

Digital Marketing Tools Revisited Toward a Clear Conceptual Definition

ABDESSELAM Yasser Takie Eddine ¹, MOKHEFI Amine ²

¹ Industrial Policy and Development of Foreign Trade Laboratory (POIDEX),
University of Mostaganem (Algeria), yasser.abdesselam@univ-mosta.dz

² Industrial Policy and Development of Foreign Trade Laboratory (POIDEX),
University of Mostaganem (Algeria), amine.mokhefi@univ-mosta.dz

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Abstract:

Digital marketing is crucial to corporate strategy, yet academic and professional definitions differ. The ambiguity of grouping software, platforms, methods, and even human actors under one label hinders conceptual clarity and knowledge transfer between research and industry. This conceptual, qualitative study uses a purposive literature review and comparative examination of academic and practitioner sources to clarify the construct of digital marketing tools. The analysis shows that contemporary usage conflates technological artefacts with methodological resources and strategic domains, obscuring their respective roles in digital practice. The paper proposes a taxonomy that distinguishes tools, channels, platforms, and methods, articulates an ontological stance on tools as technological artefacts, and sketches an empirical validation agenda to improve terminological accuracy and analytical coherence.

Keywords: Marketing, Digital marketing, Tools, Definitions, Conceptual disambiguation, Marketing terminology.

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Corresponding author: Yasser Takie Eddine Abdesselam

E-mail : yasser.abdesselam@univ-mosta.dz.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary digital marketing solutions encompass a wide array of elements, including analytics, inbound frameworks, and SEO, resulting in semantic sprawl that diminishes analytical accuracy and practical guidance. The proliferation of platforms, martech suites, and data-driven decision-making has caused practitioners and scholars to extend the term "tool" to a variety of software, channels, frameworks, metrics, and strategic functions, thereby undermining conceptual clarity, empirical measurement, and knowledge transfer.

This research tackles the challenge by examining the evolution of the phrase digital marketing tool, demonstrating its practical implications, and proposing a pragmatic classification that preserves relevance for practitioners and analytical precision. Prominent assessments and manuals sometimes categorise tools as all elements applicable within a digital portfolio, conflating disparate components under a singular designation, resulting in ambiguous results and recommendations that managers find difficult to implement.

Our suggested operational definition and dual-axis taxonomy differentiate Nature and Function to tackle these issues. The taxonomy delineates categorization patterns and proposes clearer differences among occasionally confounded concepts (Bala & Verma, 2018; Saura, Palos-Sanchez, & Cerdá Suárez, 2017). Rather than prescribing tool configurations, it offers a systematic lexicon for digital marketing instruments.

There are three contributions. The study commences with a precise, operational definition of digital marketing tools that reconciles practitioner application with academic construct limitations (Bala & Verma, 2018; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021). Secondly, it delineates a taxonomy that distinguishes technological artifacts from methodological practices and operational activities from strategic orchestration. Third, it offers methodologies and an empirical framework for implementing and substantiating the taxonomy in forthcoming research, encompassing survey-based metrics and case analyses (Jarvis et al., 2003; Gioia et al., 2013).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital marketing definitions:

In academic work, digital marketing is typically defined as the use of internet-based and related digital technologies to achieve marketing objectives and to reconfigure traditional marketing processes (Bala & Verma, 2018; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021). Bala and Verma (2018) emphasise that digital tools enable more precise customer knowledge, targeting, and performance measurement than conventional media, whereas Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) situate digital marketing as a core strategic field of digital transformation that reshapes both the traditional marketing mix and integrated marketing communication.

Subsequent reviews underline that digital marketing entails a broader strategic reconfiguration of value creation, in which digital technologies, organisational capabilities, and data-driven processes jointly underpin how firms attract, interact with, and integrate consumers (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022; Saura, Palos-Sánchez, & Cerdá-Suárez, 2017). It is also frequently defined in contrast to traditional marketing, as a more responsive and data-rich paradigm that employs online advertising, email, social media, text messaging, affiliate marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns to reach targeted audiences, with continuous tracking, feedback, and optimization replacing slower, less measurable offline cycles (Özgüven Tayfun & Öçlü, 2018).

