

# ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES IN DIGITAL MARKETING: EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION

*Zuzanna Minga<sup>1</sup>, Natalia Przybylska<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** In the rapidly evolving field of digital marketing, identifying essential competencies is critical for both new and experienced professionals. This study aimed to empirically identify these competencies and develop a structured educational framework to address industry needs and challenges.

**Materials and Methods:** A two-phase research approach was adopted. The first phase analyzed secondary data sources, including literature reviews and curriculum evaluations, to understand current educational offerings and market demands. This was complemented by focus group interviews (FGI) with digital marketers from four countries, providing diverse insights into required skills. In the second phase, a survey was conducted, collecting responses from 334 digital marketing professionals across several European countries to validate and expand upon initial findings.

**Results:** The research led to the identification of key competencies and the development of five educational modules: Introduction to Digital Marketing, Website Management, Content Marketing, Digital Advertising, and Website Analytics. These modules provide a comprehensive approach to digital marketing education, addressing essential concepts such as market dynamics, website creation, content strategy, advertising principles, and analytics techniques.

**Conclusions and Summary:** The findings highlight that these competencies are crucial for success in the digital marketing industry. The proposed educational modules offer a structured framework to address labour market demands and equip professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to excel. This study underscores the importance of integrating empirical research and industry feedback into the development of educational curricula, ensuring alignment with professional requirements and industry evolution.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Gdansk, Faculty of Management, [zuzanna.minga@ug.edu.pl](mailto:zuzanna.minga@ug.edu.pl), [ORCID: 0000-0002-8901-8033](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8901-8033)

<sup>2</sup> Gdansk University of Technology, Faculty of Management and Economics, [natalia.przybylska@pg.edu.pl](mailto:natalia.przybylska@pg.edu.pl), [ORCID: 0000-0001-9414-4942](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9414-4942)

**Keywords:** digital marketing, marketing competencies, online marketing competencies, digital transformation

**JEL classification:** M30

**Paper type:** research study

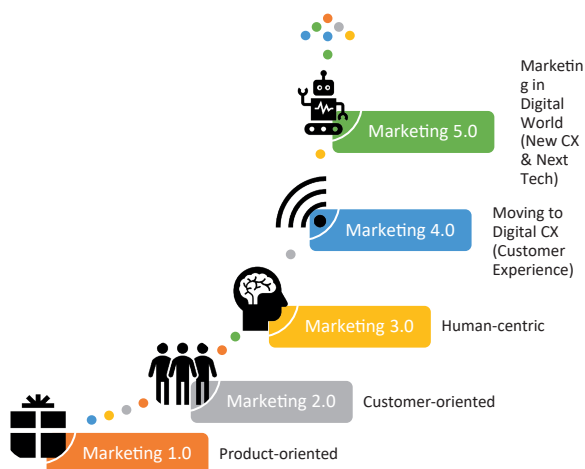
## 1. Introduction

Digital marketing is increasingly essential as companies of all sizes adopt digital strategies to achieve their goals. With the rise of the Internet, businesses can now reach global markets, making digital marketing tools vital for growth. As a result, there is a growing demand for professionals with digital marketing skills as companies seek to boost sales and build lasting relationships with customers and stakeholders through public relations, CSR activities, and data-driven insights.

This entire process is the result of the transition from marketing 1.0 to 5.0, moving from a product-oriented approach (1.0) through the next phase that added customer satisfaction (2.0), human-centric marketing (3.0), and finally, marketing 4.0 marking the entry into the digital era, and marketing 5.0 – the use of advanced technologies in marketing (Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan 2021). According to the definition presented by Wangmonta, Marketing 5.0 is described as a marketing strategy that leverages technology for humanity, where people and technologies collaborate to generate customer experiences (Wongmonta, 2021). On the other hand, Sima defines Marketing 5.0 as the use of technologies that mimic human actions to communicate, create, deliver, and enhance value in the customer experience (Sima, 2021) (Figure 1). The latest era emerged: Marketing 6.0, which focuses on how virtual and augmented reality will transform the business area (Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan 2024).

