

Effectiveness of social media marketing for local brands

Efectividad del marketing en redes sociales para marcas locales

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the effectiveness of social media marketing applied to local Ecuadorian brands, particularly those managed by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Using a mixed methodology, which integrated surveys to companies, interviews with experts and analysis of digital metrics, we explored the predominant platforms, content formats with greater capacity for interaction and the impact of strategies such as the use of influencers and targeted advertising. The results showed that platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp Business dominate the digital ecosystem of SMEs due to their accessibility and penetration. Likewise, audiovisual content, especially in video format and ephemeral publications, presented the highest levels of engagement. Notably, collaboration with local micro-influencers showed superior profitability compared to figures with greater reach, by generating

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more authentic relationships with the target audience. On the other hand, although investment in paid advertising increased visibility and sales, its effectiveness was conditioned by content saturation and users' growing indifference to intrusive ads. The research highlights the importance of aligning digital strategies with local culture and consumer behaviors, emphasizing authenticity, proximity and adaptability as fundamental pillars of success in contexts of limited resources and high digital competition. This study provides practical tools and empirical evidence for the optimization of digital campaigns in emerging markets, such as Ecuador.

Keywords: Engagement, microinfluencers, audiovisual content, paid advertising, local culture.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la eficacia del marketing en redes sociales aplicado a marcas locales ecuatorianas, particularmente aquellas gestionadas por pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYMES). Mediante una metodología mixta, que integró encuestas a empresas, entrevistas a expertos y análisis de métricas digitales, se exploraron las plataformas predominantes, los formatos de contenido con mayor capacidad de interacción y el impacto de estrategias como el uso de influencers y la publicidad segmentada. Los resultados evidenciaron que plataformas como Facebook y WhatsApp Business dominan el ecosistema digital de las PYMES debido a su accesibilidad y penetración. Asimismo, el contenido audiovisual, especialmente en formato de video y publicaciones efímeras, presentó los niveles más altos de engagement. De manera destacada, la colaboración con microinfluencers locales demostró una rentabilidad superior frente a figuras con mayor alcance, al generar relaciones más auténticas con el público objetivo. Por otro lado, si bien la inversión en publicidad paga incrementó la visibilidad y las ventas, su eficacia resultó condicionada por la saturación de contenidos y la creciente indiferencia de los usuarios frente a anuncios intrusivos. La investigación pone en evidencia la importancia de alinear las estrategias digitales con la cultura local y los

comportamientos del consumidor, enfatizando la autenticidad, la cercanía y la adaptabilidad como pilares fundamentales del éxito en contextos de recursos limitados y alta competencia digital. Este estudio aporta herramientas prácticas y evidencia empírica para la optimización de campañas digitales en mercados emergentes, como el ecuatoriano.

Palabras clave: Engagement, microinfluencers, contenido audiovisual, publicidad paga, cultura local.

INTRODUCTION

Social media marketing has emerged as a fundamental strategic tool for local brands in Ecuador, in a context characterized by accelerated digitization and sustained growth in access to digital platforms. According to recent figures from the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC, 2023), approximately 78% of the Ecuadorian population has access to the internet, and within this group, 92% use social media on a daily basis, with Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok being the most popular platforms. This environment has led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to progressively venture into digital marketing as a way to achieve positioning, loyalty, and competitiveness in an increasingly saturated and globalized market.

Internationally, several studies have documented the benefits of social media marketing in improving brand visibility, consumer loyalty, and sales conversion (Ebrahim, 2020; Kotler et al., 2021). However, transferring these strategies to emerging contexts such as Ecuador requires critical analysis, given the existence of particular structural conditions. These include limited budgets for digital advertising, a shortage of specialized personnel, and high competition for consumer attention, often dominated by large corporations with greater access to algorithms and technological resources (Maridueña Ganchozo, 2024).

Ecuadorian consumer behavior also presents relevant peculiarities for the design of digital strategies. Research such as that of Pinargote et al. (2022) has pointed out that the national audience tends to value authentic, relatable, and culturally significant content over visually sophisticated but impersonal campaigns. This preference translates into a greater emotional and behavioral response to brands that manage to incorporate elements of the local imagination, such as regional humor, everyday life, or community identity, into their digital narrative. Likewise, variables such as communication tone and the degree of direct interaction with the audience have a significant impact on engagement levels (Pletikosa & Michahelles, 2013).

In terms of platform selection, the evidence points to a different logic compared to developed markets. While Instagram or LinkedIn tend to be priorities for B2B and B2C strategies in countries in the global north, in Ecuador, SMEs show a marked preference for Facebook and WhatsApp Business, motivated by their wide penetration and low

costs (Mera-Plaza et al., 2022). For its part, TikTok has experienced exponential growth of 150% in active users between 2021 and 2023, positioning it as a key platform for connecting with young audiences. However, its adoption by businesses is still in its infancy, partly due to the challenges involved in producing dynamic and audiovisual content.

