



An exploratory study of Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work

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It has been a long road to get to this point but one that I am very proud of. With work and all of the other commitments that I have in my life, it certainly was not an easy task by any means. It had been a goal of mine for a very long time to continue my studies and complete a master's programme. I couldn't be happier to say that it has now been ticked off my list.

Now, what's next on the agenda?

Abstract

This exploratory research focuses on how SMEs in the West of Ireland have upscaled their use of Digital Marketing since March 2020. This study reviews how SMEs in the West of Ireland reacted during this rapid digitalisation period, and uncovers the benefits of this digitalisation as well as difficulties encountered during the process. It also examines the attitudes of participating SMEs to Digital Marketing and challenges they faced along the way.

The research methodology employed was exploratory comprising eight in-depth semi-structured interviews chosen as the primary data collection. The study employed a thematic analysis to best answer three research questions;

QUESTIONS:

1. What barriers, if any, have prevented SMEs in the West of Ireland from utilising Digital Marketing?
2. How has the use of Digital Marketing by SMEs been impacted by the challenges presented during the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic?
3. Has the West of Ireland location of SMEs impacted their use of Digital Marketing?

The study found some interesting results including how SMEs in the West of Ireland were leveraging their location to their advantage to not only survive this difficult period but also to grow and conquer new markets. From the research it is clear that SMEs in the West of Ireland have a clear preference for Digital Marketing methods with an eagerness to improve on their own skillsets. Unlike what previous research would suggest, their marketing practices are highly organised and data driven.

It is hoped that this study will act as a foundation for future research on the Digital Marketing activities of SMEs in the West of Ireland.

Abbreviations

SME - Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

ATU - Atlantic Technological University

LEO - Local Enterprise Office

TOV - Trading Online Voucher

SEO - Search Engine Optimisation

PPC - Pay-Per-Click

SMM - Social Media Marketing

KPI - Key Performance Indicator

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This exploratory research will focus on how SMEs in the West of Ireland have upscaled their use of Digital Marketing since March 2020. This study will review how SMEs in the West of Ireland reacted during this rapid digitalisation period, and it aims to uncover the benefits of this digitalisation and any difficulties encountered during the process. It will also examine the attitudes of participating SMEs to Digital Marketing and any challenges they faced along the way.

There has been considerable research undertaken to ascertain the factors that determine how easy it is for small firms to adopt digital communication (Ritz et al., 2019; He et al., 2017), however, knowledge of how smaller firms utilise digital channels in their marketing still requires more in-depth knowledge (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). For small firms, digitalisation has been found to positively relate to business growth, performance, and competitiveness (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

However, challenges abound for small firms seeking to introduce and manage digital marketing communication. A major barrier is a lack of knowledge or 'know-how' to implement (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010). Other research found a lack of general technical understanding and personal innovativeness among personnel which poses a barrier (Järvinen et al., 2012). A lack of strategic orientation and a lack of financial and human resources have similarly been revealed as barriers (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010).

With an ever-increasing focus on Digital Marketing in the day-to-day operations of SMEs, this study will explore the challenges that these businesses face. Most Irish SMEs have not been able to maximise the potential of integrated Digital Marketing (Thuy Vo, 2014). It is particularly important as this research found a scarcity of papers which have studied the process of rapid Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs specifically based in the West of Ireland.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has created an enormous amount of uncertainty in our lives, including that of a business sense (Yustian, 2021). It had a significant economic impact on

financial markets and vulnerable industries such as manufacturing, high street businesses and the tourism industry. Results from a study by Altig et al (2020) suggest uncertainty among businesses increased in reaction to the pandemic and its economic fallout. It goes on to say that the unprecedented scale and nature of the ongoing pandemic crisis helps to explain why it has generated such an extraordinary surge in economic uncertainty. With physical premises bound by continually changing restrictions, all eyes have been on how businesses can best utilise Digital Marketing to diversify their offering. Although utilising Digital Marketing to grow your business is not a new idea, the shift towards SMEs harnessing its potential has been intensified because of the ongoing pandemic. This ongoing crisis further increased the opportunities and importance of Digital Marketing capabilities (Herhausen et al., 2020). In 2020 for example, 65,113 new .ie domains were registered which was the highest ever registration figure recorded in the country - an almost 30% increase on the previous year (We Are Ireland Online, 2020).

Now more than ever, Digital Marketing plays an ever increasing part in our lives. According to a recent study by the Commission for Communications Regulation (2019), Irish people use their phones more than 4 ½ hours every day - only spending a very small amount of time making or receiving phone calls. Just 10% of a typical user's time on their phone is spent conversing; the rest is spent browsing social media, shopping online, and watching videos (Pope, 2019). This is further endorsed by Faruk et al (2021), which highlights that consumers are spending more time on social media for a variety of purposes ranging from searching brand information to the final purchase of products.

The digitalisation of SMEs intensified further still as the window of opportunity to create income during this difficult period decreased. With consumers resorting more to online shopping amid pandemic restrictions, entrepreneurs have embraced the digital phenomenon for online shopping even more (Arreola, 2020). The question may centre on whether SMEs can take advantage of their consumers' growing web usage to help them bounce back and recover. The real litmus test is whether those currently affected by this difficult period have the resilience to get through this time and emerge on the other side.

1.2 What is an SME?

SMEs (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) are widely regarded as a pillar of any successful economy (ARSHAD, 2020; Ungureanu & Ungureanu, 2020). For the purpose of this study, we will use the definition of what an SME is as described by the EU Commission;

- Small enterprises are defined as enterprises that employ fewer than 50 persons and whose annual turnover or annual balance sheet total does not exceed €10 million.
- Medium-sized enterprises are defined as enterprises that employ fewer than 250 persons and either have an annual turnover that does not exceed €50 million, or an annual balance sheet not exceeding €43 million (Commission, 2016).

The reason for choosing SMEs for this study is because of the contribution that they make to the Irish economy. Seen as “*the motor for economic growth*” (Kurniawan & Asharudin, 2018), they are the main source of jobs in the country with SMEs accounting for 99.8% of total active enterprises in Ireland and 65% of total employees, which increases to 68.4% when proprietors and family members engaged in the SME are included (House of the Oireachtas, 2019).

It is worth noting at this point that SMEs performance can be positively impacted with the introduction of Digital Marketing into their business proceedings (Nuseir, 2018). All of this is of particular interest in the context of this study because of the importance that SMEs hold to the economy, often being referred to as the backbone of the nation’s economy (Kurniawan & Asharudin, 2018).

1.3 Digital Marketing

In a time before the digital boom opened up doors virtually across the world, businesses were, in many ways, restricted in how they operate. Nowadays, however, SMEs can reach an international audience in a short space of time thanks to Digital Marketing. Some would even go as far to argue that at present any business can now be globalised rapidly in every corner of the world wherever presence of digital media can be found. (Nuseir, 2018)

With the continued rise in the importance of Digital Marketing, a significant amount of research has been carried out in the area. Upon researching the topic, you will find that there

are many definitions for Digital Marketing. For example, according to Bizhanova et al., (2019), Digital Marketing is based on online channels with the highest frequency of use, they are dynamic, they can change from year to year and are always influenced by market trends. We find another universal definition from Pradhan et al (2018), which states that Digital Marketing outlines the use of technologies in marketing efforts and business practices with the marketing of goods, services, information and ideas via internet, mobile phones, display advertising and other e-mediums. Digital Marketing can also be defined as exploitation of digital technologies, which are used to create channels to reach potential recipients, in order to achieve the enterprise's goals (Sawicki, 2016). The researcher finds the definition by Bizhanova et al., (2019) as the most appropriate for this study as it emphasises the dynamic and ever-changing nature of Digital Marketing.

1.4 The West of Ireland

It is particularly important to note throughout this thesis that there is a scarcity of papers which have studied the process of Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs specifically in the West of Ireland. The West of Ireland is comprised of the counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway & Clare (Western Development Commission, 2019). In 2016, there were 54,410 SMEs registered in the seven counties (Western Development Commission, 2016).

SMEs in the West of Ireland have a unique backdrop to grow their business. Within the seven counties, there are vibrant third-level institutions, picturesque landscapes, cities renowned for their culture and towns absolutely bursting with history. As noted by Greenberg et al (2018), geographical distance can significantly affect the level of business' exposure, i.e. their ability to reach potential clients. With that, the importance of Digital Marketing to these SMEs should not be underestimated.

1.5 The COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19, an infectious disease caused by the novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), is a global pandemic. With high transmissibility, a case fatality rate greater than 1%, the mainstay of pandemic management has been containment and

mitigation (Whitelaw et al., 2020). This had a serious impact on the world economy during the period of this research study between 2020 – 22.

Since the turn of the year in 2020, news of COVID-19 began to increase on Irish shores but the public really began to take notice in March when St. Patrick's Day celebrations were cancelled. Ireland entered into a Level 5 lockdown on March 12th with restrictions including non-essential journeys banned for at least two weeks. The authorities introduced extensive restrictions on economic and social life which saw much of the economy put into a deep freeze (McQuinn et al., 2020). At this point in time, the people of Ireland and business owners nationwide entered what can only be described as a period of severe uncertainty. Efforts to prevent the spread of the virus included travel restrictions, quarantines, event cancellations, mask wearing and the closure of all non-essential businesses.

The advent of the COVID 19 Pandemic significantly challenged SMEs as it hit their profitability and sustainability in an unprecedented way (Zutshi et al., 2021). SMEs have faced logistical issues, labour shortages and a significant drop in demand due to lockdown measures (Juergensen et al., 2020).

1.6 Research Questions and Objectives

With an increased importance on Digital Marketing since March 2020 and the outbreak of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic, the aim of this study is to discover how Digital Marketing has impacted SMEs specifically in the West of Ireland during this challenging period for the economy (2020 to 2022). The study has the following research questions and objectives;

QUESTIONS:

1. What barriers, if any, have prevented SMEs in the West of Ireland from utilising Digital Marketing?
2. How has the use of Digital Marketing by SMEs been impacted by the challenges presented during the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic?
3. Has the West of Ireland location of SMEs impacted their use of Digital Marketing?

OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify what difficulties SMEs in the West of Ireland have experienced when attempting to utilise Digital Marketing.
2. Explore how SMEs in the West of Ireland utilised Digital Marketing to adapt their business to abide by the limitations placed on them during the COVID 19 Pandemic.
3. Investigate the attitudes of SMEs in the West of Ireland toward traditional versus Digital Marketing methods.
4. Investigate supports made available to SMEs in the West of Ireland to help implement Digital Marketing practices.

It is anticipated that this research, which will be readily available online and in the library of the Atlantic Technological University, will help SMEs in the West of Ireland navigate past some of the common difficulties associated with the process of implementing a Digital Marketing strategy. Furthermore, it will provide an insight into the benefits that Digital Marketing can have on their business. It will also help the researcher and anyone reading this thesis understand why SMEs in this rural location have yet to maximise the benefits of Digital Marketing.

In a post COVID-19 world, SMEs in the West of Ireland will need every help that they can get to flourish and grow. It is hoped that this thesis can play some part in that.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One has introduced the reader to the background of the study, the reasoning behind it, the research questions and the objectives. In total, this research is divided into Five Chapters.

In Chapter Two, an in-depth literature review highlights the different elements of Digital Marketing, the effect it has had on SMEs both during and prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, rural businesses and traditional marketing methods. The aim of this chapter is to showcase the research that was carried out and to create a story as we lead into the outcomes and findings from this study.

Chapter Three explains the how and the why of the methodology chosen by the researcher, along with the justification for the chosen methods. It also presents an overview of the ethical considerations that were taken into account throughout the duration of this study.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the study and what themes emerged from the interviews. It is followed by a discussion around the findings from the study alongside the comparisons and contrasts to the findings from the literature review.

The thesis finishes with Chapter Five in which the researcher draws conclusions from the study. Recommendations which have resulted from the research are made here. This chapter also presents any limitations that the study may have had.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review has been carried out to create a better understanding of Digital Marketing and its implementation by SMEs. As there is a scarcity of papers which study this topic specifically in the West of Ireland, papers from across the world have been used so as to compare the findings to that of the primary research.

An in-depth literature review has been carried out to give the researcher a greater understanding of the landscape and a platform to identify common trends both nationally and internationally. It has also been used to help create an effective approach to the research as laid out in this document, including, but not limited to the way in which data is gathered and from what sources. With the study being explorative in nature, the researcher employed a circular approach to the literature review. As the intention was to carry out this study without any preconceived ideas, some data was gathered initially in the literature review to refine the data collection methods. This process of studying relevant papers was ongoing before, during and after the primary research was carried out.

This literature review will explore and analyse emerging themes from a wide range of relevant journals and publications in the area of SMEs and Digital Marketing implementation. This research will also form the basis of the questions being asked in this thesis. The fundamental aim of this research is to find out how SMEs, specifically in the West of Ireland, have reacted to a period of rapid implementation of Digital Marketing during COVID-19. The literature review is a vital starting point to answering these questions.

2.2 Understanding what we mean by Digital Marketing

Since its inception, Digital Marketing has played a key role in how SMEs showcase their business to their target audiences. The development of Digital Marketing in the 1990s and 2000s changed the way brands and marketers use technology for implementing marketing plans and strategies (G.K.Ayush & Rakshith, 2020). While Digital Marketing has continued to grow in importance at a steady pace over the past number of years, the outbreak of the

COVID-19 Pandemic has given it an unexpected boost and influenced a fast-paced behavioural shift towards digital platforms, digital media, and digital content (G.K.Ayush & Rakshith, 2020).

As earlier stated, Digital Marketing is a marketing activity of a product using digital media or the internet. The purpose of Digital Marketing is to quickly attract consumers and potential customers (Park et al., 2018). With restrictions on physical stores and the overall increase in the acceptance of technology including online platforms, it is not surprising to note that Digital Marketing activities are now the main choice for many companies worldwide (Giantari et al., 2022).

There are many elements to Digital Marketing, in fact the term Digital Marketing has continued to evolve over time. It has significantly transformed the way in which SMEs and larger companies employ communication technologies. Some of the more relevant elements of Digital Marketing that we should understand before engaging with this study are listed below.

2.2.1 Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

“Whoever controls the door to the internet, controls the internet.” (Dodson, 2016)

This quote best encompasses the importance of SEO. Search engines provide internet users with a starting point to finding what they are looking for online. SEO is effectively the ability to manipulate the search results of the user. It can be described as the process of *“affecting the visibility of a website or a web page in a search engine’s natural or unpaid search results”* (Yasmin et al., 2015). In general, the higher up you rank on the search engine results, the better the outcome of more visitors to your website or online store. Implementing a strong SEO strategy will help drive more traffic to your website, increase its visibility and increase your potential of online sales or enquiries. It can often be a slow process but there are ways in which SMEs can improve their search ranking through SEO tactics such as optimising content with relevant keywords, using alt tags (image descriptions) and blogging.

2.2.2 Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Advertising

When we say PPC Advertising, we mean a form of Digital Marketing where advertisers pay a fee each time one of their ads directing customers to their website is clicked. Most commonly, this is associated with search engines where advertisers pay to have their ads higher up on the search engine results for key terms / words associated with their business. As noted by Vaibhava Desai (2019), one of the most common types of PPC is Google AdWords, which allows you to pay for top slots on Google's search engine result pages at a price "*per click*" of the links you place. When done correctly, this can bring some success with an increased volume of traffic coming towards your website. A lot of work can go into PPC campaigns as advertisers need to research and choose the correct keywords, set up ad groups, create landing pages and constantly review their effectiveness. As stated by Halvadia & Menon (2021), getting organic traffic by ranking can be very difficult and time-consuming so paid advertisements should not be avoided by companies.

