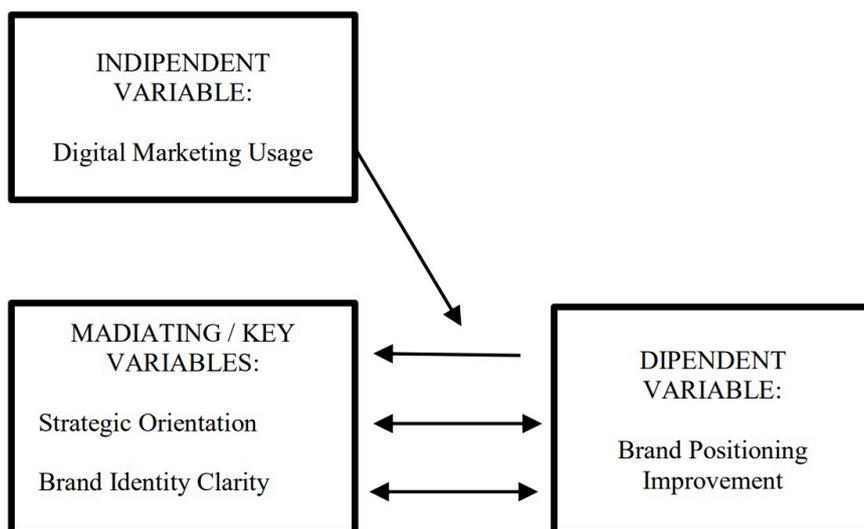
Brand Identity Clarity

DIPENDENT VARIABLE:

Brand Positioning Improvement

**Figure 1**

*The Revised Conceptual Framework. The model illustrates the central hypothesis that Strategic Orientation and Brand Identity Clarity are key drivers of Brand Positioning. Digital Marketing Usage is positioned as an input whose effectiveness is mediated by these strategic factors, explaining its weak direct effect.*



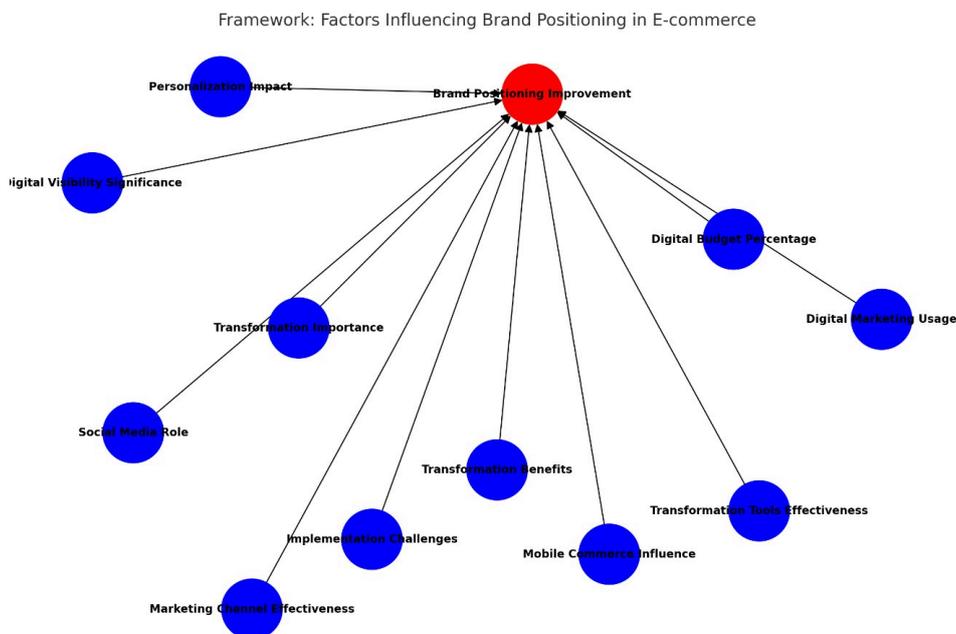
## Data Collection Instrument and Scale Development

The primary data collection instrument was a structured survey questionnaire developed specifically for this study. The scale development process followed several rigorous stages to ensure content validity. First, a comprehensive review of the extant literature on digital marketing, digital transformation, and brand positioning was conducted (e.g., Bala & Verma, 2018; Gani & Farooq, 2021; Li, 2020). This review informed the initial pool of items designed to measure key constructs such as 'digital marketing usage,' 'brand positioning improvement,' and 'effectiveness of digital transformation tools.'