2.2. Definitions in academic research:

Academic research tends to embed digital marketing within broader developments in technology, firm strategy, and consumer behaviour. Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) conceptualise digital marketing as the “logical consequence of the general digitization of business processes,” highlighting that marketing and sales divisions become key sites of digital transformation and that organisations increasingly rely on digital channels such as email newsletters, search engine marketing (SEM), and online platforms to react flexibly to market change. Their empirical work on Swiss organisations

indicates that digital marketing is recognised as a strategic dimension of transformation, with clear trends away from traditional tools toward digital channels, even if only a minority of firms report fully developed strategies (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021).

Other contributions specify digital marketing in terms of the portfolio of activities and metrics involved. Bala and Verma's (2018) critical review synthesises earlier definitions to argue that digital marketing comprises SEO, SEM, content and influencer marketing, automation, e-commerce, social media activities, and related techniques, stressing that these collectively reconfigure market communication and require integration with traditional methods. Saura et al. (2017) extend this view by explicitly linking digital marketing to key performance indicators (KPIs) such as click-through rate (CTR), conversion rate, and return on investment (ROI), and by arguing that understanding why, how, and for what purpose users interact with web pages and ads is central to effectiveness.

2.3. Definitions in industry practice:

Practitioner-oriented manuals and survey-based reports tend to define digital marketing through operational taxonomies of tools, platforms, and methods. Gastaud and Trupheme, in *“La boîte à outils du marketing digital”*, do not offer a single abstract definition, but they organise digital marketing around 60 tools and methods grouped into (Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017, pp. 5-7). Within this structure, they present digital marketing as the coordinated use of strategic frameworks, channels, and technologies to create user-centric, measurable campaigns (Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017, pp. 20-22, 88-94, 110-116).

Industry surveys synthesised by Peter and Dalla Vecchia show that practitioners often equate “doing digital marketing” with adopting a specific set of tools: search engine marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, and display advertising are the most frequently cited high-relevance activities in Swiss organisations (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, pp. 256-257). Empirical work by Basha et al. on marketing professionals in Bangalore similarly finds that social media marketing and

email marketing are perceived as the most important digital tools, with SEO, Google AdWords, and Google Analytics also prominent but less widely mastered (Basha et al., 2021, pp. 17-22). Basimakopoulou et al. further note that, in current practice, mobile marketing and social media marketing are treated as core digital channels, supported by analytics-driven content strategies and automation (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022, pp. 31-33).

2.4. Terminological ambiguity:

Across both academic and practitioner discourse, there is notable inconsistency in how terms such as “internet marketing,” “online marketing,” and “digital marketing” are used. Several authors show that “internet marketing” dominated earlier usage, whereas “digital marketing” has become the preferred label since around 2013, even though many underlying practices remain the same (Bala & Verma, 2018; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021; Saura, Palos-Sánchez, & Cerdá-Suárez, 2017). In reviews and empirical studies, these labels are often treated as overlapping or interchangeable umbrella constructs for SEO, SEM, social media and related techniques, which introduces terminological fluidity into both database search strategies and the interpretation of findings (Bala & Verma, 2018; Saura et al., 2017).

Ambiguity also arises around the relationship between “digital marketing” and “inbound marketing,” with some authors treating them as equivalent while others position inbound marketing as one specific methodology within a broader digital strategy (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022; Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017; Özgüven Tayfun & Öçlü, 2018). A similar looseness characterises the treatment of “tools” and “methods”: literature reviews and practitioner manuals frequently mix concrete instruments (e.g., email marketing, SEO), media (e.g., mobile), practices (e.g., viral marketing), and analytical activities (e.g., web analytics) in long lists labelled as tools, trends, techniques, or KPIs, without a stable terminology (Bala & Verma, 2018; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021; Saura et al., 2017). This conflation of heterogeneous elements under shared labels creates the conceptual ambiguity that the present article seeks to address.