2.2.3 Social Media Marketing (SMM)

Social Media Marketing is now seen as one of the most important Digital Marketing tools. Companies seeking an advantage over competitors cannot ignore social media as it helps them connect and engage with customers (Rana & Kumar, 2016). It provides SMEs with a significant tool to build and grow their brand, engage with their current and potential customers and share information on their products or service. It also provides a very important avenue to direct customers to their website through paid and non-paid advertising.

Social media users continue to grow. In January 2022 there were 4.62 billion social media users (Kemp, 2022). Compare this to the 1.48 billion back in 2012 and you can see just how drastically it has grown. As evident from the graph below, the figure continues to rise at a double-digit rate of 10.1 percent over the past 12 months. The amount of time spent using social media also continues to rise, with an average user being active for 2 hours and 27 minutes per day (Kemp, 2022). When you see statistics such as this, it's hard to see why any SME would ignore Social Media Marketing.

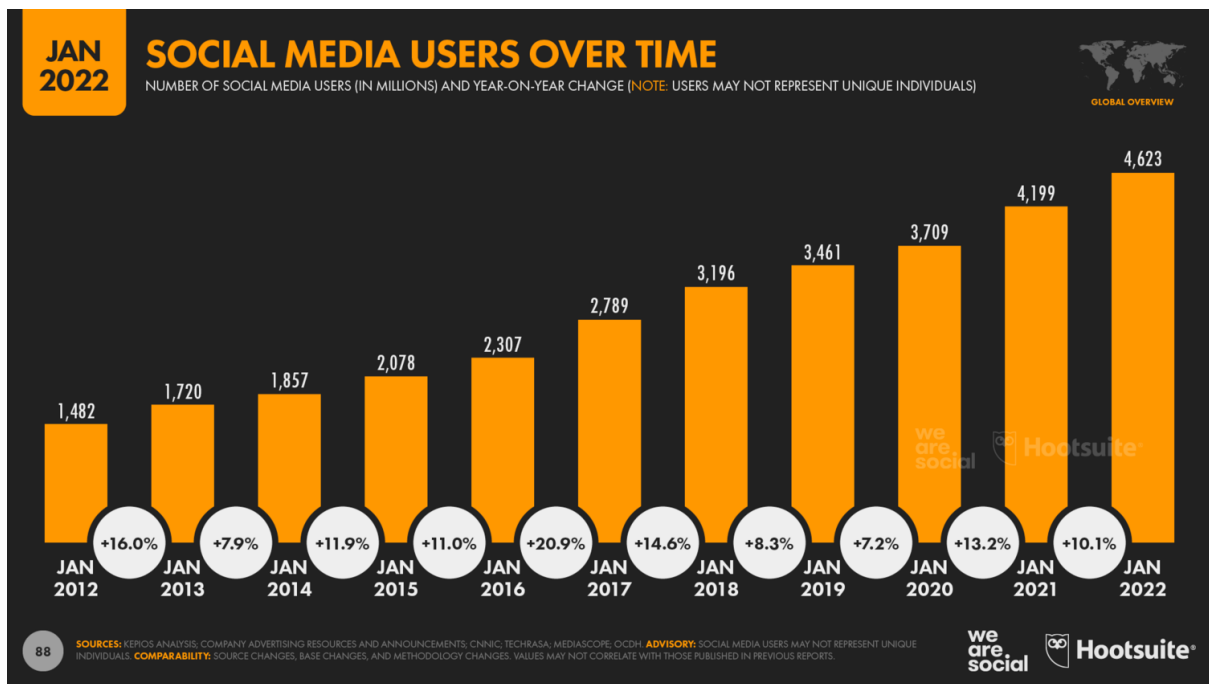


Figure 1: Social Media Growth Over Time (Kemp, 2022)

There are a wide variety of social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, TikTok, Snapchat and LinkedIn. Facebook is currently the most used social media platform, with the likes of Instagram and TikTok rising very rapidly (Kemp, 2022). SMEs can be confident with the latest data which reveals that more than 1 in 4 internet users aged 16 to 64 (27.6 percent) discover new brands, products, and services via social media ads, which is only slightly less than the figure for TV ads (Kemp, 2022). This is just a brief insight into the continually impressive figures for businesses relating to Social Media Marketing. With new functions and features being readily updated and introduced, utilising these platforms as part of your marketing strategy is a clear must.

2.2.4 Email marketing

Email marketing is the process of sending emails to customers to highlight products, services and news from the business. Email marketing often has a significant impact on the promotion of discounts, special offers or events as marketers use catchy one liners and engaging email titles to draw the attention of the reader. It was noted by Halvadia & Menon (2021) that email marketing can be used as both retention as well as an acquisition tool and it also has a significant impact on the buying behaviour of the consumers.

Knowledge of best practice and how to really maximise the benefit of email marketing continues to grow. We know that by using segmentation, you can personalise your emails based on subscribers' needs and interests. You can also deliver content that resonates with them rather than sending information that may not be suitable. Perhaps the biggest advantage of email marketing is that it is very cheap or relatively free in comparison to other marketing mediums (Kumar Sharma & Sharma Associate Professor, 2021).

2.2.5 E-commerce

As the purchase habits of consumers began to shift from traditional stores to online shopping, a new era was born. E-commerce is the practice of engaging in transactions over computer networks and the internet, including the exchange of goods and services as well as information (Rainer & C. Cegielski, 2014). It can further be defined as the process of buying, selling, transferring, or exchanging products, services, and/or information via computer networks, including the Internet (Kidane & Sharma, 2016).

2.3 From local to international audiences in the click of a button

Digital Marketing has created an endless stream of opportunities for businesses. For small enterprises, digital technologies, and in particular social media, represent a powerful opportunity (Cesaroni & Consoli, 2015). According to Nehru (2019), the prime advantage of Digital Marketing is reduced costs and enhanced reach, yet a 2019 study revealed that only 69% of SMEs in Ireland had a website. On top of that, only 32% of these companies were actually selling products or services online at the time (E-Commerce News, 2019). From an EU perspective, about 1 out of 5 companies across the EU are highly digitalised and more than 90% of SMEs lag behind in digital innovation (European Commission, 2021).

As stated by Bala & Deepak Verma (2018), consumers can access internet any place, anytime allowing them to reach SMEs with the simple click of a button – a far cry from Artisan producers setting up their stall at a Sunday Market and hoping for a good turn-out. This is supported by Nuseir (2018), who states that pre-digital media, awareness about a business or an industry was limited to local boundaries or at most within a country. It has been said that the internet and digital media are significant strategic weapons which “*go beyond*

borders and target the specific audience in accordance to the consumer needs” (Nuseir, 2016). With all of this in mind, the opportunities for SMEs in Ireland are endless with a worldwide customer base now easily accessible. Digital Marketing allows companies to vastly increase their target audience. A great example of this is when you post an item on Facebook, you equally reach an audience a continent away, as well as those located within the same block (Nunes Cruz et al., 2019).

Businesses can also interact with consumers more effectively and in diverse ways, as well as target new markets that they would not otherwise reach, thereby exponentially increasing their brand awareness (Makrides et al., 2020). This is supported by Yasmin et al (2015), which states that the primary advantages of social media, a key component of Digital Marketing, is reducing costs and enhancing the reach of the business. They also follow that up by saying Social Media Marketing allows firms to reach customers that may not be accessible due to temporal and locational limitations of existing distribution channels. Digital Marketing and the online world has enabled SMEs to do something that in years gone by they could only ever dream of – grow internationally without the need for huge costs. The internet has, moreover, provided companies with the possibility to interact with foreign customers and conduct sales without setting up physical stores or having to rely on intermediaries (Tolstoy et al., 2022).

On the surface, increased exposure to potential customers can only be a good thing. However, if we explore the argument that Nuseir (2018) gives, increased business competition of SMEs may end up resulting in a negative impact on sales as potential customers now have more choice on the internet. Added to this, there are cost implications as although some elements of Digital Marketing are relatively free, it is becoming more costly to make a significant impact online. For example, Pollák & Markovič (2021) argue that Digital Marketing can overall become costly and SMEs usually only have limited funds that can be spent on marketing communications.

2.4 Difficulty keeping up with an ever-changing environment with an eye on the risks involved

The digital landscape is always evolving and with it comes its own challenges for SMEs to keep up with these changes. Digital Marketing and technology can move at rapid pace. The most popular social media platform can be yesterday's news in a matter of months rather than years meaning that marketers can never rest on their laurels. This is highlighted by Nunes Cruz et al (2019), who states that new technologies are changing rapidly, so companies need to invest in digital tools and find a way to keep up with changes. The rapid growth of online marketing has not only changed the way people interact, it has also changed the way in which businesses attract and retain their consumers (Krizanova et al., 2019). Under the cloud of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the need to keep up with these changes has been highlighted even further still. In this situation of a global pandemic, there is a great need to adopt change and formulate new marketing strategies for increasing awareness and reaching out to the target audience (Vapiwala, 2020). This is further emphasised by Kumar Sharma & Sharma Associate Professor (2021), who states that individuals are investing more in online content, and companies that find it hard to digest this fact in their advertising strategy need to adjust quickly.

Companies are aware of the need to adapt to the rapid adoption of Digital Marketing use if they want to grow and compete against their competitors however, as highlighted by Malesev & Cherry (2021). It's all well and good knowing the benefits that Digital Marketing holds, yet for SMEs to be able to leverage these favourable conditions, they need to develop relevant digital capabilities (Tolstoy et al., 2022). It is quite clear that although the importance of Digital Marketing is known, teams are struggling to maximise its potential. What the value of each channel is in serving business clients, how to seamlessly integrate those channels in (existing) structures, and how to optimise conversion from one point to the next is far from clear from extant knowledge (Herhausen et al., 2020).

For many companies, particularly smaller businesses, the pace of this change and rapid advances in technology & internet marketing mean there is insufficient time to absorb and analyse all of the data to formulate an appropriate response (Malesev & Cherry, 2021). During this time of uncertainty, it is worth noting that the application of Digital Marketing allows

companies to be flexible and adaptable to changes in the external environment (Veleva & Tsvetanova, 2020).

The need for knowledgeable, skilled personnel to take ownership of the Digital Marketing operations of a business cannot be underestimated. The harsh reality is that without the appropriate tools, SMEs face obstacles that limit their Digital Marketing prospects. Often, a business' talents dictate its success (Ragab, 2016). Used incorrectly, Digital Marketing can have a negative impact on your business. Digital Marketing is often detrimental, when it is done by unskilled service providers (Aswani et al., 2018). This is further argued by Dole (2020) who states that online marketing will not be taken seriously by consumers if it's not carried out in a professional manner. That creates further challenges as there is a shortage of people with deep knowledge and experience in technology-related marketing strategies (Beach, 2019). Some would even go so far as to call the skill shortage a crisis (Quinn et al., 2016). Time dedicated to Digital Marketing activities, as well as knowledge, is another key barrier that SMEs face to implementing online marketing strategies. As stated by Malesev & Cherry (2021), many SMEs struggle to maintain their social media presence alongside their website. They go on to pinpoint prioritising staff resources / time to oversee these activities as a defining factor to this. Interestingly, it appears that SMEs have taken to outsourcing their Digital Marketing activities to allow for both the shortage of skilled staff and the difficulty dedicating time to this area. They also highlight the fact that external agencies are willing to take advantage of this situation (Quinn et al., 2016).

There are also a number of risks associated with utilising Digital Marketing. This is highlighted by Nuseir (2018), who states that digital media optimisation has some potential risks and disadvantages. Social Media Marketing can have a detrimental effect on your business. For instance, if customers want to vent their anger about your product or service, they can use your social network account to leave negative reviews or comments (Rana & Kumar, 2016). Opening your business to this level of online criticism can hurt the reputation of your business. Even the smallest amount of online activity can have a negative effect; for example, just one online post or tweet criticising your company might completely ruin your online reputation (Dole, 2020). Being able to deal with this negativity is paramount to maintaining your online reputation as bad news can travel just as fast as good news through social media. As social

media is not yet widely moderated or censored as mainstream media, individuals can say almost anything they want about a company or brand online (Rana & Kumar, 2016). This lack of control was further highlighted by Malesev & Cherry (2021), who found that SMEs had a lack of trust in the online advertising process. In fact, there appears to be an absence of trust when it comes to online marketing for both SMEs and consumers alike (Dole, 2020).

Another important element of Digital Marketing is measuring your return on any investment. Setting out goals for online campaigns and what is to be gained from them is vital when it comes to being able to measure their success. This is argued by TODOR (2016), who states that to be able to measure these goals, SMEs must look at the “*Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)*”. We uncover issues with regards to this when we look at Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015) who argued that the Digital Marketing activities of SMEs were “*unplanned or ad-hoc*”. This point was emphasised further still by Gagauz (2020) who stated that the biggest problem they found with the marketing of SMEs to be the fact that in most circumstances, it was “*spontaneous*”.

The literature tells us that Digital Marketing is evolving rapidly and SMEs are struggling to keep up. Their struggles include staffing, knowledge levels and, even though they are aware of the positive effects Digital Marketing can have on their business, there is still a level of mistrust with putting their brand online. It is also evident from the research that their Digital Marketing activities are currently unplanned and the success of those activities are not being measured. The next section will highlight how SMEs utilised Digital Marketing during the COVID-19 Pandemic and any challenges that they faced.

2.5 Digital Marketing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Digital Marketing is by no means a new practice. It has helped to successfully transform the attitudes and perceptions of consumers and in the end helped revolutionise many businesses (Khan & Siddiqui, 2013). From a consumer's perspective, the use of information communication technologies offer a number of benefits, including efficiency, convenience, richer and participative information, a broader selection of products, competitive pricing, cost reduction, and product diversity (Bayo-Moriones & Lera-López, 2007).

With the COVID-19 Pandemic taking a foothold in Ireland during March 2020, traditional business and shopping practices were not possible for long periods of time with stores closed due to lockdown procedures. In comparison with the rest of the world, Ireland had one of the strictest and longest lockdowns as measured by the recently developed Oxford Stringency Index (McQuinn et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the ongoing crisis, SMEs needed to still maintain their business albeit under completely different conditions than they are accustomed to. According to a study by Ritter & Pedersen (2020), the level of competitiveness is increasing and SMEs *“must be able to prepare contingency strategies to deal with the crisis due to the COVID-19 Pandemic”*.

For SMEs of all sizes and backgrounds, Digital Marketing has never been more important. With the online world the only place immune to these restrictions, it has become an indispensable tool for brands worldwide. Digital Marketing is playing a crucial role for small businesses by providing opportunities to come again on shore and enter the sea of tremendous scope (Vapiwala, 2020). One of the clear standout positives from 2020 was the rise of e-commerce. The COVID-19 Pandemic drove consumers to embrace online shopping with nearly 77% of internet users aged 16 to 64 now saying that they purchase something online each month (Kemp, 2021). It is worth noting that consumers from all generations reported purchasing goods and services online at a higher rate during the COVID-19 crisis (Jílková & Králová, 2021). This paper also highlights the fact that although restrictions on bricks & mortar stores forced their hand to delve into the world of online shopping, customers noted that they intend to continue this post pandemic. Has this become the new reality among customers throughout the world? Currently, Digital Marketing is at the heart of this success, with COVID-19 putting its implementation on fast-track and paving the way for further developments and enhancement (G.K.Ayush & Rakshith, 2020).