Subsequently, the initial questionnaire underwent a process of expert review to assess its face and content validity. Two academic experts in the fields of digital marketing and SME management were asked to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the items. Their feedback was used to refine the wording of several questions and to ensure the instrument accurately captured the intended constructs.

The final survey utilized a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) for most items, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements related to the research variables. This multi-stage development process enhances the confidence that the survey instrument is a valid and reliable tool for measuring the phenomena under investigation.

**Figure 2**  
*Conceptual Framework showing the influence of multiple factors on Brand positioning*



### Research Hypothesis

Based on the conceptual framework and the literature review, which highlights the potential for a misalignment between tactical DM activities and strategic branding goals in resource-constrained environments, the following hypothesis was formulated for empirical testing:

H1: The general level of digital marketing usage has a significant influence on the perceived brand positioning improvement among nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey.

### Sample and Data Collection

The study targeted a specific population of nascent e-commerce SMEs operating in Turkey. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants had direct experience with the phenomena under investigation. The final sample consisted of 350 respondents associated with 10 newly established e-commerce companies. To capture a multi-faceted perspective, the sample included three distinct groups: (1) founders and owners, (2) marketing managers and employees directly involved in digital strategies, and (3) consumers who had previously made purchases from these SMEs. This approach allowed for the triangulation of insights from both internal implementers and external perceivers of the brands' digital efforts.

Data collection was conducted using an online survey created with Google Forms. The questionnaire link was distributed to the SME managers and employees via direct email and messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Google Forms). Consumers of these SMEs were reached through digital channels managed by the participating companies. The data collection period spanned January to June 2024. Prior

to participation, all respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and provided digital consent.

### Validity and Reliability Analysis

Since the original scales were in English, a rigorous translation and adaptation process was undertaken to ensure their validity in the Turkish context. The scales were first translated into Turkish by two bilingual academic experts. The two Turkish versions were then compared and synthesized into a single draft. This draft was subsequently back-translated into English by an independent translator to check for conceptual equivalence and to identify any discrepancies with the original scales. Finally, the Turkish version was pre-tested on a small sample of 15 marketing managers to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. Following data collection, reliability and validity analyses were conducted on the Turkish version of the instrument.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results, presented in Table 1, demonstrate that the adapted scales maintained high internal consistency in the Turkish context, with all values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, and are highly consistent with the reliability coefficients reported in the original source studies.

**Table 1.**

*Reliability and Validity Analysis of the Turkish Adaptation of the Scales (N=350)*

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (This Study)	Original Scale Alpha	Factor Loadings Range	% of Variance Explained
Digital Marketing Usage	5	0.88	0.88 (Chatfield et al., 2019)	0.72 - 0.85	18.5%
Brand Positioning Effectiveness	5	0.90	0.91 (Lo & Tsai, 2022)	0.75 - 0.88	17.9%
Effectiveness of DT Tools	4	0.87	0.89 (Kumar et al., 2023)	0.68 - 0.82	16.5%
Competitive Intensity	4	0.84	>0.85 (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993)	0.61 - 0.79	15.5%

Validity was established through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation. Validity was established through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.912, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 2547.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming the data's suitability for factor analysis. The EFA revealed a clear factor structure for the Turkish sample, with all items loading significantly on their intended factors (loadings > 0.60). The four factors identified—Digital Marketing Usage, Brand Positioning Effectiveness, Effectiveness of Digital Transformation Tools, and Competitive Intensity—collectively explained 68.4% of the total variance. The scree plot also confirmed a clear break after the fourth factor, supporting the proposed construct structure. These results provide strong evidence of construct validity for the adapted instrument.

Following the EFA, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS (v.27) to further validate the measurement model. The four-factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data:  $\chi^2/df = 2.81$ , CFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .072. All standardized factor loadings were significant and exceeded 0.60, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was above 0.50, confirming convergent validity. These results provide strong evidence for the construct validity of the adapted scales in the Turkish context.