Digital marketing emerged in the 1990s with the introduction of Web 1.0, allowing users to search for information but lacking broader content-sharing capabilities. A key milestone was the publication of the first clickable banner for advertising in 1993, which began the digitization of marketing (Jadhav et al., 2022). The launch of Google in 1998, followed by social media platforms like LinkedIn (2002) and MySpace (2003), marked significant developments. The 2006 surge in search engine traffic, the introduction of the iPhone in 2008, and the rise of cookies revolutionized digital marketing. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok further boosted marketing efforts. The latest breakthrough in marketing came with the launch of ChatGPT in 2020, an AI tool developed by OpenAI, now available in GPT-4 (Jadhav et al., 2022). In today's digital age, digital marketing plays a pivotal role in the growth and development of businesses across industries. The essence of digital marketing lies in its ability to harness the power of digital channels and technologies to reach and engage with target audiences effectively. Marketers today are required to possess a diverse skill set that goes beyond traditional marketing

competencies. They must be adept at leveraging various digital tools and platforms to create impactful campaigns, analyse data-driven insights, and optimise strategies in real-time. Moreover, in the face of rapid technological advancements and the unique challenges posed by Generation Z and Alpha consumers, marketers must continually update their skills and knowledge base. It is indicated, that Generation Z are currently referred to as digital natives, i.e., a generation familiar with the latest technology, with digital skills and a wide range of information and consumer knowledge (Kahawandala et. al. 2020, Salviettiet et al. 2023). This necessitates a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation to stay ahead in the dynamic digital landscape. A comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in digital environments, proficiency in data analytics, and agility in responding to market trends are indispensable qualities for today's marketers striving for success in digital marketing (Kahawandala et al., 2020; Salvietti et al., 2023).



**Diagram 1.** Marketing 1.0 to 5.0

*Source:* based on Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan (2021).

This publication aims to explore and present the most desired competencies of digital marketing specialists based on research on how practitioners perceive their daily work and what they expect from aspiring digital marketing specialists. By examining these dynamics, this study aims to provide insight into the evolving skill sets necessary for success in the digital marketing landscape.

## 2. Defining the essence of digital marketing

Digital transformation has significantly accelerated in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and has caused irreversible changes in many areas. This change also caused the way companies operate around the world to evolve. This is

influenced by the growing popularity of digital marketing, which is called a set of tools enabling companies to achieve goals in the digital environment (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Pandey et al., 2020; Erdmann et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic was, therefore a factor that pushed societies towards using applications and social media for maintaining contacts, socializing or collecting information and making online purchases (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022). The growing popularity of online shopping results in the emergence of new digital technologies, which have increased the number of touchpoints in the customer's journey map, such as: social media, applications, e-commerce platforms and websites (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Marketing employees must, therefore combine existing offline marketing skills with online marketing (Rosario et al., 2022).

The literature defines marketing as the “art and science of selecting target markets and acquiring, retaining and developing customers through creation, delivery, and communication higher value for the customer” (Kotler, Keller, 2016). According to Rajagopal, marketers create, inform, and then deliver to the market offers that provide both customers, other stakeholders, and societies with value based on their specific needs (Rajagopal, 2020). Changes regarding development in the digital era have caused the marketing industry to enter the digitization process. Digitization is defined in the literature as the use of digital and information technologies (IT), thanks to which it is possible to optimise business processes through effective process coordination and creating additional value by improving user experience (Pagani and Pardo, 2017). Following this, it is necessary to define the essence of digital marketing. Bala and Verma (2018) said “Digital marketing is the use of technologies to help marketing activities in order to improve customer knowledge by matching their needs”. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) defined digital marketing as “Achieving marketing objectives through applying digital media, data and technology”. According to The American Marketing Association (AMA) “Digital marketing is the use of digital or social channels to promote a brand or reach consumers. This kind of marketing can be executed on the Internet, social media, search engines, mobile devices, and other channels. It requires new ways of marketing to consumers and understanding the impact of their behavior”. Another essential aspect is a digital marketing strategy. Due to the dynamically changing digital world, it is crucial for companies to have up-to-date digital knowledge to build relationships, interact, attract, and integrate consumers using a planned digital marketing strategy (Unvan, Badlo, 2021). A significant part in a digital marketing strategy is marketing performance. Marketing performance provides businesses with feedback on their ability to achieve their intended marketing goals, such as delivering value to their customers (Hadrian et al., 2021; Al-Hawary and Obiadat, 2021; Erlangga, 2022; Alhalalmeh et al., 2022; Al-Nawafah et al., 2022).

To understand the importance of the changes brought by the digital era for the marketing industry, it is worth looking at the results of the Digital 2024 April Global

Statshot Report. The report showed that: “at the beginning of April 2024, there were 5.07 billion social media users worldwide, accounting for 62.6% of the total global population. The number of social media users has also been growing over the past 12 months, with 259 million new users joining social media since last year. This corresponds to an annual growth of 5.4 percent, with an average rate of 8.2 new users per second.” This means that the marketing world must keep up with all the changes related to digitalization to meet the demands of the market and today’s customers. Therefore, marketers must have increasingly broader digital competencies.

Selected areas of digital marketing:

— Website and SEO

Search engine optimization (SEO) is related to website development. Aaron Goldman describes search engine optimization as “the practice of improving the visibility of a brand or website on Google and other search engines” (Goldman 2011). Search engines (e.g., Google) provide the opportunity to exchange value between users such as consumers looking for information, content providers, and advertisers who want to reach their segment of recipients/consumers. (Rangaswamy et al., 2020). The operation of websites must be correlated with search engine optimization to be found in the information search results by potential customers.