Digital Marketing has offered a number of potential avenues for SMEs to benefit from during this time. For example, in 2020, social media usage rose significantly by 13.5% over 12 months up to January 2021 – with nearly half a billion new users taking the global total to almost 4.2 billion (Kemp, 2021). Without the ability to sell their products in the traditional face to face method, businesses saw social media as one of their only options to engage with their customers and sell their products or services (Conlon, 2022). Added to this, the average

internet user now spends roughly 42% of their waking lives online and are spending more time online each day in 2021 than they did in previous years (Kemp, 2021).

During this period, the Irish Government had to act to support SMEs. As well as financial supports, the Government announced a raft of improvements to the Trading Online Voucher. The Trading Online Voucher (TOV) is a financial incentive to help small businesses to develop or grow their online trading presence (LEO, 2022). The grant was already in operation and used to encourage businesses to begin trading online with a new or improved e-commerce website. It is administered locally through the Local Enterprise Offices. In its original form, it gave a maximum of 50% of the costs (up to €2,500) associated with these works. As the COVID-19 Pandemic took hold, this was increased to 90%, with the same maximum figure, and included Digital Marketing activities to draw attention to e-commerce websites as well as the development of the websites themselves. The scheme has had a significant impact on SMEs nationwide with almost 6,000 companies availing of it over 4 years and an 85% increase in enquiries reported by those companies (Donlon, 2019).

The literature has shown the impact COVID-19 had on SMEs all over the world with the enforced closure of traditional bricks and mortar stores. SMEs were forced to react with a greater importance now placed on Digital Marketing efforts, particularly as online usage soared. With supports in place by the Irish government, SMEs in Ireland were able to take advantage of this scenario with it becoming apparent that customers planned on continuing their online shopping habits post COVID-19. As mentioned earlier in this section, the Irish Government had a number of supports available to SMEs through Local Enterprise Offices. The next section will delve further into giving an overall look at supports and initiatives which have been introduced at a domestic and EU level.

2.6 Domestic and EU Supports

Although this section is not meant to be an exhaustive list, it is worth noting for the context of this research some of the initiatives that have been introduced over the past number of years with regard to domestic and EU supports / initiatives for SMEs and their Digital Marketing activities.

The crucial enabling role of digital tools in the expansion of EU economies was acknowledged in 2010 as part of a 10-year digital agenda for Europe. **A Digital Agenda for Europe** stated its aim was to deliver *“sustainable economic and social benefits from a digital single market based on fast and ultra-fast internet and interoperable applications”* (European Commission, 2010). With initiatives such as lower prices for electronic communications, better internet connectivity for everyone, and better consumer protection in telecommunications with legislation on privacy and data protection, this was focused on improving access for consumers and businesses to digital goods and services across Europe.

In 2015, a **Digital Single Market Strategy for Europe** was released which set out specific measures in order to create *“a fair, open and secure digital environment”* (European Commission, 2015). These pillars included improved consumer and business access to digital products / services across Europe, favourable conditions for the growth of digital networks / services and maximizing the potential for the digital economy.

In 2021, a new 10-year digital compass was introduced – **the European way for the digital decade** which outlines the EU’s digital ambitions in concrete terms. This includes that at least *“80% of all adults should have basic digital skills”* and that *“more than 90% of EU SMEs should reach at least a basic level of digital intensity”* (European Commission, 2021a).

Domestically, there are a number of supports available to SMEs, some of which are listed below;

Local Enterprise Office
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trading Online Vouchers (TOV) Grants of max. €2,500 to help SMEs develop their website or digital strategy• Export Marketing Grant Grant of max €2,500 to part-fund costs incl preparing marketing material and developing websites targeting overseas markets.• Digital Start Provides support to create a digital strategy.• Training & Mentoring Mentoring programme, training seminars and events.
Enterprise Ireland
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online Retail Scheme Financial support to develop a "sophisticated" online presence. Max grant €64,000.• Digital Marketing Capability Aim to support the development of Digital Marketing strategies through support and financial assistance of max €35,000.• Digital Discovery Consultancy grant to develop digital strategy and road map. Max grant of up to €5,000
Miscellaneous
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fáilte Ireland - Digital That Delivers Irish attractions, day tours and visitor experiences to develop their digital presence. Funding amounts are based on the business requirements.• Marketing Assistance Programme (MAP) - Bord Bia Helps Irish food, drink and horticulture producers with financial support for a range of marketing activities. Up to 50% of the costs are covered judged on a case by case basis.

Figure 2: Supports (Bord Bia, 2022; Enterprise Ireland, 2022; Fáilte Ireland, 2022; LEO, 2022a)

The next section of the literature review will examine the future of traditional marketing methods and if they are being replaced by digital.

2.7 A new era of marketing as traditional methods are left behind

As we enter a post COVID-19 world, it would be easy to wonder what the future holds for traditional forms of marketing. There are many elements to traditional marketing methods with items such as posters, radio ads, print ads in magazines or newspapers and brochures. In fact, TODOR (2016) states that traditional marketing is “anything except digital means to brand your product or logo”. One of the biggest advantages to traditional marketing could be argued as the level of trust that it holds over Digital Marketing. This is highlighted by TODOR

(2016) and echoed by Malesev & Cherry (2021) who blamed the lack of Digital Marketing usage from the respondents on a *“lack of trust and transparency in the advertising process”*.

A certain lack of education towards Digital Marketing seems to push some SMEs towards traditional methods with Lekhanya (2015) pointing to the perception that Digital Marketing is too expensive and needs skills beyond their reach. This was supported by Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015) who called this lack of knowledge a *“formidable obstacle”* and stated that SMEs were not familiar with the benefits that Digital Marketing holds. With owners of SMEs being arguably unaware of the full potential that digital tools have, many tend to favour traditional methods which are seen to be easier to use and generate immediate / short-term success (Gagauz, 2020).

A more blended approach has been debated by researchers in the past which suggests that traditional marketing methods still have a role to play. In fact, many businesses still feel that Digital Marketing is complimentary to traditional methods (Pollák & Markovič, 2021). Why is this? Particularly when consumers’ confidence in the likes of advertising on TV, Radio and Magazines have declined (Nadanyiova et al., 2020). A combination of digital and traditional marketing methods were further recommended by Dole (2020) who stated that the *“limitations that Digital Marketing holds”* was the reasoning behind this.

In a digital era, this is a continuous debate but more often than not, many researchers would argue that traditional marketing has lost its importance and that Digital Marketing has surpassed it. For example, traditional marketing makes it difficult for smaller retailers to compete with larger organisations due to the cost involved when compared to Digital Marketing (Bala & Deepak Verma, 2018). With that, there is an evolution taking place in marketing methods. Companies have been moving away from traditional approaches with a greater focus on dynamic online activities (Li et al., 2018). Some have gone further to say that with an added importance being placed on marketing innovation, traditional marketing methods have become insufficient (Najm et al., 2021). It is interesting to note that with the argued rise in Digital Marketing effectiveness over traditional methods, traditional media itself is somewhat in the midst of an evolution. They are becoming more digital with the likes of internet radio, QR codes on posters that link to online content and even Smart TVs (Zaimovic Tarik & Sutrovic Adnan, 2018).

The literature has shown us that despite a lack of education previously pushing SMEs towards favouring traditional marketing methods, more recent studies suggest that they now have a preference for digital. Traditional methods were seen as an easier option and a lack of skills or education was one of the main driving factors behind SMEs struggling to adapt to Digital Marketing. The research will now move onto the impact Digital Marketing can have on rural businesses.

2.8 Rural businesses and Digital Marketing

Rural businesses can encounter difficulties that perhaps those in larger cities would not. For example, they are often isolated and need to find new ways to expand their reach (Townsend et al., 2016). It is argued by Townsend et al. (2013) that geographical remoteness can “*isolate rural businesses from potential clients*”. Interestingly, the study by Townsend et al. (2013) presented the case that some rural business owners have less confidence or knowledge of digital tools and are less likely to adopt the use of digital technologies for their business because of it. This problem was highlighted further by Michailidis et al. (2011) which stated that rural residents are “*latecomers in using the internet for their business*”. This is despite research by Barber et al. (2021) which suggested that “*social media advertising by rural businesses can significantly increase engagement with consumers*”. Following on from this, feedback from another study by Townsend et al. (2015) found that rural SMEs feel that it is “*essential to have a professional online presence*”. It has also been argued that rural businesses can gain access to wider markets to improve their business performance by using online platforms (Tiwasing, 2021). Despite that, and added to the issue surrounding knowledge and confidence, rural businesses can also struggle to recruit and retain staff with the skills in Digital Marketing that they need to help their business grow (Cosgrave, 2020).

In addition to the typical issues associated with being a rural business, Lucaci & Nastase (2021) stated that “*rural areas of Europe have been deeply influenced by the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic*” and have been “*forced to identify and explore new solutions and initiatives*”. This has included selling their products online which resulted in favourable advantage for those involved. On the other side of the coin, the COVID-19 Pandemic may have inadvertently solved one of the biggest issues as earlier mentioned, around skilled staff. With the outbreak of COVID-19, remote working became a typical occurrence. Remote working is seen as being

particularly advantageous to rural and regional development (Western Development Commission, 2022). Since the initial outbreak of COVID-19, according to Western Development Commission (2022), up to three-quarters of people who are relocating across Ireland are under 40 years old, and nearly half have a higher level of formal education. Just over a tenth of survey respondents said they have relocated within Ireland since COVID-19 because they can work remotely. Galway and Mayo, situated in the West of Ireland, make up two of the top five relocation counties.

The research suggests that businesses in rural areas can utilise Digital Marketing to reach wider audiences than they currently do. Despite this, a lack of knowledge was yet again earmarked as a reason as to why they fail to do so. Under the backdrop of COVID-19, businesses in rural areas were particularly affected by the restriction measures that were put in place. Due to this, they were forced into exploring new ways to continue operating. With a now increased focus on remote working, the research has suggested that this may help alleviate the issue of a skill shortage in the area of digital. The following conclusion section has drawn together the main considerations from this literature review.

2.8 Conclusion

From this review of the literature, we have seen that there is a change in how rural SMEs view Digital Marketing with a more favourable view taken from recent studies during the COVID-19 Pandemic (N. Pandey, 2021; Rashid et al., 2021). We have also seen initiatives at an EU level to encourage the use of Digital and the supports that have cascaded down from them in Figure 2. Despite previous studies which focus on the West of Ireland, including Nevin & Torres (2012) and Cawley et al. (2007), there has been a scarcity of research based on Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland. In a post-pandemic world, the researcher wanted to explore this topic to address this deficit and to further study this rapidly changing area. There was a difficulty collecting data given the restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic however, how this will be mitigated will be discussed later.

From the literature we have seen the benefits and risks that Digital Marketing hold for SMEs. We have not been able to ascertain what barriers have prevented SMEs, specifically in the West of Ireland, from utilising Digital Marketing. Given the recent nature of the COVID-19

Pandemic, there is also a scarcity of research on its impact on the Digital Marketing practices of SMEs in the West of Ireland.

Due to the scarcity of research into Digital Marketing practices uncovered in this literature review relating specifically to recent challenges faced by SMEs in the West of Ireland, the following research questions and objectives emerged;

QUESTIONS:

1. What barriers, if any, have prevented SMEs in the West of Ireland from utilising Digital Marketing?
2. How has the use of Digital Marketing by SMEs been impacted by the challenges presented during the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic?
3. Has the West of Ireland location of SMEs impacted their use of Digital Marketing?

OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify what difficulties SMEs in the West of Ireland have experienced when attempting to utilise Digital Marketing.
2. Explore how SMEs in the West of Ireland utilised Digital Marketing to adapt their business to abide by the limitations placed on them during the COVID 19 Pandemic.
3. Investigate the attitudes of SMEs in the West of Ireland toward traditional versus Digital Marketing methods.
4. Investigate supports made available to SMEs in the West of Ireland to help implement Digital Marketing practices.

The next chapter will outline the considerations given to the research design in order to address these objectives and help answer the research questions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodology employed by the researcher to address the objectives and questions which have been uncovered as a result of the literature review. Each section of this chapter will focus on different areas that the researcher needed to examine including any ethical considerations, data collection methods, sampling approach and details in relation to the pilot study that was carried out.

3.2 Research Design

“Research design provides the glue that holds the research project together.” (Trochim, 2006)

The research design of a study determines each factor of the study process including, but not limited to, how the participants were selected, how data was collected and how it was analysed. The outcome of any study may be deemed inaccurate or worthless if an appropriate research design has not taken place. As stated by Wright et al (2016), the research approach or methodology should be in line with the researcher’s worldview as this is the key to quality research design. There are many examples of characteristics of research design, including the below Figure 3, with a great importance placed on neutrality throughout the entire process.



Figure 3: Characteristics of Research Design (Team Leverage Education, 2021)

The research methodology employed in this instance was exploratory. As defined by Swaraj (2019), exploratory research is when a study is carried out with the intention of exploring an area where there is currently little known on the subject. It goes on to state that this type of research is usually a qualitative study and is “*characterised by its flexibility*”. As highlighted earlier, there is a scarcity of research on the impact the COVID-19 Pandemic has had on the Digital Marketing practices of SMEs in the West of Ireland. There are many studies which are exploratory in nature which have influenced this study including N. Pandey et al. (2020), A. Sharma et al. (2020) and Zhang & Erturk (2022).

A case study was considered, however Fusch et al. (2017) argues that a case study is often subjected to researcher bias. This is further emphasised by Shanmugam (2020) which stated that case studies were “*especially prone to researcher bias*”. With the researcher constantly mindful of the need to remain impartial, the case study methodology was not chosen in order to limit any aspects of bias.

3.2.1 Qualitative Research

A qualitative method of research is traditionally used to collect in-depth details on the topic that is being researched. Qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of experiences and context according to Cleland (2017). It also allows the researcher to ask questions that cannot be translated into numbers. Rahi (2017) supports this statement by stating that qualitative research offers in-depth details on a particular topic.

The aim of the study was to capture the opinions and experiences of SMEs in the West of Ireland. A simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer to the questions that were created would not have been sufficient and so the qualitative research method was chosen. The data collection instrument was to be in-depth semi-structured interviews. A similar method was used by Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015), however according to their own limitations, this study only comes from a region in Finland and therefore cannot / should not be generalised. A study on what lessons can be learned from online marketing and networking by Zhang & Erturk (2022) was also exploratory in nature. It cited “*gaps in literature*” as reasoning for the study to go in an exploratory and qualitative direction. It used semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling which influenced this study further as they were able to abstract enough data from

their interviews to answer their research questions. A. Sharma et al. (2020) stated that their study which used exploratory research provided a “roadmap for future research”. This study also used in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather their data with each interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. The data this study extracted from these interviews provided an understanding of the challenges that the participants experienced as it examined if small travel agencies were ready for Digital Marketing.

3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-Structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection for this research. Numerous studies showcase semi-structured interviews as being an indispensable tool to uncovering thoughts, opinions, knowledge and ideas when carrying out qualitative research (Deterding & Waters, 2018; Kakilla, 2021).

Similar explorative studies which influenced the methodology in this research carried out semi-structured interviews. The work of N. Pandey et al. (2020) for example, used this method to compare themes from the interviews to that of the previous literature on the topic. This method allowed for more informal dialogue between the researcher and the participants of the research. It was also chosen on the basis that frequently, the information obtained from semi-structured interviews gives not merely answers, but also the reasons for the answers (Cronin-Gilmore, 2009). It meant that although a list of questions were prepared (**Appendix C**), the interview could be somewhat flexible and supplemented by follow-up questions, comments and probes. This method allowed the researcher to explore participant thoughts and beliefs about the topics discussed (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In line with Flick (2018), all of the interviews were well prepared with respect to the topic of the interview and the questions asked were thought out in line with the aims and objectives of the study.