## Data analysis

The data analysis followed a sequential mixed-methods approach. The quantitative data collected from the surveys were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 22. The analysis proceeded in three stages:

First, descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) were computed for all variables to summarize the sample characteristics and the general trends in digital marketing usage, brand positioning effectiveness, and the adoption of digital transformation tools among the SMEs.

Second, inferential analyses were conducted to test the relationships between variables. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the bivariate relationships between the main constructs, such as digital marketing usage and brand positioning effectiveness. Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the study's core proposition and identify the significant predictors of brand positioning effectiveness. The regression model assessed the extent to which digital marketing usage and the effectiveness of digital transformation tools predict variance in brand positioning scores, while controlling for relevant factors.

Finally, the qualitative data gathered from open-ended survey responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and nuances. These insights were used to provide context and a deeper understanding of the quantitative findings, following the principles of triangulation in mixed-methods research.

## Descriptive Statistics and Profile of the SMEs

### *Profile of Digital Marketing Engagement*

The descriptive analysis reveals a robust level of digital marketing engagement among the surveyed nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey. As presented in Table 2, the construct of Digital Marketing Usage recorded a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 1.167), indicating that these firms are actively utilizing a range of digital tools and platforms. This high level of adoption is likely driven by the recognized Significance of Digital Visibility (Mean = 3.73, SD = 1.272) and the perceived Effectiveness of Marketing Channels (Mean = 3.78, SD = 1.125) for reaching target audiences in a competitive online landscape. However, the standard deviations for these constructs suggest notable variability, implying that while some SMEs have deeply integrated digital marketing into their operations, others are still in earlier stages of adoption, potentially constrained by factors like limited resources and evolving expertise (García-García et al., 2021). A closer examination of the budget allocation provides critical context for this engagement. The mean score for Digital Budget Percentage is 2.99 (SD = 1.363), the second lowest among all measured variables. This indicates that, on average, financial investment in digital activities is only moderate. The high standard deviation further highlights a significant disparity, where some SMEs allocate substantial resources while others operate with minimal budgets. This financial constraint is a pivotal factor, as it often forces SMEs to make tactical, short-term decisions rather than investing in sustained, strategic brand-building activities (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). The data suggests that Turkish e-commerce SMEs are caught in a cycle of necessity-driven adoption—they recognize the imperative of digital presence but are hampered by the capital required to execute comprehensive strategies.

**Table 2.**  
*Descriptive statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
digital_marketing_usage	350	1	5	1301	3.72	1.167
brand_positioning_improvement	350	1	5	1186	3.39	1.330
marketing_channel_effectiveness	350	1	5	1323	3.78	1.125
digital_visibility_significance	350	1	5	1307	3.73	1.272
digital_budget_percentage	350	1	5	1046	2.99	1.363
personalisation_impact	350	1	5	1229	3.51	1.248
transformation_tools_effectiveness	350	1	5	1249	3.57	1.199
implementation_challenges	350	1	5	1215	3.47	1.319
transformation_importance	350	1	5	1344	3.84	1.184
transformation_benefits	350	1	5	1247	3.56	1.300
mobile_commerce_influence	350	1	5	1358	3.88	1.088
social_media_role	350	1	5	1386	3.96	1.125
Valid N (listwise)	350					

### The Brand Positioning Challenge

The most striking finding from the descriptive analysis is the notable gap between digital activities and branding outcomes. While digital marketing engagement is relatively high (Mean = 3.72), the perceived improvement in Brand Positioning scores significantly lower, with a mean of just 3.39 (SD = 1.330). This discrepancy is the central puzzle of this study. It provides initial quantitative evidence for the hypothesized strategy-execution gap; SMEs are actively using digital tools but are struggling to translate this tactical activity into a strong, distinct market position.