— Content marketing and social media marketing

According to Tanton et al. (2013), content marketing is the creation and then delivery of content containing value to specific recipients, taking into account their interests and needs, which does not contain information about the incentive to purchase. Content marketing is used to build long-term relationships with recipients, e.g., through social media, and through content on a website, blog or video, webinar, or podcast. Social media is an integral element of content marketing strategy. Marketing activities in social media involve using these platforms to promote products and services. Due to the growing number of social media users who spend more and more time on them, social media has become the main communication channel, especially for younger generations. In the Digital 2024 April Global Statshot Report, the most popular platforms in 2024 are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whatssup, and TikTok. According to Charlesworth, social media had and still has the greatest impact on consumers’ perception of an organisation, brand, or product. These are platforms that also serve to exchange information and opinions about organisations, products, and brands. This resulted in a change in which consumers stopped trusting marketing messages more, directing their trust towards opinions and information from other customers on social media (Charlesworth 2018).

Author and practitioner Rebecca Lieb (2017) describes, a content marketing strategy should consist of four key elements: brand, positioning, messaging, values. These elements are crucial when creating a strategy for future digital

marketing activities (Charlesworth, 2018). Many social media platforms on the market fulfill various roles and allow you to achieve different goals, influencing the creation of a digital marketing plan. Both practitioners and academics have attempted to classify social media networks, resulting in The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) in 2009. The IAB describes 3 basic categories of tools used in social media: blogs, social media sites, widgets and social media applications. Moreover, social media websites and applications have also begun to play other roles and allow achieving other marketing goals, such as LinkedIn, which serves primarily business purposes, not social ones.

— Digital advertising

With the rapid changes in the digital era, digital advertising has also gained momentum and growth. Today, it is essential for any business or organisation to have a well-developed digital advertising strategy on the Internet. In addition to previously known forms of digital advertising, such as banners on websites, search engine ads such as Google Ads, and social media ads such as Facebook Ads, modern solutions have also appeared, such as mobile applications, which have changed the way of reaching potential customers or users. In addition, the habits of younger generations in social media are also changing, consisting of choosing video forms, and therefore changes in the way of digital advertising in these formats. One of the most common forms of digital advertising is text ads containing a specific message, e.g. regarding a promotion when purchasing here and now with a call to action incentive. This kind of advert is paid only when someone clicks on the ad – pay per click (PPC). On the other hand, advertisements aimed at brand development are display advertisements. These ads are image-based and paid on a cost-per-thousand-impression (CPM) basis (Charlesworth, 2018). Due to the trend towards video forms, display advertising has been expanded to include short films. The trend towards mobile vertical video is particularly important here (Mulier et al., 2021).

— Analytics and monitoring

Enterprises operating in today's market should take advantage of the progress that has occurred in the era of digitalization to provide value to consumers and maintain a continuous strong position in the market. Using mass amounts of information about consumer behaviour and preferences and technology to analyze this data, they can predict changing purchasing preferences and trends and thus dynamically adapt their digital marketing and general marketing strategies (Yosep et al., 2021). According to Chaffey et al., „web (or digital) analytics techniques are used to assess and improve the contribution of digital marketing to a business, including reviewing traffic volume, referrals, clickstreams, online reach data, customer satisfaction surveys, leads, and sales” (Chaffey et al. 2019). There are many tools on the market in 2024 for analyzing consumer data, which are often made available by digital market leaders in a free version, such as

Google Analytics or Meta Business Site. Each of them requires different marketing skills.

Data about users' online preferences and interests is extremely important. They allow collecting information about, for example, how and when the user navigates the website, which is enabled by cookies. Tools such as Google Analytics allow marketers to see who is on the website and where they are visiting it, allowing them to quickly respond and adjust actions to better personalize the user experience (Hanlon, 2019).

To achieve the maximum benefits of using a digital marketing strategy in the digital transformation era, marketers and entrepreneurs themselves conducting marketing activities of their companies should develop a fully planned and structured approach, involving a holistic view of all marketing activities. As a result of the rapid development of digital platforms, both social media and online shopping platforms, applications, and SEO principles, as well as changes in purchasing preferences in the face of widespread digitalization, entrepreneurs, and marketers have received many more opportunities to communicate with consumers. The result of this is the emergence of the concept of "Omnichannel" (Verhoef et al. 2015), meaning the ability and willingness of online users to use multiple channels and go through them during individual stages of the customer's purchasing journey (Timoumi et al. 2022). All these elements indicate the need for a strategic and holistic approach to digital marketing tasks as interconnected elements. This requires increasing digital marketing knowledge to create, lead, and develop a strategy to deliver the intended results.