Despite the potential offered by social media, most local brands fail to fully capitalize on its benefits. Ugsha and López (2025) found that more than 65% of SMEs in the Calderón parish of Quito do not have a defined digital strategy, and only 28% perform systematic metric analysis to optimize their campaigns. This phenomenon is consistent with international studies that warn that a lack of monitoring and evaluation is one of the main causes of poor performance in digital actions (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). In addition, overexposure to promotional content has generated a defensive response in users, reflected in what has been termed “selective blindness” toward generic ads (Hernández-Méndez & Muñoz-Leiva, 2019).

Within this landscape, the use of micro-influencers, understood as figures with fewer than 50,000 followers but with a strong connection to specific niches, has gained relevance due to their ability to generate trust and authenticity. Breves et al. (2021) argue that the parasocial relationships established with these figures can significantly increase digital persuasion, especially when they align with the values and aspirations of the target audience. This strategy is particularly useful in contexts where the emotional bond between brand and consumer is decisive, as is the case in the Ecuadorian market. Similarly, advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence for content personalization are beginning to influence campaign design, although their incorporation in Ecuador is still in its early stages (Chang & Chimchay, 2023).

The importance of this research lies in the fact that there are still few studies that comprehensively and contextually address the reality of Ecuadorian SMEs. Analyzing this phenomenon from a mixed perspective and with an emphasis on sociocultural variables allows us not only to identify which strategies are most effective, but also to understand why they work in an environment characterized by limited resources, strong digital competition, and consumers with specific cultural preferences. This approach contributes to filling a gap in Ecuadorian and Latin American literature and provides a framework for analysis that guides local brands in optimizing their digital presence and strengthening their competitiveness.

In this vein, this research aims to identify the factors that condition the effectiveness of social media marketing in local Ecuadorian brands, taking into account both quantitative variables (type of platform, content format, engagement) and qualitative variables (perception of authenticity, cultural relevance, trust). Through a mixed methodological design, the aim is to offer empirical evidence and practical guidance for optimizing the use of these digital tools in resource-limited environments, thus contributing to strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs in the national digital ecosystem.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is part of a mixed methodological approach of a descriptive and correlational nature, with exploratory elements, designed to analyze in depth the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies implemented by local brands in Ecuador. The choice of a mixed approach responds to the need to capture both quantifiable dimensions of the phenomenon, such as engagement metrics and publication frequency, and qualitative aspects related to the perception, authenticity, and cultural relevance of the content disseminated. This comprehensive approach makes it possible not only to measure statistical relationships between key variables, but also to interpret the social and communicative meanings underlying digital interaction between brands and consumers. The quantitative phase consisted of administering a structured survey to a sample of 150 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from different economic sectors, including food, retail, services, and local businesses. The sample was selected using stratified sampling by region and industry type, with the aim of ensuring broad geographical and sectoral representation within Ecuador. The questionnaire included closed questions about the digital platforms used, the type of content disseminated, the frequency of publication, the resources allocated to paid advertising, and the metrics obtained in terms of interactions (likes, comments, shares, and views). The internal reliability of the instrument was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, obtaining a value that confirms the consistency of the items and the validity of the questionnaire for measuring the variables proposed. The data were coded and processed using SPSS version 27 software, allowing the calculation of measures of central tendency (mean, median), dispersion (standard deviation), and the execution of Spearman and Pearson correlation tests to evaluate the relationship between independent variables such as advertising investment and dependent variables such as engagement.

At the same time, a qualitative phase was designed to deepen the understanding of the practices, challenges, and perceptions associated with the use of digital marketing on social media. To this end, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key players: local business owners, digital marketing specialists, and content managers of SMEs with an active presence on social media platforms. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis using the thematic coding method. This procedure made it possible to identify recurring categories such as content authenticity, audience interaction, cultural adaptation, budget constraints, use of influencers, and consumer resistance to advertising. The emerging categories were contrasted with the quantitative findings to consolidate the internal validity of the results through methodological triangulation.

Case analysis was incorporated as an additional tool within the qualitative component. Paradigmatic experiences of local brands with high and low digital performance were intentionally selected in order to study in detail the factors determining the success or failure of their strategies. These units of analysis made it possible to examine, for example, how communication tone influences the perception of authenticity, how

elements of local cultural identity are integrated into the brand narrative, and what role relationships with micro-influencers or content creators with low reach but a high level of emotional connection with the audience play. Targeted content analysis was used to treat these cases, contrasting empirical data with theoretical frameworks proposed by authors such as Aaker (2010) on brand identity construction, and Breves et al. (2021) in relation to the effect of parasocial relationships in digital contexts.