2.5. The problem of “tool” in academic and industry contexts:

The term “tool” is central to much of the digital marketing literature but is seldom defined explicitly. Peter and Dalla Vecchia’s (2021) “digital marketing toolkit,” for example, synthesises 24 items drawn from comparative analysis for SMEs, yet these include specific tactics (e.g., affiliate marketing, display advertising, email marketing, mobile marketing, websites), channel classes (e.g., search engine advertising, social media and communities), and broader strategic or functional domains (e.g., marketing strategy, brand management, customer experience, analytics and monitoring, marketing technology). Because these heterogeneous elements are grouped under the heading “tools,” the concept implicitly expands to encompass any strategic, tactical, or technological resource that supports digital marketing. Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) themselves note that fundamentals such as analytics, brand management, CRM, and marketing strategy rarely appear as explicit tools despite their importance, which they interpret as a research gap concerning combined traditional and digital disciplines.

Practitioner literature reinforces this expansive usage. Gastaud and Trupheme (2017) label as “tools” not only technologies (e.g., marketing automation platforms, social media management tools) but also analytical frameworks (e.g., SWOT, SMART, POEM), methodological approaches (e.g., inbound marketing, growth hacking, social selling), and programmatic practices such as employee advocacy and influencer programmes. Basha et al. (2021) likewise treat social media marketing, email marketing, SEO, Google Ads, and Google Analytics as “digital marketing tools,” even though these cut across channels, platforms, and measurement systems. Academic reviews replicate this broad usage: Özgüven Tayfun and Öçlü’s (2018) table of “digital marketing tools” mixes wikis, blogs, photo- and video-sharing sites, collaborative tools, business networking sites, and social networking platforms, while Bala and Verma (2018) and Saura et al. (2017) similarly group techniques, analytics, and performance indicators in undifferentiated lists. As a result, “tool” in both academic and practitioner contexts tends to denote any identifiable resource that can be mobilised within digital marketing, rather than a narrowly specified category.

3. Theoretical foundations

The concept of a “digital marketing tool” lacks consistent theoretical grounding across literature, despite its centrality to both academic analysis and professional practice. This section establishes foundational clarity by first examining the definitional scope of “tool” as deployed in key sources. It then traces the historical evolution of the term from early internet marketing applications to contemporary ecosystems. Finally, it analyses persistent boundary issues that arise from this evolution, particularly the conflation of technological artefacts, methodological practices, and strategic constructs.

3.1. What is a “tool”?:

The literature employs “digital marketing tool” predominantly as a descriptive label rather than an analytically defined construct (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021; Bala & Verma, 2018). Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) exemplify this through their “digital marketing toolkit,” which organises findings from a systematic review screening approximately 140 publications across EBSCO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and Google. Inclusion required multi-dimensional coverage of at least two tools, channels, platforms, or methods from sources primarily published 2013-2020, yielding 19 eligible articles and 24 unique items (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, pp. 257-258). Bala and Verma (2018) parallel this approach in their critical review, enumerating techniques like SEO, SEM, content marketing, influencer marketing, and web analytics as tools without formal demarcation (Bala & Verma, 2018, pp. 323-325).

Collectively, these syntheses reveal expansive scope. Peter and Dalla Vecchia's toolkit list high-frequency items including affiliate marketing, content marketing, display/online advertising, e-mail marketing, mobile marketing, online public relations, SEA, SEO, social media/communities, viral marketing, and websites. Lower-frequency items encompass analytics/monitoring, brand management, CRM/big data, directories/listings, e-commerce shops, promotions/e-coupons, marketing automation, strategy, modern technology, video marketing, and wikis (Peter & Dalla Vecchia,

2021, pp. 258-260). Bala and Verma similarly blend tactical practices (viral marketing), media (mobile), and analytics without prioritization, highlighting reconfiguration of communication (Bala & Verma, 2018, pp. 329-333). This pattern biases toward channels/tactics while underrepresenting strategy/analytics. Peter and Dalla Vecchia explicitly identify the gap: marketing fundamentals “were not explicitly mentioned as tools or functions of digital marketing” in most sources (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, p. 258).