### **3. Online marketing competencies in the theoretical background**

The meta-analysis synthesizes findings from diverse studies investigating digital marketing competencies across different contexts and sectors. Employing methodologies ranging from qualitative case studies to quantitative surveys and content analyses of job advertisements, these studies collectively underscore the evolving landscape of digital skills in response to technological advancements. By examining the educational and professional requirements outlined across various studies, this analysis aims to delineate the essential competencies crucial for success in contemporary digital marketing roles (Table 1).

The review highlights significant findings from recent literature on digital marketing competencies. It emphasises the critical skills identified across studies, such as SEO, content marketing, analytics, and social media management. These competencies are increasingly pivotal in meeting the demands of digital business environments and are underscored by both technical expertise and soft skills like communication and adaptability. Moreover, the review emphasizes the imperative for educational institutions and training programs to evolve in tandem with these



skill demands, ensuring that professionals are adequately prepared for the challenges posed by rapid technological innovation in digital marketing.

**Table 1.** Summary of literature research on digital marketing competencies

Sources	Research methodology with main results and conclusions
Papageorgiou, G., Marneros, S. (2023)	This study developed a Digital Marketing Competencies (DMC) framework, emphasizing SEO, analytics, and content management skills. Research included curriculum evaluations in Sweden, Spain, and Greece, alongside surveys with educators and industry experts. Findings highlighted the need for educational programs to align with evolving digital business and technological demands.
Kovács, I., Zarándné, K.V. (2022)	The study examines employers' expectations for personal skills in graduate and junior digital marketing roles, focusing on transferable soft skills. An analysis of 5,548 Hungarian job ads from February 2021 identifies key skills for positions like junior digital marketing manager and social media manager. A classification framework categorises 31 skills, showing that while hard skills predominate, soft skills like communication and teamwork are also highly valued.
Hafezieh, N., Pollock, N., Ryan, A. (2023)	This study examines how digital technologies and big data are transforming marketing practices. Through case studies, it identifies a "hacking marketing" strategy involving expertise spanning, value measurement, and experimentation. Findings highlight a shift in managing digital consumers and data from IT to marketing, requiring new skills and approaches.
Graesch, J.P., Hensel-Börner, S., Henseler, J. (2021)	The study shows how information technology (IT) has transformed marketing tools and practices. It highlights the roles of automation, customer interaction, connectivity, and data in digital marketing. Findings stress aligning marketing and IT to develop innovative tools for better customer engagement and control.
Elhajjar, S. (2022)	The study used semi-structured interviews with 25 top-level managers in the Dutch creative industries to examine 21st-century digital skills. While technical skills are strong due to frequent digital tool use, participants highlight innovation challenges from time constraints and rapid technological changes. The research advocates for systematic skill development and integrating digital competencies into organizational practices.
Siddoo, V., Sawattawee, J. (2020)	This study used an online focus group and fuzzy set theory to survey 21 experts on key digital competencies for entrepreneurs in Thailand's digital sector. Findings identified content marketing, creativity, data analysis, and strategic planning as the most important competencies. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of content adaptation, market interpretation, and digital problem-solving skills.



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Royle, J., Laing, A. (2014)	This study explored digital marketing skill gaps affecting communications professionals through 20 in-depth interviews. It found that the main challenges were a lack of technical skills to keep up with new technologies and difficulties in integrating traditional and digital marketing tools. Based on these findings, a model for digital marketers was developed, emphasizing the need for specific guidelines and best practices in communication.
Di Gregorio, A., Maggioni, I., Mauri, C., Mazzucchelli, A. (2019)	This study examines how the digital age has reshaped career paths in marketing, analyzing in-demand skills and future opportunities. Through job ad analysis and surveys of marketing specialists across countries, the research proposed a framework outlining essential skills for career development. Key findings reveal that digital transformation has altered traditional marketing roles, creating demand for new positions focused on managing interactive communication.
Periáñez- Cañadillas, I., Charterina, J., Pando-García, J. (2019)	This study examined the importance of digital competencies for business graduates in relation to current labor market demands. It found that content creation, digital problem solving, communication, and security are crucial for candidates' employability. The research highlighted the growing importance of digital skills and the need to align the skills developed in educational institutions and those required by employers.
Tolstoy, D., Nordman, E.R., Vu, U. (2022)	This study emphasizes the importance of online marketing capabilities (OMC) for SMEs in international e-commerce, while noting that these skills alone are insufficient for improved performance. It introduces the concept of marketing ambidexterity, combining market-driven and market-driving strategies to maximize OMC's impact. Through regression and mediation analysis of 99 Swedish SMEs, the study shows that combining both strategies leads to superior performance in international e-commerce.
Mathews, S., Bianchi, C., Perks, K., Chen, H.L., Glavas, C. (2015)	This study examines the role of digital marketing in shaping international business for SMEs in Australia, Chile, and Taiwan. Analyzing data from 215 Australian SMEs, 204 Chilean SMEs, and 130 Taiwanese SMEs, the research finds that digital marketing strategies positively impact internationalization, with notable country differences. Australian and Taiwanese SMEs benefit from stronger international networks, while Chilean SMEs struggle with limited digital integration, affecting their international growth potential.