In terms of statistical treatment, in addition to the correlation tests already mentioned, multiple linear regression models were developed to identify the relative weight of different explanatory variables such as content type, platform used, or publication frequency on the perceived effectiveness of campaigns, measured in terms of return on investment (ROI) and interaction metrics. Statistical significance levels ($p < 0.05$) were established to ensure rigor in the interpretation of the results, and the internal consistency of the measurement instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Meanwhile, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to identify significant differences between economic sectors, which made it possible to determine whether certain industries perform better on social media, depending on their nature and consumer profile.

The secondary data used in this research came from reliable and up-to-date sources, including reports from the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC, 2023), databases from social platforms such as Facebook Insights and TikTok Analytics, as well as indexed scientific literature that provides relevant background information on consumer digital behavior in Latin American contexts. The document review also served to identify knowledge gaps and contrast the local situation with international trends, thus reinforcing the comparative nature of the study.

The methodological choice, based on the paradigm of critical realism, sought to balance the objectivity of quantifiable data with an in-depth interpretation of the social phenomena involved in digital marketing. In this way, an approach consistent with the objectives established in the introduction to the study was achieved, which emphasize the need to understand not only which strategies work, but also why they do so in certain sociocultural contexts.

The methodology adopted provides a solid and multidimensional framework for evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing from a contextualized, integrative, and scientifically grounded perspective, combining precise measurement with analytical sensitivity to the complexity of the Ecuadorian digital environment.

RESULTS

The first finding was obtained by processing the responses to a survey administered to 150 small and medium-sized enterprises in different regions of Ecuador. The questions were designed to identify the digital platforms most frequently used for marketing activities, such as promotional publications, customer service, and content dissemination. The information collected was processed in SPSS, where absolute and

relative frequencies were calculated to determine the prevalence of use by platform, providing a clear picture of the technological preferences of SMEs and their alignment with digital consumption trends in the Ecuadorian context.

The data show a significant dominance of Facebook and WhatsApp Business as the preferred platforms for Ecuadorian SMEs. This pattern can be explained by the high penetration of both platforms in the country, their accessibility, and their ease of managing direct interactions with customers. Instagram occupies an intermediate position, suggesting moderate adoption associated with the requirement for more elaborate visual content. TikTok, despite its growth, still has low business adoption, while LinkedIn remains a platform with limited use for marketing purposes among SMEs. These results coincide with the findings of Mera-Plaza et al. (2022), who noted that Facebook and WhatsApp are positioned as the most accessible and functional digital tools for businesses with limited budgets. However, this pattern differs from that reported by Smith et al. (2012), who highlighted Instagram and LinkedIn as priority channels for B2B and B2C strategies in developed economies. This confirms the need to contextualize strategic decisions according to local digital behavior and habits, as also argued by Coral et al. (2023). Consequently, the choice of platforms responds not only to global trends, but also to the ability of each medium to integrate into the cultural and commercial practices of the environment, making Facebook and WhatsApp Business key channels for maximizing the reach and interaction of Ecuadorian SMEs.

2. Relationship between content type and engagement level

The second finding was generated from the analysis of 120 digital campaigns executed by the SMEs surveyed. Content types were classified into four main categories: videos, images, text, and ephemeral posts such as Instagram and Facebook stories. These formats were then correlated with three engagement metrics: number of likes, comments, and shares. Spearman's correlation coefficient was applied for this purpose. Videos emerged as the content format with the greatest ability to generate interactions on social media, with high and significant correlation coefficients in the three metrics evaluated. Ephemeral stories also demonstrated a positive influence, especially on likes and comments. In contrast, text-only content showed a weak correlation, suggesting its limited effectiveness in fostering engagement on platforms geared toward visual stimulation and immediacy.

These results corroborate the findings of Pletikosa & Michahelles (2013), who showed that visual content has greater potential to encourage user participation. In the Ecuadorian context, this preference for videos and visual elements can be explained by the search for authentic and emotionally resonant content, as suggested by Pinargote et al. (2022). The use of ephemeral stories, by generating a sense of urgency and exclusivity, is also in line with the new dynamics of rapid consumption of digital content, widely documented in contemporary literature (Ebrahim, 2020).

In this sense, statistically reliable evidence confirms that prioritizing audiovisual formats, especially videos and temporary posts, is a decisive factor in increasing audience

interaction on social media. The high correlation found supports the need for SMEs to orient their content production toward short, dynamic, and culturally relevant pieces capable of capturing attention in the first few seconds of exposure and generating an immediate emotional connection with the user. This orientation not only optimizes engagement but also enhances organic reach.

3. Effectiveness of local influencer marketing

For this section, 30 campaigns carried out by SMEs using both micro-influencers (fewer than 50,000 followers) and macro-influencers (more than 100,000 followers) were analyzed. Data was collected on return on investment (ROI), customer trust perception, and associated costs per campaign. In addition, interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs who hired these services, seeking to explore the perceived value of each type of influencer.