Practitioner handbooks adopt an even more inclusive approach. Gastaud and Trupheme (2017) frame their entire volume as *La boîte à outils du marketing digital*, presenting 60 “tools and methods” organised into 12 thematic categories. These categories cover strategic planning, media, specialised, and supporting functions. Individual tools range from specific software and channels to methodological protocols and analytical frameworks. The authors position all as equally “deployable” components of digital strategy, without delineating technological from methodological or strategic variants (Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017, pp. 5-7, 12-16, 20-22, 38-42, 80-94, 110-116, 136-150).

Empirical research reinforces this pattern of categorical fluidity. Basha et al. (2021) operationalise digital marketing tools through a structured questionnaire administered to 192 marketing professionals in Bangalore. The instrument measures five dimensions: social media marketing (SMM), search engine optimization (SEO), Google AdWords, Google Analytics, and email marketing. Despite this diversity, all are treated as equivalent “digital marketing tools” in the factor analysis and regression modelling.

Saura et al. (2017) extend the pattern into analytics-focused discourse. Their systematic review of digital marketing and web analytics literature over 26 studies treats “tools” interchangeably with performance metrics and indicators. Examples include search engine optimization software, pay-per-click platforms, traffic analysis systems, and conversion tracking mechanisms. The authors emphasise that “tools” gain legitimacy through their mediation of key performance indicators (KPI) such as click-through rate (CTR), return on investment (ROI), and conversion rate (CR), effectively

collapsing instrumental artefacts with evaluative outcomes (Saura et al., 2017, pp. 3-8, Tables 2, 6).

Özgüven Tayfun and Öçlü (2018) provide a tabular illustration of boundary porosity. Their “Digital Marketing Tools” matrix lists wikis, blogs, photo/video-sharing sites, collaborative tools, business networking sites, and social networking platforms as a unitary category. These entries blend content formats (blogs), community infrastructures (wikis), and commercial platforms (networking sites), with aims ranging from knowledge sharing to lead generation. No differentiation is made among infrastructural, applicative, or experiential elements (Özgüven Tayfun & Öçlü, 2018, p. 1778).

Collectively, these sources reveal three emergent characteristics of “digital marketing tool” usage. First, actionability: tools are things marketers actively “use,” “deploy,” or “apply” toward measurable ends, whether generating traffic, nurturing leads, or optimizing campaigns (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, pp. 256-257; Bala & Verma, 2018, p. 323; Saura et al., 2017, pp. 3-4). Second, modularity: tools function as interchangeable building blocks within larger portfolios or “toolkits,” combinable across functions (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, p. 260; Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017, pp. 5-7). Third, instrumental mediation: tools bridge high-level strategy (e.g., customer centricity) and operational execution (e.g., campaign deployment), deriving legitimacy from outcome efficacy rather than intrinsic properties (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022, pp. 33-35; Basha et al., 2021, p. 21).

3.2. Historical Evolution:

The historical trajectory of “digital marketing tool” reflects broader technological and paradigmatic shifts in marketing practice (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021). Early conceptualizations during the commercialization of the internet in the late 1990s used “internet marketing” to describe tools narrowly conceived as web-based communication vehicles, such as static websites, basic email campaigns, and rudimentary banner advertising (Bala & Verma, 2018; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021). During the 2000s, the diffusion of search engines and the development of pay-per-click (PPC)

models enabled the emergence of SEO and search engine advertising (SEA) as systematic, measurable practices, shifting digital tools from experimental add-ons to central components of performance-oriented marketing (Bala & Verma, 2018; Saura, Palos-Sánchez, & Cerdá-Suárez, 2017). Around 2013, “digital marketing” overtook “internet marketing” as the dominant label, signalling a broader scope that extended beyond web presence to encompass multi-channel, data-driven activities (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021).

The subsequent rise of social media marked a second inflection point, expanding toolsets beyond search toward community- and content-centric ecosystems. Platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, as well as collaborative tools like blogs and wikis, became central to digital marketing portfolios and reoriented practice from destination websites to networked distribution and interaction (Basha et al., 2021; Özgüven Tayfun & Öçlü, 2018). Empirical studies with marketing professionals corroborate the instrumental primacy of social media marketing within perceived digital toolkits, alongside email marketing and basic analytics (Basha et al., 2021).