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Ritz, Wendy, Wolf, Marco, Mcquitty, Shaun (2019)	This study examines small businesses' engagement in digital marketing, combining the DIY behaviour model and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to understand their motivations and expected outcomes. Using data from 250 small business owners and managers, the research finds that while technological advantage plays a role, it is not the sole factor influencing their actions. The study emphasizes the importance of the DIY model, suggesting that owners and managers take on digital marketing tasks that require specialized knowledge.
Report: The future of skills in ETF partner countries 2024.	The report emphasizes the increasing demand for digital skills due to technological advances, particularly in AI, robotics, and data analysis. These skills are essential for improving production efficiency and are in high demand across agriculture, automotive, construction, and energy sectors. The study calls for modernizing vocational education and training (VET) programs to address the gap between traditional skills and the digital competencies required in today's workplaces.

Source: own study based on literature included in the Table.

4. Characterizing Digital Marketing Competencies – research analysis

4.1. Methodology and research sample characteristics

The extensive adoption of digital marketing practices has profoundly impacted how firms and customers engage with new Internet-based technologies. This shift influences their behaviour, interaction, collaboration, and value co-creation. Consequently, there is a growing demand for marketers whose competencies align with the evolving needs of the market (Angelo Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Ghauri et al., 2016).

In response to the rapidly changing digital landscape, this study aims to explore the requirements for marketing professionals. The study is divided into two comprehensive phases: an initial exploratory study conducted through a cross-country comparison involving four European countries – Poland, Portugal, Finland, and the Netherlands. The exploratory phase employs a qualitative method, focus group interviews to examine the roles, responsibilities, tasks, and skills required of marketing graduates in the digital environment. The next phase also included international research, including a survey of marketing professionals in the same four countries.

The study aimed to create the Transversal Digital Marketing Curriculum. It was one of the project results of an international consortium of DEMS projects (Developing E-marketing Skills for the Business Market) funded by the European

Union<sup>3</sup>. The study was developed based on the collection of primary and secondary data. Taking into account international curricula, expert focus group interviews, and online surveys, five modules containing teaching content and instructions were developed. A number of research activities are described in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Research methods description

Study phases	Method	Description
Exploratory Phase	Study of secondary data	Literature, international reports, and curriculum evaluation. Review of the Existing Teaching Open Resources. Short- and medium-term courses, as well as postgraduate and master's courses, were analyzed. The analysis focused on the EDX, Coursera, Digital Marketing Institute, and Udacity platforms for short- and medium-term courses.
	Focus Group Interviews (FGI)	Conducted in January/February 2022 among digital marketing professionals. Each FGI involves 6 participants and a moderator from four countries. The diverse group of people. From several years to decades of experience in digital marketing. At different levels, including freelance, agency, SME, or owner. The FGI takes 90 minutes.
Explanatory Phase	Online Survey Research	Survey research was carried out using an online questionnaire from April 2022 to June 2022. 334 respondents from Poland, Portugal, Finland, the Netherlands, and other European countries participated. The survey was available in 5 languages (English, Polish, Portuguese, Finnish and Dutch).
	Feedback collected from the consortium partners	During the project meeting, the DEMS partners discussed the conclusions. Based on the research conducted, the most important competencies and tasks in the field of digital marketing were categorised. Then, it was decided to separate 5 educational modules responding to the labour market demand for people starting work in digital marketing.

Source: own study based on DEMS Transversal Digital Marketing Curricula Report PR 1, 2022.

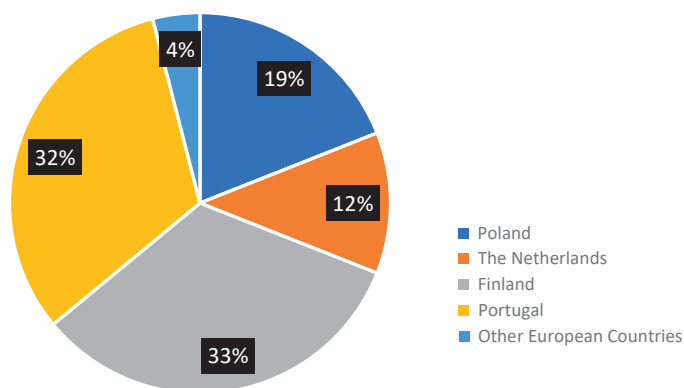
The selected research method is well-suited to address the increasing demand for digital marketing skills in response to the fast-evolving digital environment. The study is divided into two phases: an initial qualitative phase with focus group interviews to gather detailed insights into the skills needed by marketing graduates, fol-