Focus groups were considered as part of the study; however, they are not without their disadvantages (Leung & Savithiri, 2009). One major issue with focus groups is that the discussions can be dominated by one or two group members who ensure that only their opinion is articulated (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Smithson, 2000). This goes against the nature of this research which is seeking to learn from the experiences of all of the participants in the study.

3.3 Ethics

There were many ethical considerations to be taken into account with this research. The main ethical principles are in accordance with the Atlantic Technological University research ethics and research integrity policies.

This research received ethical approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee in December 2021 (**Appendix A**).

The guidelines to which this ethical approval was granted include the promotion of honesty and professionalism throughout the research process. It also includes guidelines to state that participation is on an informed and voluntary basis, there is respect for anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, especially in the context of any commercially sensitive information and the researcher declares any possible conflicts of interest.

3.3.1 Maintaining Anonymity

The names of those taking part in the study and any information relating to their business name have been kept anonymous and will not be included in any other publications that come from the research.

All participants have been given a pseudonym in replace of their name. They are as follows; Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E, Participant F, Participant G and Participant H.

There is no information mentioned which helps to identify the participants or their respective business.

3.3.2 Data Protection

All of the data collected, including but not limited to, the recordings of the interview (written or otherwise) are stored in a folder on the ATU Student One Drive. This folder is only accessed using unique login details and a password that has not be shared with any other individual or group. This information will only be kept for the length of time that it takes to be awarded a master's degree from the resulting final thesis report. This data will then be destroyed in line

with the best practices for the destruction of any research data – files will permanently deleted from the secure folder and any paper recordings will be shredded.

All data was processed in compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (2022) and the ATU data protection policy (ATU, 2022). The device being used to access this information is password protected and has an anti-virus software installed.

3.3.3 Informed Consent

All participants in the research were given an information & consent form which explained in detail what the aim of the study is, where any data recorded would be stored and what was expected of them (**Appendix B**). This had to be electronically signed and sent back to the researcher before the interview could take place. It states that they have the right to withdraw at any time that they may wish to do so and that they are under no obligation to answer every question asked of them. They also had the option to contact the researcher with any further questions or concerns should they have them.

All of the prospective candidates were contacted through their company contact details which are readily available online. If a participant needed to withdraw from the study, they could do so by emailing the researcher directly. The participants can withdraw from the study at any time up until the point of final submission of the thesis. All of their information would have been destroyed and a suitable replacement who fell within the criteria would have been found. Withdrawal could take place at any time until the thesis was submitted for evaluation by the ATU Examinations Board.

Due to the ongoing restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic and its ease of access, all of the in-depth interviews took place online via a secure Microsoft Teams link which was sent directly to the participant's email address. The email containing the link and a reminder of the option to withdraw from the study was sent to them three days prior to the meeting. This difficulty surrounding data collection was yet another reason for the research being exploratory. Difficulty with data collection is often cited as a key indicator of exploratory research (George, 2021).

3.4 Sampling & Research Context

The sampling method used during this research was purposive. Although data collection is a crucial part of research, selecting the manner of where this data comes from is arguably even more important. According to Etikan (2016), the purposive sampling technique is *“the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses”*.

As the name suggests, purposive sampling is when those involved with the research have been purposely chosen as the researcher feels that these individuals or organisations fit the profile of the people that they need to study. The idea behind choosing purposive sampling is to concentrate on those who will be able to assist with the relevant research and is in line with the study methodology chosen (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The West of Ireland is comprised of the counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway & Clare (Western Development Commission, 2016). In 2016, there were 54,410 SMEs registered in the seven counties (Western Development Commission, 2016). With that in mind, the researcher planned on interviewing an owner of an SME in each county. With Galway having a significantly higher population number than the other counties, two interviewees were chosen from this region bringing the total number of semi-formal interviews to eight. Limiting the number of participants in the study allowed for in-depth interviews to take place. In-depth interviews are argued by Showkat & Parveen (2017) as being one of the *“most efficient methods of collecting primary data”* and allow the researcher to uncover extensive details of the interviewee’s experiences. The criteria for those being selected, as highlighted in Figure 4, were very specific and allowed for rich data to be collected. Due to restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic and the difficulty collecting data, all interviews were held via Microsoft Teams with each interview having a planned duration of approximately one hour. This duration would allow for in-depth discussions to take place.

Following on from the pilot study, and from research by Gagauz (2020), which stated that in the *“absence of a marketing manager in SMEs, the marketing responsibility falls on the owner”*, the researcher added that the owner taking part needed to be directly involved with the marketing of their business as a prerequisite to being chosen to participate in the study.

Every effort was made to have a gender balance amongst the participants, and they needed to be using Digital Marketing for their business since at least 2020. All participants had to be over the age of 18. Participants were offered no incentives, financial or otherwise, to participate in the study. They, like everyone else, will have access to the final thesis document if they so wish.

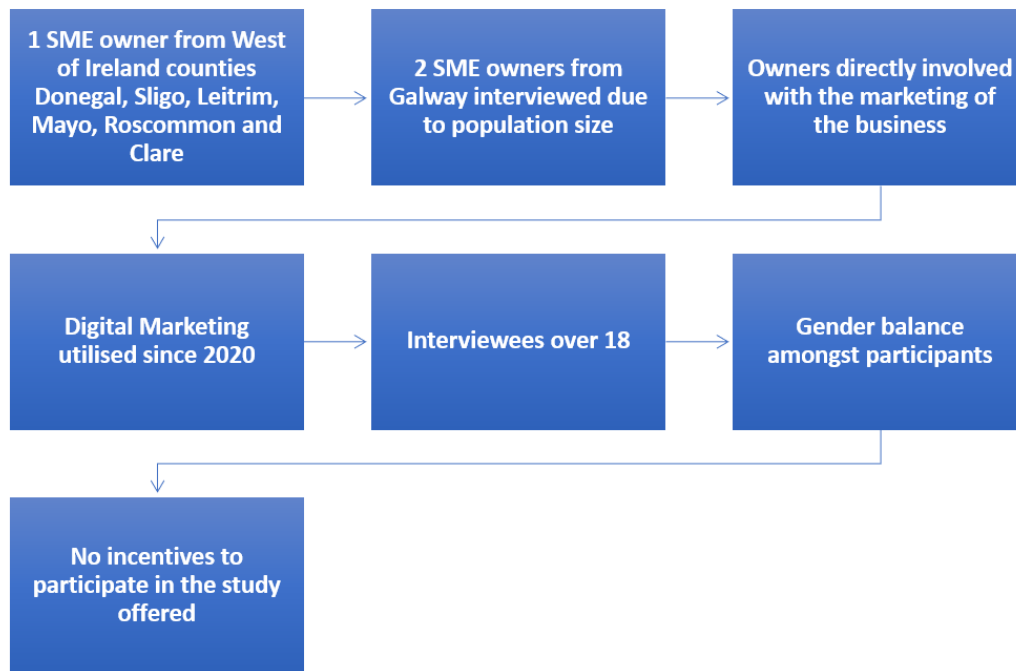


Figure 4: Interview Sampling Criteria

3.5 Understanding Bias

It is important to note that despite the researcher working in Digital Marketing, there is no conflict of interest or unresolved bias which may conflict the outcome of this study. There was no prior relationship, working or otherwise, with any participants who took part in the research. This research has been carried out for academic purposes only and each participant was made aware of same. It was explained clearly to anyone taking part in the study that this research bears no relation to any contract of work the researcher currently has or will have in the future.

Bias can be defined as any tendency that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). Bias can occur in any phase of research, from the planning phase

to data collection and analysis. Understanding research bias allows researchers to critically and independently review the scientific literature (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). The researcher remained cognisant of this throughout the research as in their current role, they already have formed strong opinions on Digital Marketing implementation for SMEs. As such, the researcher needed to remain open to all ideas and information given by those taking part in the study and any literature that was being reviewed. An example of this is the sampling method used. The researcher was aware that according to a study by Sharma (2017), it could be argued that using purposive sampling could be prone to researcher bias. It goes on to state that this is only when such judgements are *“ill-conceived or poorly considered; that is, where judgements have not been based on clear criteria, whether a theoretical framework, expert elicitation or some other accepted criteria”*. The researcher believes this is not the case in this instance.

All information in the thesis will be readily accessible to users through the ATU Library so there will be no direct benefit to the researcher or their business.

Yarborough (2021), argued that the most prominent safeguard against bias is peer review. As well as approval to carry out this research by the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee in December 2021, this research has been consistently reviewed by Dr. Janine McGinn and Sharon Boyle. Any level of bias encountered by either tutor could see them reject manuscripts out of concern for bias (Yarborough, 2021).

3.6 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with a separate interviewee that was not included in the final research project. Conducting a pilot study is a typical characteristic of exploratory research (Swaraj, 2019). According to research carried out by Janghorban et al. (2014), the use of pilot studies can be summarised into four areas;

- 1) *To find problems and barriers related to participants' recruitment*
- 2) *Being engaged in research as a qualitative researcher*
- 3) *Assessing the acceptability of observation or interview protocol and*

4) To determine epistemology and methodology of research

The pilot consisted of two online interviews through Microsoft Teams and was carried out using the initial set of questions that were prepared by the researcher (**Appendix C**). The pilot was treated as if it were part of the actual final study itself and as such, was treated with the same high level of importance. The pilot was extremely beneficial as it allowed the researcher the time needed to not only practice their interviewing technique but also allowed a greater familiarisation with the software being used.

In terms of the questions being asked, upon reviewing the pilot study, the researcher felt that two of the original questions disturbed the flow of the conversation somewhat. They were almost asking two questions in one and on both occasions the interviewee only referenced the latter of the two. For the study itself, these were broken up into stand-alone questions and better reflected what the researcher was trying to achieve. During the questioning, it made the researcher more aware of the sample and who to interview. Originally, the sample contained that of SME owners however it became apparent that not all owners of SMEs were directly involved with the marketing of their business. Therefore, the sampling was updated to reflect that prerequisite.

On a positive note, the style of the semi-structured interviews worked well and it allowed the researcher a great deal of freedom to probe further on topics that the interviewee had touched on. It also allowed the researcher to stay on track as there was a full list of questions to constantly refer back to if the conversation ever went off course.

3.7 Data Analysis

“Data analysis is central to credible qualitative research.” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)

As per the approved application to the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee, all interviews undertaken as part of the research were recorded and kept in a folder on the ATU Student One Drive. As touched on by Flick (2018), data is usually transcribed from recorded interviews. It was concluded by Bailey (2008), that this should be the first step in analysing data as the process itself involves making judgements.

According to Nowell et al. (2017), there is a greater need for guidelines to support researchers in conducting qualitative research that is trustworthy. Given the need for a structure to identify and evaluate the data which was collected, a Thematic Analysis was carried out. Defined by Braun & Clarke (2006) as a method for analysing and identifying the themes that arise within your data, it *“organises and describes the data in detail”*. A good thematic analysis does more than just summarise the data that has been collected, it will make sense of it. Taking a semantic approach, the researcher was only concentrating on what the participants had said.

The researcher followed the six-phase framework for conducting this type of analysis that is provided by Braun & Clarke (2006);

Step #1 Become familiar with the data

Step #2 Generate initial codes

Step #3 Search for themes

Step #4 Review themes

Step #5 Define themes

Step #6 Write-up

Each step to the framework is very self-explanatory and involves becoming extremely familiar with your data so you can extract any themes that emerge. Although the researcher did this by hand initially with print-outs and highlighters, eventually this was managed through Microsoft Excel which was earmarked as an effective tool for doing so by Bree & Gallagher (2016). Crucial to the choosing of this software was the fact that the researcher didn't need an in-depth knowledge of using Microsoft Excel as the colour co-ordinating and table creation were very straightforward. The coding process allowed the researcher to focus on specific characteristics of the data which is needed to identify the themes within it. Braun & Clarke (2006) stated that a theme *“captures something important about the data in relation to the research question”* and *“represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the*

data set". Coherent and distinct themes surfaced from the data as it was reviewed, with several of them prominently featuring throughout. There were a total of six main themes that were found. By the end of analysing the data of the 8th interview there were no new themes emerging therefore the researcher had reached the point of saturation. Research saturation indicates that no new data is being found and further data collection is unnecessary (Saunders et al., 2018). This data is discussed in Chapter Four: Findings & Discussion.

During this process, the researcher once again needed to have an open mind about themes that may not have aligned with views that they may have held prior to the research being carried out. The importance of doing this cannot be underestimated, as argued by O Leary (2004), if you don't acknowledge any pre-conceived notions that the researcher may have, you are likely to only find what you expect to find.

3.8 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher outlined the considerations taken with regard to the research design and explained as to why it was chosen. Studies by Zhang & Erturk (2022), N. Pandey et al. (2020) and A. Sharma et al. (2020) were all cited as studies which influenced the exploratory nature of this study and the resulting qualitative method of gathering data.

The next chapter looks at the data that was collected from the semi-structured interviews and the themes that were found. It will compare these themes with those found in the literature review. There will be a thorough analysis of each theme and how they relate to the research questions.

Chapter Four: Findings & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the results from the exploratory research that was carried out and present a thematic analysis of the data that was generated from the eight in-depth semi-structured interviews. The analysis will identify the themes that arose from the interviews and highlight how they relate to the research found in the literature.

There was a total of six main themes that emerged from the data which have been named as follows;

1. Lack of knowledge
2. Fear of online uncertainty
3. West of Ireland leverage
4. Indispensable supports
5. The transition to online from bricks & mortar
6. Clear digital focus

As a reminder, each participant has been given a pseudonym in replace of their name. They are as follows; Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E, Participant F, Participant G and Participant H.

4.2 Themes

4.2.1 Lack of knowledge

The literature review found that organisations, particularly SMEs, lack comprehensive knowledge in relation to Digital Marketing (N. Pandey et al. 2020). The perspectives of several interviewees concur with this finding from the literature. Some of them had spoken about previously believing their own knowledge of Digital Marketing had been of a high standard. Once they began making attempts at e-commerce, they realised that their knowledge levels were not as high as they had originally thought. Participant H recounted *“I had thought that I was pretty good with Digital Marketing until we started trying to sell online”*. Unfortunately,

this had a negative impact on the confidence of Participant C when it came to online marketing as he stated, *“I felt as if I had been back to square one when we first tried selling online. This was coming from a position of relative comfort when it came to online marketing”*.

This lack of knowledge further hindered a number of participants who expressed that they had not maximised the full potential of their efforts online, despite a desire to improve their performance. Participant B felt that they had not given a good account of themselves as they *“have been very conservative when it comes to utilising Digital Marketing in the past, mainly because we didn’t understand it”*. Participant A noted that they struggled particularly with their social media in this regard by saying *“our main channel is a constant struggle with the message that we want to get across on social media. I feel as if sometimes we are afraid to do something different because we don’t fully understand it”*. These comments are in line with the current research worldwide including the earlier mentioned works of Beach (2019), Quinn et al. (2016) and Malesev & Cherry (2021).

Despite attempts at upskilling, it was interesting to note remarks made by participants who felt that the relevant courses they took didn’t actually prepare them for the work that was needed to be carried out effectively.

