DIGITAL MARKETING

A Qualitative Study on Understanding Content Strategy Development in Digital Marketing

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Published November 2026

Abstract

Digital marketing has transformed how organizations communicate with current and prospective customers. Content has moved beyond a supporting communication asset to a strategic mechanism through which brands attract attention, communicate value, construct identity, encourage interaction, build trust and support customer journeys. However, terms such as content marketing, content strategy and social media content strategy are often used at different levels of analysis.

This study examines how content strategy is developed in digital marketing through a qualitative thematic analysis of existing academic literature. Relevant peer-reviewed studies on digital marketing, content marketing, social media marketing, branded content, consumer engagement, storytelling, authenticity, customer journeys and performance measurement were reviewed and coded around recurring patterns.

Six interrelated themes emerged: (1) audience and customer-journey orientation; (2) strategic alignment and content planning; (3) value, relevance and message design; (4) creative execution and multimodal communication; (5) engagement, relationships and authenticity; and (6) measurement, learning and strategic adaptation. The findings indicate that content strategy is better understood as an iterative strategic system than as a calendar of posts.

Keywords: digital marketing; content strategy; content marketing; social media marketing; consumer engagement; brand communication; thematic analysis

1 Introduction

Digitalization has changed marketing communication by connecting consumers with brands through search engines, social networks, video platforms, websites, applications and messaging environments. Kannan and Li (2017) describe digital marketing as a broad field in which digital technology affects multiple stages of marketing. Social media further changed communication from one-way broadcasting to participation, allowing users to respond to, share, remix and create brand-related content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Content marketing responds to this environment by providing useful and relevant material rather than relying only on direct persuasion (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Content is an output, whereas content strategy concerns the decisions behind what is created, for whom, why, how, where, when and how its effects are evaluated. Strategic content therefore requires both creativity and analysis.

The literature also shows fragmentation. Research separately examines consumer engagement, message characteristics, brand posts, authenticity, influencers, customer journeys and visual

aesthetics. Reviews by Alves et al. (2016), Bubphapant and Brandão (2024), and Reitsamer et al. (2026) point to the need for a more integrated understanding of how these elements form a content strategy.

1.1 Research objective

To understand the process of content strategy development in digital marketing through a qualitative thematic analysis of existing literature.

1.2 Research question

How is content strategy developed in digital marketing according to existing academic literature?

2 Literature review

2.1 Digital marketing as an integrated communication environment

Digital marketing operates through interconnected touchpoints rather than a single communication channel. A consumer may discover a brand through search, encounter a video, read reviews, follow social media, visit a website and later purchase. Content can therefore perform different functions across awareness, consideration, purchase and retention stages (Kannan & Li, 2017; Terho et al., 2022).

Consumers also conduct independent searches, compare alternatives, follow creators and directly communicate with brands. As a result, content may function as advertising, education, social proof, entertainment, customer service or relationship-building communication depending on its design and context.

2.2 Strategic social media and content

Felix et al. (2017) present social media marketing as a multifaceted strategic activity. Felix et al. (2020) further distinguish social content strategy from other strategic orientations such as social commerce, monitoring and social customer relationship management. This distinction is important because strong-looking content does not necessarily indicate a coherent strategy.

Content value is another recurring concept. Holliman and Rowley (2014) emphasize relevant, compelling and timely content, while Hollebeek and Macky (2019) connect content value with engagement, trust and relationships. Reitsamer et al. (2026) examine marketer-generated content through dimensions including value and vividness.

2.3 Creative execution, engagement and authenticity

Research on branded social content shows that creative characteristics influence audience responses (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; de Vries et al., 2012). Message type, length, visual elements, language and platform can affect engagement, meaning that creative execution is part of strategy rather than merely an aesthetic layer. Tenca (2022) highlights how visual and verbal patterns contribute to brand personality on Instagram.

Engagement also extends beyond clicks or likes. Lim and Rasul (2022) describe customer engagement as a broader relational process, while Södergren (2021) identifies authenticity as an important

area of brand research. Authenticity depends on perceived consistency between brand identity, communication and behavior.

2.4 Distribution and measurement

Platform affordances influence how content is discovered, consumed and shared. A single idea may need to be translated differently for a long-form article, email, search result or short-form video. Drossos et al. (2024) show that content characteristics and placement variables can influence responses. Measurement therefore needs to consider the original objective and use results to inform future decisions rather than relying on one universal metric.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis of existing academic literature. The unit of analysis is the scholarly publication, while the analytic focus is the meaning and conceptual relationships expressed across literature concerning content strategy development. The approach was selected because the study seeks to synthesize how scholars describe processes, components, purposes and consequences rather than calculate a pooled effect or test a statistical relationship.