<sup>3</sup> The DEMS – Developing E-marketing Skills for the Business Market project, Programme: Erasmus+, Action Type: KA220-HED – Cooperation partnerships in higher education, aims to popularise digital marketing and provide teachers with useful instruments, in order to supply their students with today’s skills. Project was co-funded by the European Union.

lowed by a quantitative international survey conducted across four countries to offer a wider perspective. This combined approach provides a thorough understanding of the competencies essential for the development of the Transversal Digital Marketing Curriculum.

To prepare students for future employment, curricula must adapt to incorporate the technological advancements of the past two decades. These changes have significantly impacted marketing, as companies across various industries have digitised their marketing operations and processes to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in advertising and promotion (Papageorgiou, 2023). To ensure accurate results, the comprehensive questionnaire identifies core digital marketing competencies, incorporating the perspectives of industry professionals. A total of 334 respondents completed the questionnaire. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents by country of origin.

To enhance the characterization of digital marketing competencies, respondents were initially asked to provide information on the following: the country they work in, years of experience in digital marketing, highest academic degree obtained, their professional situation (single choice), the best designation of the functions they perform, the number of people working in their organisation, the number of people, besides themselves, dedicated to digital marketing in their organisation, the sectors of activity of the organisation in which they work (multiple selections).



**Figure 1.** Research sample – percentage of respondents by country

*Source:* own study based on conducted research.

Digital marketing professionals have an average of 7.12 years of experience. It is worth noting that the Netherlands has the highest average of 9.08 years, while Finland has the lowest average years of experience. The maximum experience value is 30 years and occurs in Greenland (Other). This is followed by the Netherlands and Portugal, both with 27 years. Poland is the country that presents the lowest value regarding the maximum number of years of professional experience in digital marketing. The majority of respondents, as many as 47.9%, have master's degrees.

Following this group are respondents with a Bachelor's degree, making up 35.6% of the sample. Additionally, 12.9% have a high school diploma, and 2.4% have a PhD. Poland is the country with the highest percentage of respondents with a master's degree (69.2%). Most of the respondents (75.7%) work in a company, developing work as employees. As a freelancer or similar, we have 16.1% of the sample. Most respondents hold managerial roles, distinguished by:

- Marketing Manager/Chief Marketing Officer/Digital Marketing Manager
- Digital Marketing Specialist
- Digital Marketing Strategist
- Project Manager
- Account Manager
- Digital Content Manager
- Social Media Manager

These designations account for over 69% of all occupations. Respondents working at organisations were asked about the number of people working at the entities where they work. The lowest number obtained (14.62%) corresponds to organisations with less than 10 employees, i.e. micro-companies. The maximum value obtained was 31.23% (organisations with 10 to 49 employees). Organisations with more than 250 people (28.46%). Finally, the organisational dimension from 50 to 250 people obtained 25.69% of the answers. With the presence of organisations in the sectors in which they operate, it can be seen that 38.79% of organisations are services, 16.06% are retailers and 15.45% are manufacturers. It is also worth noting that in this sample we include public organisations (7.58%) and non-profit organisations (4.85%) (DEMS, 2022).

## 4.2. Digital Marketing Competencies – Empirical Evidence

The main conclusions from the conducted FGI include the necessity of understanding traditional marketing before delving into digital marketing. Two main topics have proven to be central to any digital marketing curriculum: strategy and customer experience. Additionally, participants emphasised that a comprehensive digital marketing curriculum should cover strategy, customer experience, web content, SEO, digital advertising, analytics, social media, websites, and e-commerce. Furthermore, it is essential to have professionals who can see digital marketing as a whole (holistic approach).

The main empirical study consisted of four parts. The first section focused on job descriptions, providing insights into the roles and responsibilities of respondents. The second section covered digital marketing activities, detailing the specific tasks and strategies employed by professionals. The third section addressed digital marketing courses, exploring the educational background and training of the respondents. Finally, the fourth section delved into introductory digital marketing courses and

digital marketing specialisation blocks, examining the foundational and advanced training needed in the field.

In the first part of the study, respondents were asked to select from a predefined list of 20 digital marketing activities that they performed or participated in in the last 7 days. Table 3 presents the responses. The most frequently given answers about performed activities were “Analytics” (8.19%), “Digital marketing strategies” (7.85%), and “Social media” (7.82%) of total responses. Conversely, the minimum value of 0.57% was “other” digital marketing activities that respondents indicated were not listed in the questionnaire. When excluding this category, the minimum value increases to 2.74%, corresponding to “Digital selling.”