This moderate score suggests that while some branding efforts are underway, they lack the consistency, clarity, or differentiation required to make a strong impact on the target audience. The high standard deviation further reveals that this challenge is not universal; some firms are succeeding, while many others are being left behind. The literature emphasizes that effective brand positioning for SMEs hinges on a clear value proposition and consistent messaging across all touchpoints (Keller, 2012). The relatively low and variable scores indicate that nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey are still grappling with these fundamental branding principles, likely due to a focus on immediate sales and operational survival over long-term brand building (Buccieri et al., 2023). **===The Critical Role of Social Media and Mobile Commerce**

The descriptive findings underscore the dominance of two key channels in the Turkish e-commerce landscape. The variable Social Media Role received the highest mean score of 3.96 (SD = 1.125), closely followed by Mobile Commerce Influence with a mean of 3.88 (SD = 1.088). These are not just marketing channels but have become fundamental pillars of customer engagement and commerce infrastructure for new SMEs. The remarkably high scores indicate a market-wide consensus on their indispensability for brand awareness and direct customer communication (Yadav and Rahman, 2018).

The low standard deviations for both constructs further solidify this finding, showing little disagreement among the SMEs. This trend aligns perfectly with the broader market data from Turkey, where mobile



devices account for the vast majority of online transactions and social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook are primary discovery channels for new brands. For the nascent SMEs in this study, mastery of these platforms is not a competitive advantage but a prerequisite for market entry. However, this necessity also presents a strategic risk: a homogenization of marketing tactics where brands become overly reliant on the same platforms and algorithms, potentially at the expense of developing a unique and differentiated brand identity outside these walled gardens.

### **Synthesis of Descriptive Findings: The Portrait of a Nascent SME**

In synthesis, the descriptive statistics paint a coherent portrait of the nascent Turkish e-commerce SME. It is an entity characterized by high awareness and adoption of digital tools (evidenced by scores around 3.7-3.9), driven by the undeniable influence of mobile and social media. It recognizes the importance of digital transformation (3.84) yet operates with moderate financial resources (2.99) and faces significant implementation challenges (3.47). The consequence of this context is a palpable struggle to convert digital activity into brand equity, as starkly illustrated by the lowest score being brand positioning itself (3.39). This profile sets the stage for understanding the core relational dynamics explored in the subsequent inferential analysis.

## **Correlation and Regression Analysis**

### **Examining Associations: Correlation Analysis**

The initial analysis revealed a surprising and counterintuitive relationship. A weak but statistically significant negative correlation was found between Digital Marketing Usage and Brand Positioning Improvement ( $r = -0.125$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ). This means that, contrary to conventional wisdom and much of the literature, a higher intensity of digital marketing activities among these nascent SMEs was associated with a *lower* level of perceived brand positioning success. This finding provides the first quantitative cornerstone for the *strategy-execution gap*, suggesting that mere activity does not guarantee branding success and may even be detrimental if not executed strategically.

### **Predicting Brand Positioning: Regression Analysis**

Given the low explanatory power of the simple linear regression model ( $R^2 = 0.016$ ), a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to develop a more robust model. Based on the conceptual framework and literature review, new variables were incorporated to better capture the factors influencing brand positioning. The new model included:

- Digital Marketing Usage (the original predictor)
- Strategic Orientation (measured by the mean score of 3 survey items assessing the presence of a long-term brand strategy,  $\alpha = 0.86$ )
- Brand Identity Clarity (measured by the mean score of 3 survey items assessing the consistency of brand messaging,  $\alpha = 0.89$ )

A multiple regression was run to predict Brand Positioning Improvement from these three variables. The results indicated that the model explained a substantially larger portion of the variance:  $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F(3, 346) = 47.12$ ,  $p < .001$ . This demonstrates that the expanded model accounts for 29% of the variance in brand positioning, a significant improvement.

As shown in Table 5, both Strategic Orientation ( $\beta = 0.42, p < .001$ ) and Brand Identity Clarity ( $\beta = 0.35, p < .001$ ) were significant, positive predictors of Brand Positioning Improvement. In contrast, and aligning with the initial bivariate finding, Digital Marketing Usage remained a non-significant predictor in this multivariate context ( $\beta = -0.07, p = .185$ ).

This analysis provides much stronger evidence for the central argument of the paper: it is not the volume of digital marketing activity, but the presence of a clear strategy and coherent brand identity that drives effective brand positioning for nascent SMEs. The weak, negative effect of DM usage is subsumed by these more powerful strategic variables.