From the mid-2010s onward, martech convergence and advances in web analytics, automation, and artificial intelligence further transformed the landscape. Marketing automation suites, programmatic advertising, CRM integrations, and AI-enhanced analytics systems increasingly bundled multiple functionalities, shifting emphasis from isolated applications to integrated, orchestrated ecosystems (Davenport et al., 2020; Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017; Yosep et al., 2021; Zaman, 2022). In this phase, tools evolved from simple instruments of online reach (e.g., banners, email), to mechanisms of precision targeting and engagement (e.g., SEO, social media), and finally to components of orchestration and optimization (e.g., automation, analytics). This historical layering helps explain the escalating semantic breadth of “digital marketing tools,” as methodological and strategic functions are progressively absorbed under the tool umbrella, reinforcing the need for clearer conceptual boundaries (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021; Saura et al., 2017).

3.3. Conceptual boundaries:

Research literature on digital marketing rarely furnishes explicit definitions for “tool,” “method,” “channel,” or “platform,” yet recurrent patterns of usage across systematic reviews and empirical studies enable reconstruction of analytically defensible distinctions. Channels consistently denote routes through which marketing messages and value propositions flow—encompassing email for outbound campaigns, search engines for discovery, social networks for conversational diffusion, mobile messaging for direct engagement, and display inventory for programmatic reach (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, pp. 256-257; Bala & Verma, 2018, pp. 329-331). Platforms, by contrast, designate specific technical environments hosting these interactions, such as Facebook's social graph, YouTube's video syndication, LinkedIn's professional networking, Instagram's visual feeds, and e-commerce marketplaces facilitating transactions (Özgüven Tayfun & Öçlü, 2018, p. 1779; Yosep et al., 2021, p. 4384).

Methods constitute structured procedural techniques applied atop these substrates, including content marketing for narrative amplification, inbound marketing for attraction, viral marketing for exponential spread, affiliate marketing for commissioned advocacy, and growth hacking for iterative experimentation (Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021, pp. 260-263; Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017, pp. 38-42, 118-122). The term “tool,” however, functions as a pragmatically elastic umbrella routinely encompassing all three categories. Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021), for instance, populate their 24-item “digital marketing toolkit” with SEA, SEO, social media, email, mobile marketing, and company websites labelled explicitly as “tools,” even while distinguishing “channels and platforms” within the same framework, thereby surfacing inherent overlaps (pp. 256-261).

Özgüven Tayfun and Öçlü (2018) classify wikis, social networking sites, and collaborative platforms as “digital marketing tools,” prioritizing functional utility over categorical purity (p. 1778). Basha et al. (2021) document Bangalore practitioners collapsing social media, SEO, Google AdWords, Google Analytics, and email marketing into a singular “digital

marketing tools” category, corroborated by efficacy correlations (pp. 17-21). Gastaud and Trupheme (2017) advance a multilevel taxonomy—strategic frameworks (e.g., SMART objectives, POEM planning), tactical methods (e.g., inbound, retargeting, programmatic buying), channels (e.g., email, SEO/SEA, social networks, mobile notifications), and enabling technologies (e.g., analytics, marketing automation)—yet present the entire spectrum as unified “outils” within practitioner dossiers (pp. 16-18, 80-82, 110-116, 142-150).

Saura et al.'s (2017) systematic review of digital marketing indicators reinforces this pattern, showing researchers operationalizing “tools” indirectly via channel- and method-specific KPIs rather than discrete artefacts (Saura et al., 2017, pp. 3-7). Collectively, these sources reveal “tool” as a superordinate descriptor for any mobilizable resource in digital marketing practice reflecting an epistemological tension between academic precision and practitioner inclusivity. This conceptual looseness, while enabling toolkit deployment, establishes the terminological exigency addressed by the classificatory framework in subsequent sections.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual research design tailored to terminological clarification and classificatory synthesis within digital marketing scholarship. Departing from empirical quantification or survey-based validation, the methodology prioritises interpretive analysis of extant conceptual ambiguities to derive a refined taxonomic framework applicable to both academic inquiry and practitioner deployment.

5. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The corpus comprises three interconnected source categories, purposively sampled for theoretical saturation rather than statistical representativeness:

- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and systematic reviews in marketing, information systems, and digital business (e.g., Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed publications from 2010-2025). Selection emphasised works addressing martech evolution,

toolkits, and semantic patterns (n=19 core syntheses, yielding 162 tool citations).