**Table 3.** Digital marketing activities performed

Activities Performed	Total	Percentage of respondents
Analytics	245	73%
Digital Marketing Strategies	235	70%
Social Media	234	70%
Digital Advertising	206	62%
Web Content	186	56%
E-mail Marketing	180	54%
SEO	170	51%
Website	170	51%
Landing Pages	163	49%
E-Commerce	131	39%
Conversion Rate Optimization	127	38%
Customer Experience	126	38%
Leads	126	38%
CRM	103	31%
Reputation Management	96	29%
User Experience	96	29%
Web Design	93	28%
Digital Selling	82	25%
Digital Public Relations	71	21%
Other Activity	17	5%

*Source:* own study based on conducted research.

The research results and further analysis indicate that the less experience the respondents have, the greater the number of different types of activities they perform. This relationship is clear for respondents who answered that they had less than 7 years of experience. Contrary to expectations, the average number of activities performed is similar for all organisation size categories. This shows that regardless of the size of the organisation, respondents perform on average over 8 different types of activities. This result is unexpected and defies logic because one would expect a deeper degree of specialisation in larger firms.

To determine the presence of any patterns or connections between the actions taken, a two-way table was constructed. This analysis reveals the nine activities within digital marketing that are most frequently executed by an individual respondent, each with a frequency exceeding 50%. These activities include Analytics, Digital Marketing Strategies, Social Media, Digital Advertising, Web Content, Email Marketing, SEO, Website, and Landing Pages. It is noteworthy that the identification of these nine dominant activities is consistent with the results obtained for the average number of activities performed, which is 8.6. Based on the research conducted, five educational modules were distinguished regarding key competencies in the field of Digital Marketing: Introduction to Digital Marketing, Website & SEO, Content Marketing and Social Media, Digital Advertising, Digital Analytics and Monitoring. Based on extensive research, five areas of competence were selected, for which modules were created along with educational materials, as shown in diagram 2.



**Diagram 2.** Essential Digital Marketing Competencies

*Source:* own study based on conducted research.



The first module, Introduction to Digital Marketing, offers a fundamental understanding of the principles of digital marketing. It provides participants with an expanded insight into the vocabulary and opportunities offered by digital marketing, equipping them with the skills to navigate and achieve success in the digital space. The module covers the features of the digital market, the advantages and main opportunities of digital marketing, setting a digital strategy, and selecting digital audiences and target channels. The second module explains the key role of websites in digital marketing, covering key concepts and best practices for creating effective websites. It examines the various goals that organisations have for their websites, strategies for attracting and retaining visitors, and methods for measuring website success. Additionally, it provides a comprehensive framework for implementing SEO best practices, including auditing, sitemaps, competitive analysis, keyword strategy, social media integration, and link building. The next module explores the concept of content marketing, addressing its definition, benefits, applicable channels, and the pivotal role of social media. It also delves into strategies for achieving success in content marketing. Structured into six sub-modules, each focusing on distinct topics related to content types: blog, video, social media, and email marketing. The aspect of content planning was also presented in a separate module. The next part concerns the fundamental understanding of advertising principles and meticulous preparations before implementing a campaign. This module includes an exploration of basic forms of digital advertising, methods for defining a target demographic, an overview of common digital advertising platforms, strategies for conducting keyword research, considerations for optimising landing pages, methodologies for measuring campaign effectiveness, and techniques for increasing conversions. The Website Analytics module covers the main topics that include acquiring traffic, understanding user behaviour on the website, assessing conversions, and finally analysing loyalty or retention.

### **4.3. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

The competencies highlighted in conducted research such as analytics, content marketing and social media, or digital advertising are indeed crucial. However, in today's dynamic environment, flexibility, continuous learning and adaptation to constant changes are equally important. Digital marketing, due to its rapid evolution driven by technologies such as AI (Artificial Intelligence) and VR (Virtual Reality), requires following emerging trends, acquiring new skills, and competent use of constantly developing and increasingly available tools.

Artificial intelligence significantly enhances digital marketing through improved data analysis, customer insights, and optimised campaign performance. It

supports the creation of personalised content, increases engagement, and facilitates the implementation of new technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and voice search (Raghav et.al 2024). Artificial intelligence represents a valuable tool in digital marketing, capable of enhancing customer engagement and optimising sales outcomes. However, organisations encounter challenges such as data privacy concerns and algorithmic biases (Kumar et. al. 2023). There are many questions about this technology and its impact on the evolution of marketing.