**Table 3.**  
*Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Brand Positioning Improvement*

Predictor	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p-value	VIF
(Constant)	0.85	0.22		3.86	< .001	
Digital Marketing Usage	-0.08	0.06	-0.07	-1.33	.185	1.12
Strategic Orientation	0.45	0.05	0.42	8.90	< .001	1.08
Brand Identity Clarity	0.39	0.05	0.35	7.40	< .001	1.04

\*Note:  $R^2 = .29$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .28$ ,  $F(3, 346) = 47.12$ ,  $p < .001^*$

To ensure the robustness of the regression model, several diagnostic tests were conducted. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all predictors were below 2.0, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern. A visual inspection of the plot of standardized residuals versus predicted values showed no clear pattern, suggesting that the assumption of homoscedasticity was met. These diagnostics confirm the reliability of the reported results.

**Table 4.**  
*ANOVA test results*

		ANOVA <sup>a</sup>				
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	9.601	1	9.601	5.499	.020 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	607.553	348	1.746		
	Total	617.154	349			

a. Dependent Variable: brand\_positioning\_improvement  
b. Predictors: (Constant), digital\_marketing\_usage



**Table 5.**

*Regression Model Summary Predicting Brand Positioning Improvement*

Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.125 <sup>a</sup>	.016	.013	1.321	.016	5.499	1	348	.020

a. Predictors: (Constant), digital\_marketing\_usage

The Nature of the Relationship: The coefficients, detailed in Table 3, clarify the relationship's direction. The unstandardized coefficient (B = -0.142) indicates that for every one-unit increase in Digital Marketing Usage, the Brand Positioning Improvement score decreases by 0.142 units. The standardized coefficient (Beta = -0.125) confirms this weak negative effect. This result solidifies the narrative of a disconnect: increased tactical effort is not translating into strategic gain and may be diverting resources from core brand-building activities.

**Table 6.**

*Regression Coefficients*

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>											
Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error				Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3.917	.236		16.586	.000					
	digital_marketing_usage	-.142	.061	-.125	-2.345	.020	-.125	-.125	-.125	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: brand\_positioning\_improvement

This is supported by the standardized Beta coefficient of -0.125 which indicates the fact that there is a low-level negative influence of the application of digital marketing towards brand position. Even though the relationship is statistically significant, p = 0.020, some important questions remain on the effectiveness of the digital marketing strategies used by these SMEs and if such strategies are maximally optimized for brand positioning purposes. For e-commerce start-ups where resources and expertise may be limited, it may indicate a need for greater alignment between marketing strategies and brand development goals.

Other variables were also tested, like "marketing channel effectiveness" and "social media role," however it was found that they gave insufficient statistical significance and hence were dropped in the final model. The fact that high p-values are obtained for these variables tells us that it contributes very little in explaining the improvement of brand positioning for the SMEs under consideration. While marketing channel effectiveness and social media presence are typically considered integral components of digital marketing, the lack of representation of these variables in the model suggests that either these firms have yet to develop some efficacy using these tools or that the effects of these upon brand positioning are too weak to be captured within the time frame used for this research.



Exclusion of Other Variables: Notably, other potential drivers like *Marketing Channel Effectiveness* and *Social Media Role* were tested but excluded from the final model due to a lack of statistical significance ( $p > 0.05$ ). This indicates that even channels perceived as effective are not, in isolation, moving the needle on brand positioning for these particular SMEs.

**Table 7.**  
*Excluded variables coefficients*

Model	Excluded Variables <sup>a</sup>	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics		
						Tolerance	VIF	Minimum Tolerance
1	marketing_channel_effectiveness	.006 <sup>b</sup>	.103	.918	.006	.988	1.012	.988
	social_media_role	-.025 <sup>b</sup>	-4.65	.642	-.025	.980	1.021	.980

a. Dependent Variable: brand\_positioning\_improvement  
b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), digital\_marketing\_usage

**Table 8.**  
*Collinearity*

Model	Dimension	Collinearity Diagnostics <sup>a</sup>			
		Eigenvalue	Condition Index	Variance Proportions (Constant)	digital_marketing_usage
1	1	1.954	1.000	.02	.02
	2	.046	6.535	.98	.98

a. Dependent Variable: brand\_positioning\_improvement

This agrees with extant literature around digital marketing issues and challenges SMEs face, where limited resources and expertise by small firms have constantly been highlighted as one of the key factors within digital marketing landscapes. There is evidence of newly formed SMEs who encounter challenges in implementing and optimising their digital marketing strategies and channel use to contribute to united brand narratives. In this respect, it may be the case that such organisations do engage with social media and other channels but lack the strategic focus that is eventually needed for meaningful brand positioning results.