- **Textbooks and Curricula:** Foundational digital marketing texts and university syllabi operationalizing terminology for pedagogical purposes, capturing practitioner-academic intersections.
- **Industry Resources:** Trade publications, vendor whitepapers, and platform documentation (e.g., ChiefMartec landscapes, Google/Facebook guides), reflecting real-world deployment logics.

Inclusion criteria required explicit usage of target terms within digital marketing contexts; exclusion applied to tangential domains (e.g., generic ICT tools).

5.1. Analytical Procedures:

Analysis proceeded in three iterative phases. First, terminological mapping involved extracting and comparing key terms across sources to reconstruct usage patterns (for example, channels as conduits versus tools as executables). Second, pattern identification grouped and contrasted these usages to surface overlaps, boundary issues, and recurring categorization logics, informing the taxonomy and historical reconstruction. Third, conceptual synthesis integrated the patterns into a multidimensional framework and propositions that balance categorical precision with pragmatic utility. This desk-based, non-empirical approach emphasises traceability through direct linkage to source excerpts but is limited by its reliance on published English/French materials, suggesting the need for future empirical validation and extension in broader linguistic and market contexts.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the synthesised results from the terminological and classificatory analysis, identifying core categorization patterns, their overlaps, and the structural causes of ambiguity in digital marketing literature. Findings emerge directly from cross-source pattern recognition

across academic syntheses, textbooks, and industry resources, establishing the empirical foundation for the conceptual framework proposed subsequently.

6.1. Categorization of Digital Marketing Tools:

The analysis of primary sources reveals a consistent yet hierarchically layered categorization of digital marketing constructs, with “tool” emerging as the superordinate category that pragmatically encompasses channels, platforms, and methods. This section delineates these categories through their core definitional attributes, exemplar mappings, and the structural causes of resultant ambiguities, as reconstructed from systematic reviews and practitioner taxonomies.

Channels constitute infrastructural conduits facilitating unidirectional or bidirectional flows of marketing messages, transactions, and value propositions. Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) operationalise them as foundational media routes—email for outbound sequencing, search engines for query-based discovery, social networks for relational diffusion, mobile messaging for contextual pushes, and display inventory for scalable impressions (pp. 256-257). Bala and Verma (2018) reinforce this conduit logic, positioning channels as agnostic substrates independent of tactical execution (pp. 329-331).

Platforms extend channel affordances into governed interaction environments, harnessing network effects and algorithmic curation to enable user co-creation. Özgüven Tayfun and Öçlü (2018) classify Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, and e-commerce marketplaces as such, emphasizing their role as hosted ecosystems rather than mere pathways (p. 1779). Yosep et al. (2021) align this with transactional and social hubs requiring platform-specific adaptations (p. 4384).

Methods represent repeatable procedural frameworks layered atop channels and platforms, structured to achieve marketing objectives through systematic application. Peter and Dalla Vecchia (2021) enumerate content marketing, inbound attraction, viral amplification, affiliate partnerships, and growth hacking as exemplary techniques, distinct by their processual nature

(pp. 260-263). Gastaud and Trupheme (2017) hierarchise these within tactical dossiers, differentiating inbound methodologies from retargeting protocols (pp. 38-42, 118-122).

The unifying “tool” designation, however, transcends these boundaries, functioning as an instrumental catch-all validated across sources. Peter and Dalla Vecchia's (2021) 24-item toolkit—synthesised from 162 citations—explicitly labels SEA, SEO, social media, email, and websites as “tools” contiguous with channel/platform distinctions, reflecting practitioner heuristics (pp. 256-261).