“I didn’t have a clue about any of it. When I was in college not too long ago, online marketing wasn’t even a module in the business course that I completed.” (Participant C)

“I studied business marketing in college but it’s in real practice day to day that I actually learned. When I first started with it all, I became really overwhelmed.” (Participant D)

“Trying to understand each platform, the audiences and the advertising is very difficult. Unfortunately, you can only really learn by doing as the courses online were not up-to-date with the latest emerging platform.” (Participant G)

4.2.2 Fear of online uncertainty

Another theme that transpired which significantly impacted the participants was a fear of online uncertainty. This took a number of different forms with the main observation made

being in relation to negative reviews and / or comments. As research from Lee et al. (2008) suggests, negative online consumer reviews are said to have an even more powerful impact on the public opinion of your business compared to positive reviews. Participant C recounted an experience they had whereby they were the victim of a believed cyber-attack with a large number of negative reviews. They said that *“The whole negative side of social media with negative reviews is deeply concerning. We don’t know was it competitors or where it came from but it’s so difficult to control”*. They also went on to further emphasise this point when they expressed their dismay at another occasion where negative reviews impacted their business and even their own personal life. This was from an issue that was out of their control.

“We had stock issues and off the back of that, people were getting frustrated and started reviewing our business negatively. It had a hugely negative effect on our brand reputation. From a mental health perspective, it can really get on top of you.”

The point on negative reviews was further echoed by Participant D who stated that they had a *“love / hate relationship”* with online reviews as it can be *“very demanding and counterproductive”*. It was evident from the earlier research in the literature of Dole (2020) and Rana & Kumar (2016) that this was an issue that many SMEs felt strongly about.

Grégoire et al. (2015) called the spread of negative publicity through social media as *“truly ugly”* and that it represented *“the peak of online threats”*. This resonates with the perspectives of Participant F and Participant G. Participant F spoke of their desire to *“protect”* their brand to the point where it stopped them utilising online platforms for *“a very long time”*. An extreme example of how negativity can spread like wildfire online and the damage it can do to your brand was recounted by Participant G;

“Some bad PR started to circulate on social media from a collaboration that we had. We got an awful lot of backlash online for something that was completely out of our control. Twitter is quite a scary place. We decided not to respond because you can never win on Twitter. It really showed the dark side to online marketing.”

The financial element to the uncertainty surrounding the online world was highlighted by both Participant A and Participant B. Participant A expressed their concern about how once

they placed a paid advertisement online they deemed it to be *“entirely out of our control”*. Participant B highlighted a different issue when it came to working with a digital agency. They felt that giving the agency access to their analytics gave away too much information and allowed them to increase their prices. The participant feared that if they didn’t pay the money they would be *“left in no man’s land”* and that the spend was *“uncertain to what figure it would eventually become, both in terms of paying the marketing agency themselves and the cost of the ads”*.

4.2.3 West of Ireland leverage

A significant theme that the researcher did not anticipate was the West of Ireland being used as leverage for the participants in the study. The sheer passion that the participants have for the West of Ireland was summed up perfectly by Participant A; *“coming from the West of Ireland has loads of advantages, you can probably tell how passionate I am about it. If we do any sort of PR it’s about being from the West of Ireland”*. This went largely against the research discovered to date including the work of Townsend et al. (2015) which suggested that being a rural business was seen as a disadvantage.

In a time where remote working is encouraged, several participants spoke about attracting talent to work with their businesses. Participant B spoke of how they are now *“attracting talent from the multi-nationals in bigger cities”* as they use their location to sell working for their company. They concluded by saying that the *“low cost of living compared to bigger cities and the fact that we can market the outdoors has been a major bonus for us”*. Tapping into a sense of community, Participant E pinpointed the *“historical pattern of people from here moving abroad or to bigger cities to find work”* as something that they could benefit from as they felt that *“people don’t have to do so anymore”*. They spoke about how they tell their story online and that *“people buy into it, we’re creating long term employment in a small rural town”*. This appears to be how rural businesses in the West of Ireland are going about solving the lack of skilled staff issue as raised by Cosgrave (2020).

In a time when businesses are looking for content to share online to tell their story and separate themselves from the pack, Participant C observed how their *“location is huge for us”* and that they *“stage the photos and videos that we use online with the backdrop of the sea”*

or up in the mountain beside us". Participant H went further by declaring that the *"West of Ireland has its own marketing panache"*. The method to get this content into the public eye was mentioned by Participant G who vocalised their pleasure that *"online marketing has given us the freedom to tell our own story. We're no longer relying on the press to come west"*. This supports findings presented by Barber et al. (2021) and what was touched on by Nuseir (2018).

The competitive positions of SMEs rest on their ability to succeed in global markets (Gillespie & Swan, 2021). Therefore, it is arguably more important than ever for businesses to enter new markets. Participants in the study expressed their belief that being in the West of Ireland will allow them to target new markets online, particularly America. Participant E declared their intention to play into the *"very romantic notion about rural-Ireland for the American market online"*. Participant H emphasised this point even further stating that on their quest to conquer America, they will *"incorporate the West of Ireland into a lot of our marketing. We'll market the fact that it was the gate to the Underworld, Celtic Mythology and all of that"*. They went onto say that they *"couldn't do that if we were based anywhere else in the country"*.

4.2.4 Indispensable supports

As discussed in 2.6 of the literature review and Figure 2, support for SMEs can come in many forms. The participants in the study benefitted from a range of supports which they found indispensable to their overall continued success.

The concept of mentorship or mentors is something that emerged on a number of occasions with Participants H, D and B, all benefiting from some level of mentoring. Participant D placed their success on grasping Digital Marketing down to the work of their mentor. They said how they were *"winging it from an online marketing perspective at the beginning until my mentor helped me get to grips with the essentials"*. The Local Enterprise Office (LEO) assigned a mentor to Participant H which they felt was *"extremely helpful"* and *"contributed to their online growth"*. The sharing of knowledge and skills by mentors when it came to Digital Marketing proved particularly beneficial for Participant B who claimed that *"some of the*

learnings we got from working with our mentor made all of the difference with the online marketing end of things”.

Financial supports, particularly those around the development of e-commerce websites and Digital Marketing campaigns came at the right time. *“The trading online voucher (TOV) gave us the injection that we needed to get selling online just as we started to see a slump”* was the statement Participant D made when asked about supports. Many of the others interviewed received similar financial support;

“We got supports from LEO during COVID and we used it to redevelop our website. The supports offered by the LEO have a lot of merit and didn’t stop there. We were able to implement a campaign to draw people to our online store with their financial backing.”
(Participant B)

“There are fantastic supports at our disposal. They are giving a massive range of supports, particularly with a push to get businesses online. At one point, there was a grant to cover 90% of the cost of a new e-commerce website which we availed of.”
(Participant F)

“During the start of the pandemic, we got financial supports to rebuild our website. At that point, we didn’t have an online store or the funds to build one. This has opened up a new avenue and revenue stream for our business.” (Participant G)

Similar supports have been raised as invaluable by previous studies. The work of Ritter & Pedersen (2020) and Donlon (2019) both mentioned how important supports to SMEs are in taking advantage of online marketing.

There were however, suggestions of ways to improve these supports. For instance, Participant E believes that a major flaw to the design of the financial supports provided by the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) is that you *“have to spend it before you get it”* and that it *“puts people off as they may not have the money to begin with”*. Participant A agreed with this statement and also mentioned the fact that although there is seemingly a lot of funding out there, it can be *“very difficult to find out about”*. They suggested that *“the actual marketing of the funds and supports themselves could be improved”*. Other non-financial supports could

help ease the burden on SMEs. Participant G wants to see a space created where *“start-up or smaller businesses can go to create content for social media”*. They felt that the courses being ran by the LEO and similar organisations were *“too general”* and that *“online marketing has moved on a lot recently”* so the current offering of courses needed to be improved.

4.2.5 The transition to online from bricks & mortar

Despite research by A. Pandey & Parmar (2019) to suggest that before the COVID-19 Pandemic and digital boom, online shopping had been growing rapidly, there had still been a place for in-store shopping. The question is if that has begun to change due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Participants who had never previously sold products or services online began doing so out of necessity with their physical premises bound by restrictions. This was in line with research by Kemp (2022) and Jílková & Králová (2021) who have presented the opportunities that are now available online. Participant B told the researcher how they *“had to keep the lights on and serve our customers despite all of our shops being forced to close”*. They felt strongly that *“online was the only way through this pandemic”*. Others felt the same including Participant G whose businesses would not necessarily be the first that you would expect to thrive online. They began by creating a picture of how their *“restaurant business was completely gone”* and that they *“had to think of ways for our business to not only survive but attempt to thrive”*. This really gave an insight into the challenges that COVID-19 brought about but through online marketing they changed their whole business model successfully;

“We had to think of different ways that if the customers couldn’t come to us, we had to try and come to them. It has changed our whole business model and lead to a host of new opportunities. By pivoting and adapting, it has changed our business model completely. We are now no longer dependant on the physical premises that we once were.” (Participant G)

Some have even gone as far as fully closing their physical premises now and will remain operating online only. Participant D shared how they *“have gone completely online and away from the in-person work that we were doing”*. This is a similar scenario which was touched on by Participant F who proclaimed their satisfaction with the effects of COVID-19 on their business as they felt it was *“good for our business as customers of ours who had never shopped*

online became online customers". They were then *"able to close our high street presence and go fully online for good"*. The success that the participants had encountered continued with Participant C who made the striking comment of how they had to *"stop using Google Ads"* because they had become too busy and *"couldn't keep up with the demand"*. They closed off by saying that it was *"something we never experienced before we started offering our services online"*.

The success of utilising e-commerce has led to further investment according to Participant B. They spoke of how due to online sales they were able to *"match our turnover from 2020 with 2019 even though our physical stores were closed for at least four months of that period"*. In reflection, they stated how they *"invested hugely online in 2021 based off that fact"* and that it was *"significantly more than what we would have spent on any physical store"*. Concluding, they made a very noteworthy point of how despite this investment being of significant value, it was nothing in comparison to what the costs would have been to upgrade their *"tired and dated premises"*.

There are many reasons why customers choose to shop in physical premises. As illustrated by the work of Bäckström & Johansson (2017), retailers need to meet an advanced level of requirements expected by their customers. They use different strategies to create a positive experience including personnel, design, atmosphere, display and much more. Being able to replicate what Participant F referred to as *"an in-store smell and feeling"* and welcome customers *"into our world"*. They mentioned how they are trying to replicate this feeling in an attempt to overcome this challenge, particularly now that they have gone fully online. They explained how they will do this by;

"attempting to replicate this online through engaging video content, rich & insightful content on our various social media platforms and an interactive website that puts user experience at the forefront of what we do."

4.2.6 Clear digital focus

“If you own a business in 2022 and you’re not using online marketing, you are shooting yourself in the foot. It’s a necessity. Forget about your posters or newspaper ads, you need this to stay on top of your game and on top of the competition.” (Participant D)

Setting the tone in accordance with the rest of the interviews, Participant D stressed the importance of utilising online marketing as opposed to traditional methods. This was further emphasised by Participant H who believed that it offered *“far more tangible benefits to old style methods of marketing”*. First hand examples were given of why Digital Marketing was deemed more effective over traditional methods including from Participant H who shared that they had:

“taken out an ad in the local paper before Christmas time which, you would imagine, should have been prime time. The ad offered a coupon code for a discount on products. We ran the same ad online which was ten times cheaper but far more effective.”

A number of participants stated how far along their online capabilities had come, noting that not only are they now using digital, but they are also measuring what they do and using this data to improve their online campaigns. Participant B said that they were *“tailoring our marketing campaigns effectively around our analytics”*. Data analysis was also at the heart of driving the Digital Marketing that Participant D was involved in. They shared how every month they review what was spent and their return on investment. With *“everything reviewed being used to improve our sales”* they too have a clear strategy in place. With the knowledge of their spending and the return on their investment, Participant E confessed that they now *“no longer use print media”* as with online marketing they can *“quantify everything that we spend”*. Participant C shared the same view, now choosing to focus all of their energies on online marketing rather than offline. Given that research by Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015) argues that the online efforts of SMEs is unplanned, the findings in this study suggests that theory is outdated.

In terms of future developments with the digital era, Participants B, C and D outlined their thoughts on exploring new online avenues as they arise. Not willing to rest on the

improvements made to date, they had already earmarked ways in which they can take advantage of new technologies;

“Email marketing and the personalisation of them is something that we are working on all of the time. We kind of give the online team free reign to try new technologies and online techniques.” (Participant B)

“We now have added a new CRM system where we all have an app on our phone to add any leads that we get so it can be tracked, any jobs that we get in will be followed up with and customers will automatically be asked for online reviews.” (Participant C)

“We’re trying new platforms all the time. The way we see it is if you’re not online, you’re invisible. The likes of TikTok has huge potential. TikTok is mental. We posted a video organically on TikTok recently and it has over 300,000 views. That kind of exposure can really kick our business on.” (Participant D)

Some of the participants recognised their own limitations when it came to Digital Marketing. Participant C mentioned how as a family business, their marketing was previously carried out on an ad-hoc basis. A similar view was taken by Participant D who believed that they had originally been losing money by trying to do their marketing in-house. This opened the doors to *“link in with a digital agency to use their expertise”* as highlighted by Participant B. This was an avenue that other participants took advantage of with Participant D referring to working with an agency as *“an absolute game-changer”*. Working with digital agencies has allowed Participant H to focus on other areas of the business and *“take off a few hats”*. Time has also been a major factor highlighted by Participant E who admitted that although they felt that they could do the work, someone in the agency they work with *“could do it in half the time”*.

Some noted that although there were positive outcomes with this option, working with a digital agency could be expensive. Participant E noted that they were *“constantly increasing their pricing with the success that they would have with our online channels”* and that they were *“basically paying a full wage”*. Participant G agreed with this statement and conveyed how they *“can’t wrap our heads around spending this much money online. It’s terrifying at times to be completely honest”*.

4.3 Discussion

This section will examine how the primary research data collected aligns with the findings from the literature review.