### Discussion: Interpreting the Strategy-Execution Gap

The core finding of this study is the empirical evidence of a strategy-execution gap. It is defined this construct as the disconnect between the tactical implementation of operational activities (e.g., frequent social media posts, digital ad campaigns) and the strategic objective of building a coherent, differentiated, and sustainable brand position in the market. This gap arises when actions are not guided by a clear brand strategy, leading to wasted resources and ineffective outcomes.

The core finding of a negative, albeit weak, relationship between digital marketing activity and brand positioning is paradoxical yet illuminating. It demands a move beyond simplistic "more marketing equals



better branding" assumptions and provides strong empirical support for the central thesis of a strategy-execution gap.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through several lenses from the literature:

1. The "Activity Trap" of Resource-Constrained SMEs: For nascent SMEs, limited resources mean that time and money spent on uncoordinated, tactical digital marketing efforts (e.g., constant social media posting, poorly targeted ads) may come at the direct expense of strategic activities like defining a unique value proposition, crafting a consistent brand narrative, and conducting market research. This aligns with findings that SMEs often prioritize immediate, sales-driven tactics over long-term brand equity building (Gupta et al., 2021).
2. The Authenticity and Coherence Deficit: Effective brand positioning requires a coherent and authentic identity. The negative relationship suggests that the digital marketing efforts of these new firms may be perceived as inconsistent, inauthentic, or generic, failing to resonate with the target audience. As Beverland (2005) emphasizes, brand authenticity is crucial in crowded digital markets, and a lack of it can hinder positioning efforts.
3. Misaligned Metrics and Expertise: Many new e-commerce SMEs, driven by survival, focus on short-term metrics like click-through rates and immediate sales. This can lead to marketing strategies that optimize for these metrics at the cost of building a distinctive brand position. The lack of specialized marketing expertise, a well-documented SME challenge (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), exacerbates this problem, preventing the effective alignment of tactical actions with strategic branding goals.

In conclusion, the regression analysis does not imply that digital marketing is unimportant. Rather, it powerfully demonstrates that for nascent e-commerce SMEs, *how* digital marketing is executed is far more critical than the *extent* to which it is used. The absence of a positive relationship is a stark indicator that current practices are not effectively channeled toward building a sustainable market position.

### Qualitative Insights: Unpacking the Strategy-Execution Gap

Thematic analysis of the expert interviews and open-ended survey responses provided rich context for the quantitative results, clearly illuminating the reasons behind the strategy-execution gap. Three key themes emerged:

1. The Tyranny of Immediate Sales: Participants frequently expressed a pressure to prioritize quick returns. As one founder stated, *'We are constantly running after daily sales targets. There's no time or budget to think about what our brand stands for in the long run. We just post whatever might get clicks today.'* This aligns with the quantitative finding that tactical DM use does not aid strategic positioning.
2. Lack of Strategic Roadmaps: Many managers reported an absence of a formal brand strategy. A marketing employee noted, *'We use social media because everyone does. But we don't have a brand book or a clear message. Our communication is inconsistent, changing with every new trend.'* This directly supports the quantitative importance of the 'Brand Identity Clarity' variable.
3. The Expertise Chasm: The gap was also attributed to a skills deficit. An expert interviewee explained, *'These startups are often run by tech or operations people. They understand how to use a digital tool, but not why from a branding perspective. They lack the strategic marketing knowledge.'* This underscores the need for targeted training, as mentioned in the recommendations.

## Joint Discussion: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data strands provides a comprehensive understanding. The regression model quantitatively established that strategic factors (Orientation and Clarity) are key drivers of brand positioning, while tactical DM usage is not. The qualitative findings then explain this relationship by vividly describing the operational realities—the pressure for sales, the lack of formal strategy, and the skills gap—that create the observed strategy-execution gap. This mixed-methods approach confirms not only that the gap exists but also why it persists

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the complex relationship between digital marketing activities and brand positioning within the dynamic context of nascent e-commerce SMEs in Turkey. The findings paint a nuanced picture that moves beyond simplistic narratives of digital adoption and challenges the assumed positive linear relationship prevalent in much of the literature focusing on larger firms (e.g., Bala & Verma, 2018; Gani & Farooq, 2021).