3.2 Literature identification strategy

The literature base was constructed using academically verifiable sources located through publisher platforms and DOI-identified records. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly reviews and methodological publications directly relevant to the research question. Search concepts included content strategy, content marketing, digital content marketing, social media marketing strategy, social media content, branded content, consumer engagement, brand communication, Instagram marketing, storytelling, authenticity, customer journey and digital marketing.

Articles were retained when they contributed directly to audience orientation, strategic planning, content value, message design, creative execution, platform distribution, engagement, authenticity or performance evaluation. Publisher records were checked for bibliographic details to reduce the risk of fabricated, misattributed or unverifiable references.

3.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Included sources were peer-reviewed articles, scholarly reviews or recognized methodological publications; research addressing digital marketing, content marketing, social media marketing, branded content, engagement, brand communication or customer journeys; and studies providing conceptual, empirical, review-based or methodological insight. Sources were excluded when they were unverified webpages, anonymous or commercial material, duplicates, unrelated publications, or citations that could not be independently verified.

3.4 Analytic procedure

Thematic analysis followed the broad logic of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021): familiarization with the literature, generation of initial codes, identification of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and development of an integrated account. Initial codes

included audience needs, relevance, content value, message strategy, visual appeal, authenticity, interaction, engagement, customer journey, analytics and optimization.

Related codes were grouped according to shared meaning. For example, audience needs, consumer motivations and customer journey were synthesized as audience- and journey-oriented strategy, while analytics, measurement, optimization and learning were combined into the theme of iterative strategic development.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Rigor was supported through transparent inclusion criteria, source verification, explicit coding logic and comparison of convergent and divergent findings. Context-specific evidence was not treated as universally applicable; studies from luxury, B2B, Instagram, Facebook or TikTok contexts were used to identify broader patterns while retaining their contextual limits.

4 Thematic analysis

4.1 Theme 1: audience and customer-journey understanding

The literature consistently places the audience at the center of content strategy. Content effectiveness depends on alignment with user needs, motivations and stages of decision-making. Early-stage audiences may require education, while audiences closer to purchase may need comparison, reassurance or social proof (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Terho et al., 2022). Strategy therefore requires understanding what audiences value and consider trustworthy, not only their demographic characteristics.

4.2 Theme 2: strategic objectives and content planning

Content becomes strategic when communication choices support defined organizational and communication goals. Awareness, engagement, relationship-building and conversion require different approaches. Planning therefore connects objectives, audiences, desired responses, formats, platforms and content mix. A strategy must maintain brand consistency while providing enough variation to address different audience motivations (Felix et al., 2017, 2020; Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

4.3 Theme 3: value, relevance and message design

A central strategic question is why an audience should give its attention to the content. The literature repeatedly emphasizes usefulness, relevance, timeliness, entertainment and authenticity. Constant promotion can weaken attention when it does not provide value. Effective content therefore balances audience utility with brand objectives, making value creation a core part of strategic communication (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

4.4 Theme 4: creative execution and multimodal communication

Creative execution converts strategic intent into an audience experience. Visual style, narrative, language, message length, video and interactivity can influence how audiences understand and respond to content (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Drossos et al., 2024). Platform adaptation is also important: the same strategic idea may need different structures, pacing and formats across platforms. Creative decisions therefore have strategic consequences.

4.5 Theme 5: engagement, authenticity and relationships

Digital platforms enable dialogue and participation, making engagement a relational process rather than simply a measure of clicks. Authenticity supports trust when the brand's tone, visuals, actions and identity appear consistent. Meaningful participation may include questions, community activity, responses or co-creation, but interaction should serve a genuine audience or relationship purpose (Lim & Rasul, 2022; Södergren, 2021).

4.6 Theme 6: measurement, learning and adaptation

Digital platforms provide data that can inform strategic learning. However, likes, shares, comments, views and conversions should be interpreted according to the original objective. Different content characteristics may produce different forms of response (de Vries et al., 2012; Drossos et al., 2024). Measurement is most valuable when it generates hypotheses, learning and adjustments for the next strategy cycle.

5 Interpretation of the findings

The six themes together indicate that content strategy is a system of interdependent decisions. Audience understanding establishes relevance; objectives define purpose; planning organizes content; creative execution turns strategy into experience; engagement provides behavioral and social response; and measurement feeds learning back into the next cycle.

This explains why individual "best practices" are not universally effective. A particular format, posting frequency or visual style may perform differently depending on audience, platform, timing, message and goal. Strategy therefore requires contextual judgment rather than imitation of isolated successful posts.

5.1 Strategy and creativity

The literature challenges a strict separation between strategic planning and creative work. Strategic logic defines what a message should accomplish, while creative logic determines how the audience encounters it. Visual style, narrative structure, language, pacing and choice of messenger can affect attention, interpretation and perceptions of authenticity. Creativity is therefore a mechanism for solving communication problems, not only a way to make content attractive.

5.2 Engagement and business outcomes

Research suggests relationships between content participation, engagement, brand value and consumer behavior, but high engagement does not automatically produce commercial success (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Godey et al., 2016). A viral post may attract attention without supporting the intended brand objective, while educational content may generate limited public interaction but be valuable to serious prospects. Content must therefore be assessed against its original purpose.