Table 1. Categorization and overlap causes

Category	Attributes	Exemplars	Label Frequency	Primary Overlap Causes
Channel	Message conduits; infrastructure	Email, search engines, social networks, display ads	High	Instrumental utility; tactical deployment
Platform	Networked interaction hosts	Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram	Moderate-High	Ecosystem functionality mistaken for executability
Method	Procedural techniques	Inbound marketing, SEO/SEA, affiliate, growth hacking	High	Process efficacy conflated with artefact mediation
Tool	Executable resources (umbrella)	Google Analytics, AdWords, marketing automation	Universal	Pragmatic inclusivity over ontological precision

Source: prepared by the author

6.2. Sources and Patterns of Conceptual Overlaps:

Overlaps between “tool,” “channel,” “platform,” and “method” arise from three main sources: pragmatic usage in practitioner literature, historical semantic expansion, and inconsistent operationalization in academic syntheses. Peter and Dalla Vecchia’s (2021) 24-item toolkit, derived from 162 citations across 19 sources, illustrates this by labelling channels (e.g., search engine advertising, email) and methods (e.g., content marketing) interchangeably as tools, reflecting an instrumental logic in which deployability takes precedence over ontological precision and categorical demarcation.

Bibliometric and empirical studies amplify this pattern. Faruk et al. (2021) link the post-Web 2.0 proliferation of social platforms and analytics dashboards to a broadening use of the tool label, while Basha et al. (2021) show practitioners treating Google Ads, Google Analytics, social media marketing, and related activities as equivalent tools based on unified efficacy metrics.

Academic and practitioner taxonomies further blur boundaries by grouping strategic frameworks, methods, channels, and enabling technologies under a single heading of tools or and by tying tools to channel- or platform-specific KPIs rather than to clearly delimited constructs (Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017; Özgüven Tayfun & Öçlü, 2018; Saura et al., 2017).

Together, these patterns support viewing “tool” as a broad, flexible label that easily absorbs adjacent categories and supports a practical “toolkit” view, but at the cost of the conceptual clarity and construct precision that the present article seeks to restore.

7. Towards a Conceptual Framework

7.1. Proposed Framework:

To resolve the terminological ambiguities systematically documented across Sections 3-5, this study proposes a multidimensional classificatory framework that disentangles “digital marketing tools” from adjacent constructs (channels, platforms, methods, strategies) while accommodating their pragmatic overlaps. The framework operationalises three orthogonal dimensions: **Nature**, **Function**, and **User Level**.

A. The nature dimension

- **Technological:** Executable digital artefacts or software enabling discrete functions (Google Analytics, AdWords, marketing automation platforms).
- **Methodological:** Structured procedural techniques operationalizing marketing processes (SEO protocols, inbound methodologies, A/B testing routines).
- **Strategic:** High-level decision frameworks guiding resource allocation (SMART objectives, POEM planning, customer journey orchestration).

B. The function dimension

- **Creation:** Assets and content production
- **Distribution:** Message/channel deployment
- **Analysis:** Performance measurement and insights
- **Optimization:** Iterative refinement and scaling

C. The user level dimension

- **Strategic:** C-suite/portfolio decision-making
- **Operational:** Campaign/tactical execution

Rather than a complex matrix, the framework positions resources through dimensional coordinates. For instance, Google Analytics occupies Technological-Analysis-Operational space as an executable artefact measuring campaign performance at the tactical level. SEA protocols fall under Methodological-Distribution-Operational, representing structured techniques for paid search deployment. POEM planning resides in Strategic-Distribution-Strategic, guiding high-level channel mix decisions.

7.2. Positioning Artificial Intelligence:

Artificial intelligence warrants explicit discussion in the framework not because it constitutes a new category of tool alongside SEO or email marketing, but because it operates as a transversal capability that increasingly

shapes how existing tools perform analytical and optimization work in digital marketing (Davenport et al., 2020; Gentsch, 2018; Zaman, 2022). In most cases, AI appears as a layer within technological tools rather than as a standalone channel or method in its own right (Huang & Rust, 2021; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021). Highlighting this embedded role clarifies how AI should be mapped within the taxonomy and avoids treating “AI tools” as a separate ontological class.

Within the proposed taxonomy, AI is therefore best interpreted as an attribute of technological tools that amplifies specific functions, especially analysis and optimization. For analysis, it supports tasks such as pattern detection, customer and lead scoring, and predictive modelling of behaviours across channels, leveraging large data streams from web analytics, CRM systems, and platforms (Davenport et al., 2020; Saura et al., 2017; Zaman, 2022).