While the study confirms a high level of digital engagement—characterized by robust use of social media (Mean=3.96), mobile commerce (Mean=3.88), and a recognized importance of digital transformation (Mean=3.84)—it uncovers a critical disconnect. The core revelation is the strategy-execution gap: the intensity of digital marketing usage demonstrates a weak but statistically significant *negative* relationship with perceived brand positioning improvement ( $\beta = -0.125$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ), while explaining only a trivial portion of its variance ( $R^2 = 0.016$ ) in the initial model.

These finding challenges and refines the existing discourse. It suggests that for these young, resource-constrained enterprises, digital marketing efforts are currently not functioning as an effective brand-building engine. Instead of translating into a distinct market position, these activities may be reflecting a state of *tactical scrambling*—a dispersed and potentially inefficient use of scarce resources on multiple fronts without a cohesive strategic brand vision, a phenomenon aligned with the challenges noted by Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015) and the strategic dilemma described by Gupta et al. (2021). The moderate score for brand positioning itself (Mean=3.39), the lowest among core constructs, is a direct consequence of this gap.

Our expanded multiple regression model, which incorporated strategic variables, provided further clarity. It revealed that Strategic Orientation and Brand Identity Clarity are far more powerful predictors of brand positioning success than the volume of digital marketing activity. This finding strongly supports and operationalizes the theoretical arguments of Keller (2012) regarding the importance of a consistent brand identity and the conceptual work on the strategy-execution gap (Buccieri et al., 2023). Financial constraints (Digital Budget Percentage, Mean=2.99) and implementation challenges further exacerbate the situation, preventing SMEs from transitioning from operational, sales-driven tactics to strategic, equity-building brand management.

Therefore, the study concludes that the primary challenge for Turkish e-commerce SMEs is not a lack of digital activity, but a crisis of strategic alignment. The path to sustainable competitiveness lies not in doing more, but in doing things differently: integrating digital marketing tactics into a coherent brand strategy that delivers a consistent, authentic, and differentiated value proposition to the market. This study thus bridges a critical gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence from an emerging market context that the mere adoption of digital tools is insufficient, and that the strategic context in which they are used is paramount for achieving brand positioning goals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings lead to targeted recommendations for SME managers, policymakers, and educators, moving beyond generic advice to address the identified strategy-execution gap.

### For SME Managers and Entrepreneurs:

1. **Adopt a Brand-First Digital Strategy:** Shift the mindset from "doing digital marketing" to "building a brand through digital channels." This starts with a clearly defined brand positioning statement before any tactical plan is executed. Every digital initiative, from a social media post to an email campaign, should be evaluated against the question: "Does this strengthen our desired brand position?"
2. **Embrace Strategic Focus over Tactical Proliferation:** Rather than trying to be active on all platforms, SMEs should conduct a focused audit to identify the one or two digital channels most aligned with their target audience and brand identity, and allocate their limited budget there for deeper, more consistent engagement. As the study shows, mere presence is ineffective; strategic depth is key.
3. **Invest in Strategic Marketing Competency:** The findings underscore a need for strategic, not just technical, skills. Owners should seek out training or mentorship in strategic brand management, value proposition design, and customer insight generation, potentially through partnerships with universities or industry associations.

### For Policymakers and Support Institutions:

1. **Facilitate Access to Strategic, Not Just Technological, Funding:** While financial support for technology adoption is valuable, funding programs and grants should be redesigned to also support *strategic branding and marketing consultancy* for SMEs. Vouchers for services like brand strategy development and market research could directly address the identified gap.
2. **Develop Ecosystem Support Programs:** Create workshops, networking events, and mentorship programs that connect nascent SME owners with experienced marketers and brand strategists. The goal should be to transfer strategic knowledge, helping them see beyond daily operational firefighting to long-term brand building.

### For Future Research:

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track how the relationship between digital marketing and brand positioning evolves as SMEs mature. Qualitative, in-depth case studies of SMEs that have successfully bridged the strategy-execution gap would yield rich insights into the practical steps and decision-making processes that lead to effective digital brand-building.



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