5.3 Proposed conceptual model of content strategy development

Table 1. Proposed conceptual model of content strategy development.

Stage	Strategic role
1. Audience & situational analysis	Identify stakeholders, needs, motivations, journey stage, platform habits and market context.

Stage	Strategic role
2. Strategic synchronization	Define business and communication goals and clarify the role of content.
3. Content structure & scheduling	Select topics, functions, formats, channels, delivery and content mix.
4. Creative implementation	Translate goals into messaging, storytelling, aesthetics and platform-specific experiences.
5. Interaction & relationship	Support participation, credibility, authenticity and brand connection.
6. Assessment & adjustment	Interpret results, extract learning and feed evidence into the next cycle.

The model is cyclical rather than strictly linear: performance data and learning can return to audience diagnosis and planning, while changes in organizational goals, competitors, user behavior or platform environments can trigger revision at any stage.

6 Discussion

The research question asks how content strategy is developed according to existing academic literature. The thematic synthesis indicates a cyclical process beginning with audience and situational assessment, followed by strategic goals, planning, creative execution, interaction and measurement. This moves beyond the idea that content strategy is simply scheduling posts.

Compared with earlier views of digital marketing that emphasized websites, e-commerce, search and online advertising, contemporary literature gives greater attention to participation, user-generated communication, relationships and platform-specific messaging. Content strategy now connects corporate objectives with consumer utility across multiple digital touchpoints.

6.1 Theoretical implications

Content strategy can be understood as a multifaceted framework linking corporate strategy, consumer research, message architecture, platform environments and behavioral outcomes. The findings also reinforce the connection between engagement and customer-journey perspectives: content can support awareness, consideration, confidence, action, retention and advocacy. Future theory should therefore examine content as a process across the journey rather than as disconnected posts.

The findings further support a situational view of content success. The same content characteristic may produce different results depending on audience, platform, industry, message objective and delivery style. One-size-fits-all recommendations are therefore limited.

6.2 Practical implications

For practitioners, strategy should begin with a communication challenge or audience need rather than a predetermined format such as “create a Reel.” Content portfolios can combine educational, emotional, social, evidence-based and promotional functions according to context. Metrics should be interpreted diagnostically: reach, attention, interaction, intent and business outcomes do not represent the same stage of performance.

Strategic and creative teams also need to work closely. Tone, visual style, language, messengers, formats and storytelling shape how strategy is experienced by audiences. The creative stage should therefore not be treated as an aesthetic afterthought.

7 Research gap and future implications

The literature remains fragmented across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, influencer activity, B2B content and other environments. Cross-platform research could distinguish principles that are broadly applicable from those that depend on platform affordances. More research is also needed on less visible forms of engagement such as saves, private messages, searches and quiet consumption.

Longitudinal studies could examine how strategies develop through repeated cycles of planning, testing, measurement and adjustment. Another important area is generative AI. AI can increase the speed and reduce the cost of content production, but questions remain around creativity, authenticity, brand identity, oversight, transparency, market saturation and strategic differentiation. Research should examine whether higher output improves relevance or simply increases content volume.

8 Limitations

This research is a qualitative synthesis rather than a numerical evaluation. The reviewed publications span different platforms, countries, industries, conceptual frameworks and methods, which supports breadth but limits direct comparison. Thematic categorization is also interpretive, meaning other researchers could group overlapping ideas differently.

To reduce these limitations, the study used transparent inclusion criteria, source verification, explicit coding logic and defined themes. Context-specific findings were not presented as universal principles. Finally, digital marketing changes rapidly as platforms, algorithms, user habits and media tools evolve. Contemporary sources reduce but do not remove this limitation.

9 Conclusion

This study explored digital marketing content strategy through a qualitative thematic review of existing research. The findings show that content strategy is more than content production: it is an iterative system connecting audience insight, organizational objectives, planning, creative execution, engagement, relationship building and analytical learning.

Six core themes emerged. Strategy begins with understanding the consumer and customer journey; organizational objectives are translated into a structured content system; content must provide meaningful value; creative execution turns strategy into experience; interaction and authenticity support relationships; and measurement creates a feedback loop for continuous improvement.

Overall, no single platform, format or creative tactic is inherently superior. Effectiveness depends on the alignment of consumer needs, brand goals, content value, creative treatment, platform environment and intended outcomes. In a crowded digital environment, competitive advantage comes not from simply increasing output but from developing content with purpose, relevance, consistency, creativity, genuine engagement and a willingness to learn from results.

Content strategy can therefore be treated as an organizational capability rather than a collection of disconnected marketing tasks. Specific formats and trends can be copied, but the underlying

capability—combining audience knowledge, brand understanding, creative coordination and data-informed learning—is harder to replicate.

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