The DEMS project's research was conducted between April and May 2022, while ChatGPT was launched in November 2022, swiftly gaining global popularity and recognition in the marketing sphere. This event had a significant impact on the world of marketing. Respondents who are marketing practitioners did not emphasise that artificial intelligence is a key factor for newcomers entering digital marketing (Table 4). This begs the question: Should beginners prioritise mastering other core digital marketing competencies first, or has ChatGPT fundamentally changed the prospect of AI adoption? It may be the case that AI will be most beneficial to those who already have a basic understanding of digital marketing, serving as an advanced skill that can be developed further. Inquiries regarding such modern technologies require further research and careful observation of current developments. Project DEMS asked experts during pre-survey interviews about emerging or new areas on which the curriculum plan could focus to increase its professional value. Responses highlighted a variety of interests, including WordPress and SEO, marketing automation, agile marketing, GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) compliance combined with AI, as well as the integration of analytics, AI, and programming skills.

The diverse perspectives from digital marketing experts, as evidenced by Table 4, highlight a wide array of topics pertinent to contemporary business and marketing landscapes. Their high ratings for areas such as social media, data analytics, digital advertising, and customer and user experience underscore the necessity for a comprehensive educational approach in this field. This approach should integrate technical proficiencies in analytics with creative competencies in communication and user experience design. Such an integrated educational strategy not only equips students to effectively utilise technological tools but also fosters their capacity to innovate marketing strategies that meet evolving market demands and consumer expectations. Therefore, when adapting digital marketing educational programs, priority should be given to a balanced combination of technical analytics and automation with creative communication and design skills, ensuring that graduates are well prepared to navigate competitive labour markets and face the challenges of today's industry.

**Table 4.** The importance of the module in introductory digital marketing courses

Module	Mean (The 5-point scale of importance (1 – Not important at all, to 5 Very important))
Social Media	4.46
Analytics	4.43
Digital Advertising	4.39
Digital Marketing Strategies	4.30
SEO	4.30
Web Content	4.17
Email Marketing	4.10
Customer Experience	4.04
Landing Pages	4.04
User Experience	4.03
Leads	4.02
Conversion Rate Optimization	3.98
E-commerce	3.96
Digital Selling	3.79
CRM	3.63
Reputation Management	3.58
Website	3.54
Web Design	3.48
Digital Public Relation	3.42
Artificial Intelligence	2.93

*Source:* own study based on conducted research.

## 5. Conclusions

The research conducted, particularly focus group interviews (FGI), highlights the need for a basic understanding of traditional marketing principles before delving into digital marketing. Two key topics have become central to every digital marketing curriculum: strategy and customer experience. These elements are essential for crafting effective digital marketing campaigns that resonate with audiences and

achieve business objectives. The necessity for professionals who can adopt a holistic approach to digital marketing, viewing it as an interconnected ecosystem, is also emphasised.

The main empirical study provided a detailed examination of the roles and responsibilities within digital marketing, the specific activities and strategies employed, the educational backgrounds of professionals, and the foundational and specialised training required in the field. Analysis of the data revealed that key activities such as Analytics, Digital Marketing Strategies, and Social Media are the most frequently performed tasks, highlighting their importance in daily operations. Interestingly, the results suggest that less experienced professionals engage in a wider range of activities compared to their more experienced counterparts, indicating a potential trend towards specialisation with increased experience. Regardless of the size of the organisation, respondents declared that they were involved in more than eight different activities on average, which contradicts the expectations of greater specialisation in larger companies. This suggests that a versatile skill set is valued across the board in digital marketing roles. Consequently, the study therefore identified five core learning modules for these competencies: introduction to digital marketing, websites and SEO, content marketing and social media, digital advertising, and digital analytics and monitoring. These modules are designed to equip individuals with the skills necessary to succeed in the dynamic digital marketing landscape.

The competencies highlighted in the study, such as analytics, content marketing, social media and digital advertising, are indeed key. However, in today's dynamic environment, flexibility, continuous learning and adaptation to constant changes are equally important. Digital marketing, driven by technologies such as AI and VR, requires following emerging trends, acquiring new skills and skillful use of developing tools. Artificial intelligence significantly improves digital marketing through improved data analysis, customer insights and optimised campaign performance, supporting the creation of personalised content and the implementation of new technologies. Despite the benefits, challenges remain, such as data privacy and algorithmic biases. The DEMS project's research, conducted before the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, suggests that AI, while transformative, is not yet viewed as essential for newcomers. This raises the question of whether beginners should prioritise core competencies before adopting AI, suggesting that AI may be best served by those with basic digital marketing knowledge. Further research and monitoring of technological progress is necessary. Expert responses from pre-survey interviews identified new areas for curriculum improvement, including WordPress, SEO, marketing automation, agile marketing, GDPR compliance with AI, and the integration of analytics, AI, and programming skills. These insights underscore the need for an educational approach that balances technical proficiency and creative skills to prepare graduates for competitive markets and evolving industry challenges.

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