Theme	LIT Review	Findings
Lack of knowledge	<p>There is a lack of comprehensive knowledge in relation to Digital Marketing. (N. Pandey et al., 2020)</p> <p>There is a shortage of people with a deep knowledge and experience in technology-related marketing strategies (Beach, 2019)</p>	<p><i>"I had thought that I was pretty good with digital marketing until we started trying to sell online."</i> (Participant H)</p> <p><i>"Our main channel is a constant struggle with the message that we want to get across on Social Media. I feel as if sometimes we are afraid to do something different because we don't fully understand it."</i> (Participant A)</p>
Fear of online uncertainty	<p>Negative online consumer reviews can have an even more powerful impact on the public opinion of your business compared to positive reviews. (Lee et al., 2008)</p> <p>There appears to be an absence of trust when it comes to online marketing for both SMEs and consumers alike (Dole, 2020).</p>	<p><i>"We had stock issues and off the back of that, people were getting frustrated and started reviewing our business negatively. It had a hugely negative affect on our brand reputation."</i> (Participant C)</p> <p><i>"We stopped utilising online platforms for a very long time to protect our brand"</i> (Participant F)</p>
West of Ireland leverage	<p>Being a rural business is seen as a disadvantage (Townsend et al., 2015)</p> <p><i>"Rural areas of Europe have been deeply influenced by the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic"</i> (Lucaci & Nastase, 2021)</p>	<p><i>"Online marketing has given us the freedom to tell our own story. We're no longer relying on the press to come West."</i> (Participant G)</p> <p><i>"We will incorporate the West of Ireland into a lot of our marketing. We'll market the fact that it was the gate to the Underworld, Celtic Mythology and all of that."</i> (Participant H)</p>

<p>Indispensable supports</p>	<p>Supports are of huge importance to SMEs in taking advantage of online marketing (Donlon, 2019)</p> <p>Financial supports and mentorship available from a number of organisations including LEO, Enterprise Ireland & Bord Bia</p>	<p><i>“We were winging it from an online marketing perspective at the beginning until my mentor helped me get to grips with the essentials” (Participant D)</i></p> <p><i>“We got supports from LEO during COVID and we used it to redevelop our website. The supports offered by the LEO have a lot of merit and didn’t stop there.” (Participant B)</i></p>
<p>The transition to online from Bricks & Mortar</p>	<p>When you post an item on Facebook, you equally reach an audience a continent away, as well as those located within the same block (Nunes Cruz et al., 2019).</p> <p>The Internet has, moreover, provided companies with the possibility to interact with foreign customers and conduct sales without setting up physical stores (Tolstoy et al., 2022).</p>	<p><i>“If the customers couldn’t come to us, we had to try and come to them. It has changed our whole business model and lead to a host of new opportunities. We are now no longer dependant on the physical premises that we once were.” (Participant G)</i></p> <p><i>“We were able to close our high street presence and go fully online for good.” (Participant F)</i></p>
<p>Clear Digital focus</p>	<p>Malesev & Cherry (2021) blamed the lack of Digital Marketing usage from the respondents to their research on a <i>“lack of trust and transparency in the advertising process”</i>.</p> <p><i>Companies have been moving away from traditional approaches with a greater focus on dynamic online activities (Li et al., 2018)</i></p>	<p><i>“We’re trying new platforms all the time. The way we see it is if you’re not online, you’re invisible. (Participant D)</i></p> <p><i>“We no longer use print media” (Participant E)</i></p>

Figure 5: Literature v Findings

The table above (Figure 5) demonstrates how much of the empirical data aligns closely with the perspectives found in the literature review. There were, however, some unexpected findings from the primary research which did not coincide with the literature. The literature suggests SMEs in a rural location, such as the West of Ireland, are at a disadvantage. The findings from this research would argue against this as SMEs in the West of Ireland are using their location to their advantage. They are feeling a new sense of freedom with what they do and are incorporating many unique aspects of their location into their marketing campaigns.

Within the research, we discovered the many benefits that utilising Digital Marketing can have for SMEs. Under the backdrop of COVID-19, this research has shown that some businesses are choosing to move away from traditional 'bricks & mortar' stores / businesses to fully online business models which is a very interesting development. Despite mixed arguments in the literature review contrasting traditional and Digital Marketing methods, there is a clear digital focus emanating from this research. The future for Digital Marketing and the preference for Digital Marketing methods over traditional methods is growing.

Having reviewed the findings and compared these to the literature perspectives, we return to apply these findings to address the research objectives. The objectives are restated below;

OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify what difficulties SMEs in the West of Ireland have experienced when attempting to utilise Digital Marketing.
2. Explore how SMEs in the West of Ireland utilised Digital Marketing to adapt their business to abide by the limitations placed on them during the COVID 19 Pandemic.
3. Investigate the attitudes of SMEs in the West of Ireland toward traditional versus Digital Marketing methods.
4. Investigate supports made available to SMEs in the West of Ireland to help implement Digital Marketing practices.

4.3.1 Objective 1. Identify what difficulties SMEs in the West of Ireland have experienced when attempting to utilise Digital Marketing

Addressing research objective one, this study found that there were a number of difficulties which SMEs in the West of Ireland have experienced when attempting to utilise Digital Marketing. Participants stated how they believed their knowledge levels of online marketing methods was sufficient until they had to step outside their comfort zone and sell online. Perhaps under the backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic the participants had to react to the closing of their doors, and many felt overwhelmed by it all. This lack of knowledge has resulted in participants noting how they have held back in what they are doing online, particularly with a fear of negative reviews potentially affecting their brand. How these reviews impact their

lives as well as their business was an interesting development and potential separate topic all on its own. Of course, this can all take up an enormous amount of time, as highlighted by Participant G who said that *“trying to understand each platform and the audience with each is difficult. It takes a lot of time, particularly as new platforms emerge”*.

There appears to be a willingness to upskill and take on these new challenges, however, the feedback on the courses being offered was not positive. Participants noted how despite digital tools developing at a rapid pace, the courses available to them appear to be outdated. Supports have been noted as invaluable however, including financial supports and mentorship. The sharing of knowledge through mentorship has in some ways helped bridge that knowledge base gap. Mentorship can come in many forms, from one-to-one meetings to in-person or online events. Participant B noted that *“it’s amazing what you can learn from some of the events that are organised by some of the local support groups. You need to get educated on it because it’s the future”*.

Financial supports will always be a positive, particularly with the high costs of creating an online identity. *“Without those grants, we would not be able to afford some of the activities that we do. It takes the stress away”* (Participant E). It was noted however that SMEs needed to pay for most of these supports themselves initially to be refunded at a later date. This may be perceived as another barrier as they may not have the money in the first place to put these plans in place.

4.3.2 Objective 2. Explore how SMEs in the West of Ireland utilised Digital Marketing to adapt their business to abide by the limitations placed on them during the COVID-19 Pandemic

To address research objective 2, it is first worth noting that the COVID-19 Pandemic had a devastating impact for the world as we know it. With lockdowns restricting the movements of people all over the world, a new wave of online shoppers emerged. Businesses of all backgrounds began innovating and selling their goods and services online. The participants were able to give first-hand accounts of what they did and how they did it using online platforms. This may have been something that they wouldn’t have tried if it wasn’t for the necessity brought on by the Pandemic as illustrated by Participant H, *“since our traditional outlets were no longer available, it forced us into using online marketing to try and sell our*

products online". They were able to do this largely with the supports in place by local government organisations, with Participant D noting that it gave their business the *"injection we needed to get selling online"*. Some participants mentioned the comparison in costs to developing their physical footprint vs their online presence and, as a result, have decided to close their premises. It will be interesting to see how this develops and if it will be a common trend globally. As pointed out by Participant G, SMEs are *"no longer dependant on the physical premises"*. As you can see from the research findings, those who have decided to focus online are now researching where to go from here and how they can counteract the benefits that physical stores hold.

With previous research by the likes of Lucaci & Nastase (2021) and Michailidis et al. (2011) highlighting the difficulties that SMEs in rural areas face, it was a significant surprise to the researcher to find an area which was seemingly thriving under the backdrop of COVID-19. As research by Tolstoy et al. (2022) suggests, the importance of having the necessary digital skills to really take advantage of the opportunities online is quite significant. Attracting the skilled talent to help SMEs with their online marketing is no longer as big of an issue as highlighted by Participant B. They believe that the way of the world has changed and that *"people now want to come and live in the West of Ireland so attracting talent isn't an issue anymore"*. Previous difficulties are now becoming problems of the past, with Participant F highlighting Wi-Fi and poor connection as something that may have challenged this success but that *"we're all getting past those days as it improves"*.

Being able to use your surroundings to your advantage and tell your story online has its own benefits. With Digital Marketing allowing the participants to enter new markets such as the UK and USA, it was interesting to see how they are tailoring their online content around being from the West of Ireland. It has, in the words of Participant C, *"benefits to speak about our location online"*. The notion of the rural-Ireland connection was something that Participant E discussed taking advantage of with reference to the American market by stating that *"rural-Irish connection will be important as it's a very romantic notion for the American market"*. Participants noted how Digital Marketing has given them a platform to tell their story online and take advantage of it when targeting the international market. It's clear from the findings that they are now doing this and to good effect. Participant F summarised by stating;

“The West of Ireland is a brand in itself. The international customers that we’re targeting get a kick out of it. They kind of feel sorry for us and have this misconception about the West of Ireland being a really poor and old-fashioned area which is great for us to take advantage of.”

4.3.3 Objective 3. Investigate the attitudes of SMEs in the West of Ireland toward traditional versus Digital Marketing methods.

There has been a clear shift in favour of Digital Marketing over traditional methods. We were given a first-hand example of research carried out by Bala & Deepak Verma (2018) which mentioned that online marketing methods allow smaller businesses to compete with larger multinationals and push into new markets. Participant C explained how *“using online advertising has opened up the UK market to our business but it’s only been something that we have been pushed into using due to COVID”*. This was further emphasised by Participant D who mentioned that with the acceptance of new online meeting norms, they *“no longer travel 2-3 hours up the road to be able to meet clients”* and that it has now *“opened up doors to working with clients from all around the world ultimately”*.

Despite research by Gagauz (2020) which would have you believe that SMEs are unorganised when it comes to how they create their online marketing campaigns, this study found that the skills of several participants were much more advanced than this. From the in-depth interviews, it is clear that they have come a long way in such a short period of time. Participant D explained how their marketing methods were very *“data driven”* while Participant E spoke about how they know their *“ROI on everything”* when it comes to Digital Marketing.

Of course, due to the knowledge gap that initially presented itself to the participants, several interviewees have been drawn towards digital agencies. Although Participant E had noted how the agency are *“constantly testing and increasing our ad spend”* but that they had become particularly costly to work with. This supports research by Quinn et al (2016) which states how agencies may look to take advantage of this kind of situation. Participant B had their reservations about allowing an agency to view their analytics as it allowed them to increase their prices with success. They believed it has become *“too transparent and that there is an awful lot of people trying to cash in on online at the minute”*. Although working

with Digital Marketing agencies appeared to be the most effective method employed by the participants, there was still a clear unease and trust issue with what they do and giving away too much company data.

4.3.4 Objective 4. Investigate supports made available to SMEs in the West of Ireland to help implement Digital Marketing practices.

As seen in 2.6 of the literature review and Figure 2 there are a range of supports available to SMEs including financial aids and mentoring. The participants of this study utilised a number of these supports, however there are many others that they have not yet taken advantage of. It seems that learning from their mentors has provided invaluable advice and guidance to the participants that availed of this type of support.

As we have seen from the research and the findings presented, financial supports are also readily available. During the initial COVID-19 outbreak these supports, including the TOV, were increased which resulted in a large uptake by SMEs (Donlon, 2019; LEO, 2022b). The significant impact that this had was noted by a number of participants including Participant F, *“at one point, there was a grant to cover 90% of the cost of a new e-commerce website which we availed of”*.

In this chapter, we were introduced to the six main themes which emerged from the in-depth interviews. They were as follows;

1. Lack of knowledge
2. Fear of online uncertainty
3. West of Ireland leverage
4. Indispensable supports
5. The transition to online from bricks & mortar
6. Clear digital focus

These themes were broken down and discussed before moving on to comparing them to the findings in the literature review. Most of the findings aligned closely with that of the literature review, however there were some unexpected findings which did not. Participants noted how they are leveraging their West of Ireland location and now have a clear focus on Digital

Marketing methods. Finally, the four research objectives were addressed from the findings in the study. The next chapter focuses on the research questions, recommendations from the researcher and takes note of any limitations that this study may have.

Chapter Five: Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This study set out to discover how Digital Marketing has impacted SMEs specifically in the West of Ireland during this challenging period for the economy (2020 to 2022).

This chapter will provide a summary of insights, conclusions and recommendations emerging from this exploratory study of Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic. As with exploratory research, this study will potentially lay the groundwork for future research (George, 2021). Resulting from that, this chapter will also highlight future areas for research, highlight any believed limitations and contain a concluding statement made by the researcher.

5.2 Summary of findings

The research presented a number of different themes surrounding the use of Digital Marketing by SMEs in the West of Ireland. We learned how a lack of knowledge and fear of online uncertainty were the main driving factors behind why they had not previously taken advantage of the benefits that Digital Marketing can have for their businesses. With COVID-19 essentially forcing their hands, those that took part in the study spoke about their initial caution venturing into new waters by beginning to sell their products / services online. However, through the supports available to them and innovation beyond expectation, they have been able to weather the storm and create a new future.

By effectively leveraging their West of Ireland location utilising Digital Marketing to tell their unique stories, they have also been able to attract skilled marketing professionals to their businesses. Participants are now looking forward to a busy future with the support of Digital Marketing techniques after first hand experiences utilising them effectively.

“I have faith in online marketing at this point because I have now seen the evidence of its effectiveness. It works. We have seen the return on our investment.” (Participant D)

The feedback from the participants on the supports being offered by local support groups such as LEO and Enterprise Ireland can help create a roadmap for their future improvement. Being able to learn from this feedback and offer improved supports can be critical to helping SMEs in the region grow.

“Without the TOV from the Local Enterprise Office, we wouldn’t have been able to improve our website. The only criticism I would have is that the money doesn’t get you too far. If it could be increased, even a little, it would go a long way.” (Participant A)

The findings offered some insight into the sheer determination of the individuals who participated. Under the backdrop of COVID-19, participants spoke of how they innovated using Digital Marketing to not only survive but to flourish.

“We are able to compete now on a global market as the Pandemic pushed our business into going online. We had no choice. We lost our business overnight for a few weeks but we had to react and do something with the huge amount of inventory that we had in stock. Thankfully, it flew out the door and we have since won a number of awards for how we pivoted our business.” (Participant A)

This is just an insight into the findings that have emerged from this study. How they relate to the research questions will be addressed below. This study had the following research questions;

QUESTIONS:

1. What barriers, if any, have prevented SMEs in the West of Ireland from utilising Digital Marketing?
2. How has the use of Digital Marketing by SMEs been impacted by the challenges presented during the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic?
3. Has the West of Ireland location of SMEs impacted their use of Digital Marketing?

5.3 Research Questions

5.3.1 What barriers, if any, had prevented SMEs in the West of Ireland from utilising Digital Marketing?

This research has found that the prevailing barriers which prevented SMEs in the West of Ireland from utilising Digital Marketing were a lack of knowledge in the area and a fear of online uncertainty. In the researcher's opinion, both of these items go hand in hand as fears may be alleviated with a wider knowledge base in the area. This finding supports the research presented by Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki (2010) and more recently Herhausen et al. (2020). It also highlights that these issues were prevalent in the West of Ireland as well as the areas where their own research was carried out. There is a willingness by the participants in the research to upskill and improve their knowledge base. They are seemingly at a disadvantage in this regard however as the feeling is that the courses available to them currently are not in-depth or up to date enough to really make a difference. Participant G stated that *"the courses can be a bit general and online marketing has moved on a fair bit recently"*.

Another barrier which was highlighted during this study was the costs involved with Digital Marketing. Participant G commented that they *"can't wrap our heads around spending this much money online. It's terrifying at times to be completely honest"*. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, supports were increased to help ease the financial burden on SMEs. Grants such as the TOV were increased significantly which had an extremely positive impact as discussed by Participant D who stated that *"during a difficult period, it gave us the injection we needed to get selling online"*. The importance of these financial supports was further emphasised by Participant E *"Without those grants, we would not be able to afford some of the activities that we do. It takes the stress away"*.

5.3.2 How has the use of Digital Marketing by SMEs been impacted by the challenges presented during the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The research uncovered benefits associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic. It was noted by some of the participants how much their skills have improved. Participants are aware of the need to hone these skills with Participant B commenting that *"you need to get educated on it"*

because it's the future". Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015) argued that the marketing activities of SMEs is unplanned, however the results from this study suggest that SMEs in the West of Ireland now have a much more rigorous approach to their online marketing with data at the heart of it. The advanced nature of their marketing efforts came as a surprise to the researcher, albeit a very welcome one. Participant D noted how *"every month, we get a full report on what we spent and the return on it. Everything is reviewed and used to improve what we're doing. So it's very data driven to try and improve our sales"*.

Another surprising outcome from the study is that some of the participants have completely closed their physical premises and have preferred to operate their business solely online. Participant F stated that they believed COVID-19 was *"good for our business as customers of ours who had never shopped online became online customers"*. They also noted how they were *"able to close our high street presence and go fully online for good"*. It remains to be seen if this will be a trend nationally or globally as the effects of COVID-19 begin to settle. Further plans expressed by the participants to review and improve the online experience to counteract the benefits of in-person shopping can only have positive results in the opinion of the researcher.