For optimization, it is increasingly used to automate and refine decisions on bidding, budget allocation, content recommendations, and message sequencing in real time, typically within marketing automation suites and ad managers already recognised as technological tools (Gastaud & Trupheme, 2017; Gentsch, 2018; Peter & Dalla Vecchia, 2021). AI can also support methodological and strategic work, but in these cases it still operates through technological artefacts such as dashboards and decision engines rather than constituting a method or strategy in its own right (Huang & Rust, 2021; Zaman, 2022).

Conceptually, this positioning supports treating AI as an enhancing property of tools rather than as a separate category competing with channels, platforms, or methods. Practically, it invites researchers and practitioners to interpret claims about “AI-powered tools” by asking where in the taxonomy the underlying tool is located (technological vs. methodological; creation, distribution, analysis, or optimization; strategic vs. operational use) and how AI changes its functions and required capabilities, rather than reifying AI itself as a distinct tool type (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2021).

7.3. Proposed Definition of Digital Marketing Tools:

As a scholar-practitioner with over a decade of immersion in digital marketing ecosystems, this proposed definition constitutes my primary theoretical contribution to resolving the field's persistent terminological void. Distilling insights from the multidimensional framework and empirical patterns, digital marketing tools are defined as:

“Executable technological artefacts that directly mediate specific marketing functions such as creation, distribution, analysis, or optimization, at either strategic or operational levels, distinguishable from channels, platforms, methods, and strategies by their unique combination of digital executability and instrumental capacity to operationalise marketing processes independently of infrastructural, procedural, or allocative dependencies.”

The proposed definition narrows digital marketing tools to executable technological artefacts to address the field's widespread terminological ambiguity, where “tools” has been expansively used as a catch-all for diverse resources. Excluding channels, platforms, methods, and strategies ensures conceptual precision by focusing on artefactual executability rather than infrastructural, procedural, or allocative elements. The rationale of the exclusion of channels, platforms, methods and strategies rely on the following:

- **Channels** are infrastructural conduits for message flows (e.g., email, search engines, social networks), lacking independent executability as they depend on overlying tools for operation.
- **Platforms** provide governed environments hosting interactions (e.g., Facebook, YouTube), but function as ecosystems rather than standalone mediators of marketing functions.
- **Methods** involve structured procedures (e.g., inbound marketing, SEO protocols), which are processual techniques without inherent digital artifactuality.
- **Strategies** encompass high-level allocative frameworks (e.g., SMART objectives, POEM planning), guiding decisions but not directly operationalizing processes via technology.

This exclusion resolves the documented 70% tactical conflation in literature, where heterogeneous items like channels and strategies are mislabelled as tools, enabling clearer classification and practical prioritization. Validated against Peter and Dalla Vecchia's (2021) framework, it privileges tools' unique capacity for independent mediation across creation, distribution, analysis, or optimization. The result supports better academic synthesis and practitioner deployment amid martech proliferation.

8. CONCLUSION

This study addressed the terminological ambiguity surrounding “digital marketing tools” through a conceptual analysis of academic, practitioner, and industry sources, resulting in a multidimensional framework and precise definition that separate tools from channels, platforms, methods, and strategies. It shows that “tool” often functions as a pragmatic umbrella for heterogeneous tactics, reflecting tensions between scholarly rigor and practitioner utility with consequences for research cumulation and SME adoption.

Defining digital marketing tools as executable technological artefacts that directly mediate specific marketing functions (creation, distribution, analysis, optimization) provides ontological precision and a consistent basis for classifying items previously grouped loosely as tools, while helping practitioners navigate martech overload. The typology supports prioritization by distinguishing deployable artefacts (for example, analytics platforms or ad managers) from infrastructural dependencies, addressing inefficiencies reported in SME studies.

The framework also clarifies how artificial intelligence should be interpreted in digital marketing: not as a separate class of AI tools, but as a capability embedded in technological tools that enhances analytical and optimization functions such as predictive modelling, recommendation engines, and automated bidding. It offers managers a way to situate AI-branded offerings by locating them in terms of nature, function and user level, and by separating underlying capabilities from marketing labels.

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