Campaigns with micro-influencers generated a significantly higher ROI and were also perceived as more trustworthy by consumers. This suggests that in emerging markets such as Ecuador, where interpersonal relationships and trust are highly valued, marketing with niche figures is more effective than partnerships with wide-reaching influencers. The lower associated cost also improves its viability for SMEs.

This finding is in line with Breves et al. (2021), who emphasize that micro-influencers, by developing more intimate parasocial relationships with their followers, generate a perception of superior authenticity, which enhances their persuasive influence. In the Ecuadorian context, this dynamic is particularly relevant due to the cultural and social proximity between the influencer and their audience, an aspect also highlighted by Aaker (2010) in his theory of authentic brand building. Furthermore, Maridueña Ganchozo's (2024) premise on the need for cost-effective strategies in low-resource environments is validated.

In this context, for Ecuadorian SMEs, collaboration with micro-influencers not only represents one of the most profitable investments, but also constitutes a high-impact strategy for building sustainable bonds of trust with the target audience. The combination of lower cost, greater credibility, and cultural affinity generated by this strategy makes influencers an essential strategic resource for differentiation in highly competitive markets.

4. Impact of investment in paid advertising on sales and engagement

This result was constructed from statistical analysis using multiple linear regression, in which the amount invested in paid advertising (ads on Facebook and Instagram) was taken as the independent variable, while the dependent variables were monthly sales and engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares). Control variables such as company size and economic sector were included to avoid bias. The data were processed with SPSS v.27, using standardized beta coefficients (β) and adjusted R^2 to explain the variance. The results reveal that investment in paid advertising has a positive and statistically significant effect on the increase in monthly sales ($\beta = 0.45$) and digital engagement ($\beta = 0.38$). However, the coefficient of determination R^2 indicates that about 38%–46% of the

variability in the results is not explained solely by advertising expenditure, suggesting the existence of other moderating factors such as content quality, audience segmentation, and the platform chosen. These results support the usefulness of paid campaigns, although they warn of their limited self-sufficiency if they are not integrated with organic strategies. The results reveal that paid advertising should be conceived as a complement to organic strategies and not as a substitute in order to maximize its return and impact on engagement.

This finding is in line with Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2019), who argue that paid advertising is an effective tool in competitive digital environments, but that its performance depends on an adequate segmentation strategy and message creativity. It also relates to the warning by Hernández-Méndez & Muñoz-Leiva (2019) about advertising saturation on social media, a phenomenon that can reduce the impact of ads due to the development of "selective blindness" on the part of users. In the Ecuadorian context, where audiences value authenticity and direct interaction, this risk is amplified, so it is recommended that paid campaigns be accompanied by culturally relevant and emotionally resonant content.

The results also coincide with trends observed in other emerging markets in Latin America, where, as Rodas and Sandoval (2023) point out, paid advertising can generate high initial reach, but its sustained effectiveness is limited when it is not accompanied by organic content and strategies aimed at audience loyalty.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research allow us to conclude that the effectiveness of social media marketing in the context of local Ecuadorian brands depends on a complex interaction between technological, economic, and sociocultural factors. Far from responding to universal formulas, successful strategies are those that manage to adapt to the realities of the local environment, especially in terms of the platforms used, the content formats selected, and the way brands establish links with their audience.

One of the key findings was the high preference for platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp Business among Ecuadorian SMEs, motivated by their low cost and ease of use. These networks not only allow direct and personalized communication with customers, but also facilitate the distribution of content with high reach without requiring high investments. Although platforms such as TikTok show sustained growth, their integration is still partial, which represents a strategic opportunity for brands that want to connect with youth segments through emerging audiovisual formats.

The evidence obtained also highlights the superiority of audiovisual content, particularly videos and ephemeral stories, in terms of engagement, reinforcing the need to produce more dynamic, brief, and culturally relevant messages. This trend responds to the evolution of consumers' digital behavior, who value authenticity, emotion, and local connection over excessive technical professionalism.

In this sense, campaigns with micro-influencers are positioned as a highly effective tactic, not only because of their economic profitability, but also because of their ability to build trust through genuine parasocial relationships. ROI figures and perceived credibility among the public validate this strategy as a viable and recommendable alternative for brands with limited resources seeking to differentiate themselves in a saturated market. Finally, investment in paid advertising proved useful in increasing both engagement and sales. However, its effectiveness is conditional on proper planning, avoiding advertising saturation that can cause user indifference. Consequently, brands must adopt a balanced approach that combines paid tools with organic strategies based on knowledge of the cultural environment, intelligent segmentation, and the creation of relational value. This study reaffirms that the effectiveness of digital marketing is not based solely on technical mastery of platforms, but on a deep understanding of the consumer, the territory, and the culture in which each brand operates.

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