The use of Digital Marketing agencies to maximise the potential of online marketing appear to have been instrumental for a number of the participants in this study. Participant B spoke about how they *"linked in with a digital agency to use their expertise to help catch up with our competitors"*. The relative cost and unease at allowing access to so much sensitive information is still a lingering issue, however.

From the research, there is a clear preference for SMEs in the West of Ireland to use Digital Marketing methods rather than traditional methods. How traditional mediums react will be an interesting development. What future will print media have for example, with SMEs choosing online advertising as their preferred methods. It was highlighted by Participant D how they no longer use print media and they even made the strong statement of recommending that others *"forget about your posters or newspaper ads, you need this to stay on top of your game and on top of the competition"*.

5.3.3 Has the West of Ireland location of SMEs impacted their use of Digital Marketing?

Townsend et al. (2015) highlighted a number of negative impacts of being located in a rural area, including a disconnection from urban centres and a lack of infrastructure compared to larger cities. Furthermore, a study by Lucaci & Nastase (2021) stated that *“rural areas of Europe have been deeply influenced by the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic”*. With that, a bleak outlook for the SMEs participating in this study was presented.

The results from this study were not in line with this view, however. The research uncovered a community whose attitude and approach to pivoting their business model has allowed them to prosper in a time of great uncertainty.

“We had to think of different ways that if the customers couldn’t come to us, we had to try and come to them. It has changed our whole business model and lead to a host of new opportunities. By pivoting and adapting, it has changed our business model completely. We are now no longer dependant on the physical premises that we once were.” (Participant G)

SMEs in the West of Ireland are now leveraging their location and its history to tell their unique story online as they look to enter new foreign markets. Participant H highlighted how they *“incorporate the West of Ireland into a lot of our marketing. We’ll market the fact that it was the gate to the Underworld, Celtic Mythology and all of that”*. This was further acknowledged by Participant A who stated their eagerness to advertise the fact that they are from the West of Ireland when they said, *“If we do any sort of PR it’s about being from the West of Ireland”*.

The possibilities that are now in front of SMEs in the West of Ireland are endless thanks to Digital Marketing. After answering the research questions, the thesis will now move onto a number of recommendations made by the researcher.

5.4 Recommendations

5.4.1 Develop supports further

Throughout this research, the role that various supports during the COVID-19 Pandemic played in bringing SMEs in the West of Ireland up to speed with their Digital Marketing capabilities have been highlighted. The financial supports available to SMEs allowed them to take the plunge and move forward with what are believed to be very significant costs. From the research, there is some feedback on how these supports can be improved.

The TOV for example currently offers to pay 50% of the costs of Digital Marketing services up to the value of €2,500. It is noted how increasing this support during the COVID-19 Pandemic had such a positive effect on SMEs in Ireland. According to a report by We Are Ireland Online (2022), SMEs will need a budget of between €5,000 - €8,000 to create a new website. With that, the researcher would suggest increasing the maximum payment to €4,000 and continue the percentage rate of 50% of the costs. Local working groups of SME owners could be formed to identify gaps in supports currently offered and to gain feedback on new projects and supports being introduced by groups such as the LEO.

Recommendation 1a: Increase the maximum payment from the TOV to €4,000.

Recommendation 1b: Create local working groups of SME owners to identify gaps in supports and provide feedback on new projects and supports being introduced by groups such as the Local Enterprise Office.

5.4.2 National digital agency

The researcher believes that there should be a national digital agency created. Throughout the study, a significant number of participants commented on the positive effects that supports and mentorship they received had on their businesses. However, there is still a lack of trust towards digital agencies, and they can prove costly. A national digital agency whose job is to offer low-cost online marketing services will not only help businesses who need it most, but it will also have a number of positive knock-on effects; employment, taxation,

exports etc. The national agency would also provide mentoring services as part of any package so businesses can have advice and assistance from an experienced marketing professional.

Recommendation 2: Create a national digital agency funded by the government.

5.4.3 New region-specific courses

This study helped to identify how SMEs in the West of Ireland are leveraging their location to their advantage. Participants noted how they use their unique location to tell a story in their marketing and the content that they share online. Throughout the study, participants spoke of the need to improve the courses on offer from groups such as LEO. Some stated that they felt the courses were basic or outdated. The researcher believes that a review of the courses being ran by groups such as LEO should be reviewed with a view to offering more advanced and region-specific courses. As the West of Ireland is a rural location, SMEs here have different needs and requirements to those in larger cities for example. Courses on utilising your surroundings and how to best leverage your rural location online would be of huge benefit to SMEs in the opinion of the researcher.

Recommendation 3a: Conduct a review of Digital Marketing courses currently on offer from groups such as LEO and Enterprise Ireland.

Recommendation 3b: Develop and implement region-specific courses in Digital Marketing.

5.5 Further research

The researcher found a scarcity of papers which focus on the Digital Marketing practices of SMEs in the West of Ireland. With the global COVID-19 Pandemic having a clear impact on businesses and how they operate, this study is important to help overcome this research gap and lays a foundation for future study in this area.

It may be interesting to develop further studies in different areas of Ireland, for example, in the east of the country which would be seen as much more connected rather than rural Ireland. The ability to compare and contrast the findings between the west and the east would be very interesting.

5.6 Limitations

Although an in-depth literature review was carried out, the researcher found that there was a scarcity of literature on this particular subject surrounding SMEs specifically in the West of Ireland. With that, the research was carried out from literature in similar areas where possible rather than the West of Ireland itself. This thesis however, and others like it, could act as future study for this geographical location. Limitations may exist in the literature review because Digital Marketing is such a broad term. Being able to focus on different areas may produce more in-depth and focused results.

The interviews that were carried out contain their own limitations. There was difficulty surrounding the data collection due to COVID-19 restrictions, however the use of Microsoft Teams allowed the interviews to take place. It also made the recording and scheduling of these interviews more accessible. The researcher feels that holding interviews in-person may produce more data to analyse as participants may be more at ease meeting in person. Each in-depth interview with the eight participants was of significant length (40 minutes – 1 hour) and provided rich data to analyse. As seen in Figure 4, the sampling criteria was robust and carefully selected. Future research may allow for an increased pool of people to take part in the study and / or with different criteria for selection.

Furthermore, a slightly different take on questioning could be taken at the interview stage with participants. Those interviewed were from a number of different sectors. Future studies could be more sector focused which would allow the results from each sector to be compared and contrasted. Everyone who took part in the study also had different knowledge levels with regard to Digital Marketing which may have influenced their responses.

Future research may allow for different methods of data collection. For example, a large scale survey based upon the experiences expressed in this research could be conducted among owners of SMEs.

5.8 Concluding Statement

A large quantity of rich data was gathered and analysed during this study. Being able to obtain concrete insights into the perceptions and opinions of SMEs in the West of Ireland who have gone through so much unexpected upheaval has produced some very interesting results. The ability of communities, particularly in this part of Ireland, will never cease to amaze the researcher. They have showed an enormous amount of strength, determination and passion as they began to innovate by utilising Digital Marketing during a time of huge uncertainty. Now, as they move forward, they are better positioned to grow their businesses with the help of Digital tools and a renewed vision for what they do best.

The West is well and truly awake.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval Form



Taught Programme Research Ethics Approval Application Form

Research undertaken by taught students must receive ethical approval unless deemed exempt. This application form may be completed by an individual student or by a Programme Board/Lecturer for a group of similar research projects.

This application is completed by:

Student:

OR

Lecturer on behalf of Programme Board:

PART A

Applicant Details	
Name:	Sam O'Neill
Student ID: (if relevant)	G00263322
Programme Title:	Master of Science in Digital Media & Marketing
Programme Stage:	Stage One
Research Supervisor's Name: (if relevant)	Primary: Sharon Boyle Secondary: Janine McGinn

Project Details	
Research Study Title:	An exploratory study of Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic. (working title)
<p>Research Study Summary (max 100 words):</p> <p>This research will focus on how SMEs in the West of Ireland have rapidly upscaled their use of Digital Marketing since January 2019. This study will review how SMEs in the West of Ireland reacted during this rapid digitalisation period, and it aims to uncover the benefits of this digitalisation and any difficulties encountered during the process.</p> <p>There has been considerable research undertaken to ascertain the factors that determine how easy it is for small firms to adopt digital communication, however, knowledge of how smaller firms utilise digital channels in their marketing still requires more in-depth knowledge (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). For small firms, digitalisation has been found to positively relate to business growth, performance, and competitiveness (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).</p> <p>However, challenges abound for small firms seeking to introduce and manage digital marketing communication. A major barrier is a lack of knowledge or 'know-how' to implement (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010). Other research found a lack of general technical understanding and personal innovativeness among personnel which poses a barrier (Järvinen et al., 2012). A lack of strategic orientation and a lack of financial and human resources have similarly been revealed as barriers (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010).</p> <p>With an ever-increasing focus on Digital Marketing in the day-to-day operations of SMEs, this study is important to explore the challenges that these businesses face. Most Irish SMEs nowadays have not been able to maximise the potential of integrated digital marketing (Trang, 2014). It is particularly important as there is a scarcity of papers which have studied the process of rapid digital marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland.</p>	

Risk Checklist

Please answer ALL the questions in each of the sections below – Tick YES or NO

	Will the research study....?	YES	NO
1	Involve direct and/or indirect contact with human participants?	/	
2	Involve analysis of pre-existing data which contains personal or sensitive information not in the public domain?		/
3	Require permission or consent to conduct?	/	
4	Require permission or consent to publish?	/	
5	Have a risk of compromising confidentiality?	/	
6	Have a risk of compromising anonymity?	/	
7	Collect/contain personal data i.e. any information that relates to an identified or identifiable individual?	/	
8	Collect/contain sensitive personal data e.g. health data, sexual orientation, race religion?		/
9	Contain elements which you OR your supervisor are NOT trained to conduct?		/
10	Use any information OTHER than that which is freely available in the public domain?	/	
11	Involve respondents to the internet or other visual/vocal methods where participants may be identified?		/
12	Include a financial incentive to participate in the research?		/
13	Involve our own students or staff?		/
14	Take place outside Ireland?		/
15	Involve participants who are vulnerable or at risk?		/
16	Involve any participants who are unable to give informed consent?		/
17	Involve data collection taking place BEFORE informed consent is given?		/
18	Involve any deliberate deception or covert data collection?		/
19	Involve a risk to the researcher or participants beyond that experienced in everyday life?		/

Risk Checklist

Please answer ALL the questions in each of the sections below – Tick YES or NO

	Will the research study....?	YES	NO
20	Cause (or could cause) physical or psychological harm or negative consequences?		/
21	Use intrusive or invasive procedures?		/
22	Involve a clinical trial?		/
23	Involve the possibility of incidental findings related to participant health status?		/
24	Involve the remuneration of research participants?		/

If, as a student, you answered **NO** to all the above questions your research supervisor will review, and if in agreement sign below to indicate that this form does not have to be submitted to the Taught Programme Research Ethics Committee.

<i>Name</i>		<i>Signed</i>	<i>Sharon Boyle</i>	<i>Date</i>	May 27 th 2021.
	Research Supervisor				

If you answered **YES** to any of the above questions, you need to complete part B below.

PART B

1	Project Overview
<p>Please give a brief overview of the study, including a summary of the aims and objectives.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> Describe the purpose of the research and what question(s) the project should answer.</p>	
<p>This research will focus on how SMEs in the West of Ireland have rapidly upscaled their use of Digital Marketing since March 2020. This study will review how SMEs in the West of Ireland reacted during this rapid digitalisation period, and it aims to uncover the benefits of this digitalisation and any difficulties encountered during the process.</p> <p>Digital Marketing has created an endless stream of opportunities for businesses, some would even argue that at present any business can now be globalised within no time in every corner of the world wherever presence of Digital Media can be found. (Nuseir, 2018). Yet a 2019 study revealed that only 69% of SMEs in Ireland had a website. On top of that, only 32% of these companies were actually selling products or services online at the time (Ecommerce News, 2019). From an EU perspective, only about 1 out of 5 companies across the EU are highly digitalised and more than 90% of SMEs lag behind in digital innovation (European Commission, 2021).</p> <p>With an ever-increasing focus on Digital Marketing in the day-to-day operations of SMEs, this study is important to explore the challenges that these businesses face. Most Irish SMEs nowadays have not been able to maximise the potential of integrated digital marketing (Trang, 2014). It is particularly important as there is a scarcity of papers which have studied the process of rapid digital marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland.</p> <p>For my research, I plan on interviewing one owner of an SME in each county of the West of Ireland discover their own experiences and get a firm understanding of how Digital Marketing has impacted their business since January 2019. With Galway having a</p>	

significantly higher population number than the other counties, I will interview two from this region giving a total of 8 semi-formal interviews.

AIM: To discover how Digital Marketing has impacted SMEs in the West of Ireland.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To find out what benefits have come from these SMEs utilising Digital Marketing.
2. To explore the negative elements Digital Marketing has had on their business.
3. What barriers, if any, had stopped them from using Digital Marketing previously.

2	Methodology
<p>Please give a description of the methodology, including any data collection and analysis methods.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> Give an outline of the study here. If the project is complex, you can also submit the research proposal/protocol (no more than 2-3 A4 sides) if this would help the reviewer's understanding of the project. Include details of your (or the Research Supervisor's) appropriate skills and qualifications to carry out this research. Consideration of how, and for what duration are stored should be provided under Section 7 below.</p>	
<p>For this study, I will be using qualitative research by arranging semi-formal interviews with owners of SMEs in the West of Ireland. The West of Ireland is comprised of the counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway & Clare (Western Development Commission 2021). In 2016, there were 54,410 SMEs registered in the seven counties (Western Development Commission 2016). With that in mind, I plan on interviewing one owner of an SME in each county. With Galway having a significantly higher population number than the other counties, I will interview two from this region giving a total of 8 semi-formal interviews.</p> <p>I expect the interviews to last approximately 40 minutes. I have chosen qualitative research as it facilitates academics to cultivate a deeper understanding of experiences,</p>	

procedures, difficulties, and events (Priyanka et al. 2018). Similar studies have used this methodology as part of their research although the focus has not been on the West of Ireland or the Business Owners, instead focusing on other areas including solely those from an area in Central Finland and the Business Managers (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

In terms of having access to a research sample, as the Managing Director of a leading Marketing Agency in the West of Ireland, I will be using my network of contacts to target individuals who fall within the criteria set out to be part of the study. As an insider researcher, I will be conscious at all times over any bias that I might have prior to conducting this research. In my current role, I already have formed strong opinions on Digital Marketing implementation for SMEs. I will remain open to all ideas and information given by those being interviewed. I will make no assumptions about them, their business and any information provided by the participants. All information in the thesis will be readily accessible to users through the GMIT Library so there will be no direct benefit to my business.

3	Main Ethical Considerations
<p>Please give a brief description of the main ethical considerations involved in the study.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> Highlight here the main ethical considerations for the study (which may concern, e.g., the type of participants, the sensitive nature of the study, the data collection process, security-sensitive research) and advise how the main issues will be addressed. If the project is funded, give details here, and whether there are any potential conflicts of interest involved in the study. NB: Section 5 below addresses: recruitment; voluntary participation; consent; and, the right to withdraw. Those details need not also be entered here.</p>	
Maintaining Anonymity	

The names of those taking part in the study and any information relating to their business name will be kept anonymous and will not be included in the thesis write-up or any other publications that come from the research.

All participants will be given a pseudonym in replace of their name. It will be as follows; Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E and Participant F.

There will be no information mentioned which helps to identify the participants or their respective business.

Data Protection

All of the data collected including but not limited to the recordings of the interview (written or otherwise) will be stored in a folder on the GMIT Student One Drive. This folder can only be accessed using unique login details and password that will not be shared with any other individual or group. This information will only be kept for the length of time that it takes to put together the final thesis report.

This data will then be destroyed in line with the best practices for the destruction of any research data – files will be permanently deleted from the secure folder and any paper recordings will be shredded.

All data will be processed in compliance with [GDPR](#) and the GMIT data protection policy, available at: [data-protection-policy.pdf \(gmit.ie\)](#).

The device being used to access this information is password protected and has an anti-virus software installed.

As I hold a position running a Marketing Agency in Galway, some of the information given by the participants may be of a sensitive nature. This research is being carried-out for academic purposes only however and each participant will be made aware of same.

4	Human Participants
<p>If the study includes Human Participants (or their data), please give a description of who will be included.</p> <p><u>Help:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please note this should include sample size/number of participants, whether the project will focus on any particular groups/individuals, if it will include any at risk or vulnerable participants, participants aged 16 years or under, etc. Please also specify the rationale for including / excluding groups of participants. • If the research involves secondary data not in the public domain, give details in this section. <p>For this study, I will be using qualitative research by arranging semi-formal interviews with owners of SMEs in the West of Ireland. The West of Ireland is comprised of the counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway & Clare (Western Development Commission 2021). In 2016, there were 54,410 SMEs registered in the seven counties (Western Development Commission 2016). With that in mind, I plan on interviewing one owner of an SME in each county. With Galway having a significantly higher population number than the other counties, I will interview two from this region giving a total of 8 semi-formal interviews. Those being interviewed will be the Business Owners and be in business since at least January 2019. All participants will be over the age of 18.</p>	

5	Recruitment, Voluntary Participation, Consent and Right to Withdraw
<p>If the study includes Human Participants, please give a brief description of the recruitment process, how voluntary participation will be ensured, if (and how) informed consent will be obtained prior to participants taking part in the study, and the right of withdrawal from the research process.</p>	

Help:

- This should include clear information on how participants will be identified, approached and recruited; whether the study will include any covert research or deliberate deception; whether help is required from a third party/ gatekeeper to access participants; what information will be given to participants, etc.
- If expenses or any incentives are to be offered to participants, give full details.
- If research involves students, colleagues and/or other employees then specify the rationale for this and how issues of coercion or feelings of obligation will be addressed.
- If data is held on participants, research using that data may require permission from the participant.
- Regarding withdrawal from the study, discuss the different stages/dates a participant could withdraw or withdraw their data, and how they could do this.

All participants in the research will be given an information & consent form which explains in detail what the aim of the study is, where any data recorded will be stored and what is expected of them. It states that they have the right to withdraw at any time that they may wish to do so and that they are under no obligation to answer every question asked of them. They will also have the option to contact me with any further questions or concerns should they have them.

For this study, I will be using qualitative research by arranging semi-formal interviews with owners of SMEs in the West of Ireland. The West of Ireland is comprised of the counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway & Clare (Western Development Commission 2021). In 2016, there were 54,410 SMEs registered in the seven counties (Western Development Commission 2016). With that in mind, I plan on interviewing one owner of an SME in each county. With Galway having a significantly higher population number than the other counties, I will interview two from this region giving a total of 8 semi-formal interviews

There will be no financial incentives to take part and the perspective candidates will be contacted through their company contact details which are readily available online.

As I hold a position running a Marketing Agency in Galway, some of the information given by the participants may be of a sensitive nature. This research is being carried-out for academic purposes only however and each participant will be made aware of same.

If a participant needs to withdraw from the study, they can do so by emailing me directly. All of their information will be destroyed and a suitable replacement who falls within the criteria will be found. Withdrawal can take place at any time until the thesis is submitted for evaluation by the GMIT Exams Board.

6	Risks and Benefits
<p>Please give a brief description of how, when and where the research will take place and whether there are any risks and/or benefits involved.</p> <p><u>Help:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This should include information on what participants will be required to do, the rationale for this and the level of risk involved.• When considering risks, please refer to risks to the participants (e.g., for research in sensitive areas, where there is a balance of power), the researcher, any other parties to the research; and also any health and safety issues for anyone involved (e.g., for lone researchers carrying out fieldwork).	
<p>Due to the ongoing restrictions surrounding COVID19 and its ease of access, all of the interviews will take place online via a secure Microsoft Teams link which will be sent directly to the participants email address.</p>	

The email containing the link and a reminder of the option to withdraw from the study will be sent to them three days prior to the meeting. All of the interviews will be recorded with the participants consent and take place individually.

There is a low level of risk involved in this method as everything will be sent directly to the participant. All recordings (written or otherwise) will be stored in a folder on the GMIT Student One Drive. This folder can only be accessed using unique user login details and password that will not be shared with any other individual or group. This information will only be kept for the length of time that it takes to put together the final thesis report.

As the Managing Director of a leading Marketing Agency in Galway, it will be explained clearly to anyone taking part in this study, that this research bears no relation to any contract of work I have with them now or in the future.

As an insider researcher, I will be conscious at all times over any bias that I might have prior to conducting this research. In my current role, I already have formed strong opinions on Digital Marketing implementation for SMEs. I will remain open to all ideas and information given by those being interviewed. I will make no assumptions about them, their business and any information provided by the participants. All information in the thesis will be readily accessible to users through the GMIT Library so there will be no direct benefit to my business.

7	Personal Data, Anonymity and Confidentiality
<p>Please specify what type of information/data will be collected/analysed and the source(s). In addition, specify if and how the anonymity of participants will be ensured, and information be kept confidential.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> This should include information on whether new information/data are being collected or uses data that are already in the public domain; whether the data includes personal data; whether the data includes sensitive personal data e.g. health data, sexual orientation, race, religion; how the data will be processed and stored; who will have access</p>	

to it; who it will be shared with; how long data will be retained; how it will be destroyed; the Data Protection requirements for any sensitive personal data, etc. In addition, include whether there may be any requirements for disclosure of information to other parties due to professional practice or legal reasons. If there are limits to confidentiality, explain clearly how the participants would be advised about these limits and possible outcomes.

It is of utmost importance to the researcher that all data collected including but not limited to recordings of the interview (written or otherwise) will be stored in a folder on the GMIT Student One Drive. This folder can only be accessed using unique user login details and password that will not be shared with any other individual or group. This will only be kept for the length of time that it takes to put the final thesis report together. This data will then be destroyed in line with the best practices for the destruction of any research data – files will be permanently deleted from the secure folder and any paper recordings will be shredded.

All data will be processed in compliance with [GDPR](#) and the GMIT data protection policy, available at: [data-protection-policy.pdf \(gmit.ie\)](#).

The device being used to access this information is password protected and has an anti-virus software installed.

Any data recorded will be done so after permission is secured from the participant through the information & consent form given to each participant before they undertake their interview.

The data will be collected via a recorded interview via a private Microsoft Teams link which will be sent the participants direct email address.

All participants will be given a pseudonym in replace of their name. It will be as follows; Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E and Participant F.

There will be no information mentioned which helps to identify the participants or their respective business

8	Reporting and Dissemination
<p>Please give details of the planned dissemination and specify if the findings from the research will be published and whether any permission is required for this.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> This should include information on the methods of dissemination (e.g., dissertation/thesis) and/or what will be published and where (research papers, conference presentations). Specify if any permission is needed (e.g., from participants, clients, gatekeepers, etc.) prior to publication, and whether there are any potential issues relating to Intellectual Property Rights when creating or using materials.</p> <p>This research will primarily be used to present to examiners at Galway Mayo Institute of Technology. It may be used in future academic journals or at academic conferences including but not limited to Biz Expo Ireland, SMART Business Conference, Digital West, and events ran by the Galway Chamber of Commerce and Local Enterprise Offices.</p> <p>Permission is sought in an information & consent form which will be given to each participant to sign if they wish to take part in the study. All participants in the study will remain anonymous with all information provided by the participants used solely for research purposes.</p>	

9	Location of research
<p>Will the research take place outside of Ireland?</p> <p>YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If yes, give details below.</p> <p><u>Help:</u> If yes, please specify where the research will take place. Research must comply with the laws of the country where it is taking place and also comply with local Data Protection and Intellectual Property legislation: you must confirm that your research is compliant with local requirements and how you have ascertained this. Advise if the project requires ethical approval in-country and how this has been ascertained. If approval is required, a</p>	

copy of this should be included in the application or details of the process of how it will be obtained. Please make reference to insurance and indemnity cover for the project where relevant.

Note: If data is to be processed or stored outside the EEA contact dpo@gmit.ie

N/A

10	Collaborative Projects
Is the research a collaborative project (i.e., it involves more than one institution)?	
YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If yes, give details below.	
<p><u>Help:</u> If yes, please specify the other institutions involved and if ethical approval needs to be / has been given by them. Please also specify what procedures have been put in place to ensure ethical compliance from all partners.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> If personal data is being shared between institutions then a data sharing agreement must be in place. Contact dpo@gmit.ie</p>	
N/A	

11	Any other permission or external ethical approval required to undertake the project
Please specify if the project requires any other ethical approval or permissions not mentioned previously in this application and how and when these will be obtained.	

Help:

- Other permissions: ethical approval does not give the right of access to the Institute's students, staff or the use of Institute premises to carry out research, and you may need to contact an appropriate Institute gatekeeper for agreement to approach potential participants or for the use of premises, so please give details.
- Gatekeepers: permission of a gatekeeper for initial access to participants may be required or to carry out data collection on their premises.
- If the project requires approval from an external ethics committee, this should normally be obtained prior to submitting this application.
- If a Disclosure and Barring Service check is required due to the specific participant group, give details.
- Regarding insurance and indemnity cover, some projects will require individual confirmation of cover. See the Research Ethics Procedures document for more details.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION: what to submit with the application

For projects involving human participants, you must submit, where appropriate, the Participant Information Sheet/s and consent form/s. You must also submit every communication a participant will see or receive. Failure to do so will cause delays to the application.

DECLARATIONS AND SIGNATURES


STUDENT

I confirm that I will undertake this project as detailed in Part A and Part B of the application. I understand that I must abide by the terms of this approval and that I may not make any substantial amendments to the project without further approval. I understand that research with human participants or their data must not commence without ethical approval.

<i>Signed</i>	Sam O'Neill	<i>Date</i>	May 27th 2021.
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RESEARCH SUPERVISOR RECOMMENDATION FOR STUDENT PROJECT

I confirm that the committee has considered part A and part B of the application. The project is viable and the student has appropriate skills to undertake the project. Where applicable, the Participant Information Sheet and recruitment procedures for obtaining informed consent are appropriate and the ethical issues arising from the project have been addressed in the application. I understand that research with human participants must not commence without ethical approval. I recommend this project for approval.

<i>Name</i>	Research Supervisor	<i>Signed</i>		<i>Date</i>	May 27 th 2021.
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Comment(s):

E.g. if similar research projects have been previously approved.

LECTURER ON BEHALF OF PROGRAMME BOARD

I confirm that the project will be undertaken as detailed in stage one and stage two of the application. I understand that I must abide by the terms of this approval and that I may not make

any substantial amendments to the project without further approval. I understand that research with human participants or their data must not commence without ethical approval.

Signed		Date	
d		14/09/21	

PROJECTS APPROVED BY THE RESEARCH ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE

I confirm that this project was considered by the Taught Programme Research Ethics Committee and has received ethical approval.

Chair	George Onofrei	Signed	GO	Date	22/09/2021
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This form will be retained for the purposes of quality assurance of compliance and audit for THREE years

Appendix B: Information and Consent Form



Information and Consent Form for Participants

The researcher would like to thank you for your time and considering participating in this research project. This document has been created to give you an understanding of what the study is about and what would be expected of you to help you make an informed decision as to whether or not you would like to participate in the research.

Research (working) Title:

An explorative study of Digital Marketing implementation by SMEs in the West of Ireland during the COVID 19 Pandemic.

The purpose of the research:

This research is being undertaken as part of a MSc of Science in Digital Media & Marketing. It aims to take an in-depth look at how SMEs, specifically in the West of Ireland, have utilised Digital Marketing since January 2019.

Researcher Disclosure:

This research will primarily be used to present to examiners at Galway Mayo Institute of Technology. It may be used in future academic journals or at academic conferences including but not limited to Biz Expo Ireland, SMART Business Conference, Digital West, and events ran by the Galway Chamber of Commerce and Local Enterprise Offices.

Neither the information from this interview or the findings from this research will be used in a personal capacity by the researcher Sam O'Neill. The researcher works as the Managing Director of One Stop Marketing Solutions, a leading Marketing Agency in Galway however this research is being carried out solely from an academic standpoint. Although this researcher may be reviewing Digital Marketing practices in SMEs he has contact with, all participants are

reassured that the researcher will adhere strictly to anonymity and confidentiality protocols outlined in this information sheet. No sensitive information about the business or any names of those taking part in the research will be shared with any other business entity.

Informed Consent:

This study has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Business in Galway Mayo Institute of Technology and all the research carried out will be in conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the Institute.

We do not foresee any negative outcomes arising from participating in this study however participants may seek clarification at any point on items that arise during the interview. All participants will be asked for their permission for the interview to be recorded however these recordings will not be shared with anyone else. Participants can request that the interview recording be stopped at any time and are not obligated to answer every question if they do not wish to do so.

Confidentiality:

It is of utmost importance to the researcher that all data collected including but not limited to recordings of the interview (written or otherwise) will be stored in a folder on the GMIT Student One Drive. This folder can only be accessed using unique user login details and password that will not be shared with any other individual or group. This information will only be kept for the length of time that it takes to put together the final thesis report and any files holding data which might identify any individual or business will be destroyed within two months of the final thesis submission.

Anonymity:

Those participating in the research and their business name will be kept anonymous and will not be included in the thesis write-up or in any other publications that from the research.

Consent:

1. I understand the nature and purpose of this research and I consent to being interviewed as part of the study.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can decide to opt out of the research during the data collection process.
3. I confirm that I am over the age of 18 years old.
4. I understand that all information gathered about me during this study will be treated with full confidentiality.

I do / do not consent to the interview being recorded.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Sam O'Neill

Master of Science in Digital Media and Marketing

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology, Mayo Campus, Westport Rd, Castlebar, Co. Mayo

085 821 5029 | samuel.oneill@research.gmit.ie

Appendix C: Interview Questions Guide

Semi Structured Interview Questions Guide

Introduction: setting the scene

How long has your business been in operation?

Tell me about what made you set up your own business?

What have been some of the challenges that you have faced along the way?

How long have you been utilising digital marketing?

How would you describe the current online presence of your business? What, if any, marketing channels are you currently utilising?

Experiences

What impact has digital marketing had on your business? Do you have any examples?

Could you describe any challenges that you have faced when using digital marketing?

What factors have stopped you from utilising digital marketing previously?

Can you describe the decision making process which led to the digital marketing strategy that your business has in place?

Can you provide some examples of digital marketing challenges or benefits that you have encountered which are unique to the fact that your business is located in the West of Ireland?

Future Growth

What are your ambitions for the business?

What areas of digital marketing do you believe that you can capitalise on?

What advice would you give to any SMEs in the West of Ireland who are currently not using digital marketing?

In terms of supports from the government or otherwise, what do you feel that your business needs to support your digital marketing strategy and implementation?