

WHAT MARKETING CAPABILITIES MATTER IN SERVICE DIGITALIZATION? A STRUCTURED ABSTRACT REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation is reshaping competition in service industries by shifting emphasis from mere technology adoption to the development of marketing capabilities. However, existing research is fragmented and lacks a cross-sector perspective on how digital service marketing capabilities evolve. This study investigates the core capabilities emerging across service sectors and how they are strategically developed. Using a qualitative systematic literature review of 22 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2021 and 2026, the research applies abstract-based thematic analysis. Five key capabilities are identified: communication, customer interaction, platform ecosystem management, analytics, and service experience design. The findings also reveal sector-specific variations across platform, tourism, and banking industries. Importantly, the evolution of these capabilities occurs through gradual capability building and integration rather than through isolated technology adoption. The study concludes that long-term competitiveness in digital service environments depends on strategically developing and integrating marketing capabilities, not simply implementing digital tools alone for sustainable future growth.

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INTRODUCTION

Service industries increasingly dominate modern economies in both developed and emerging markets, contributing a substantial share of global output and employment. Global economic reports show that services account for a large proportion of GDP and employment worldwide, highlighting their central role in economic development and competitiveness (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2020). At the same time, rapid digitalization is reshaping how services are designed, delivered, and consumed, particularly through the growing use of digital platforms, analytics, and artificial intelligence (Yin et al., 2025). These technologies are redefining customer interaction, enabling more personalized service delivery, and supporting new digitally enabled business models across sectors such as tourism, banking,



and e-commerce (Wang et al., 2017; Yas et al., 2025). Consequently, firms operating in service industries increasingly need to develop adaptive marketing and service capabilities to remain competitive in evolving digital ecosystems, where value creation is closely linked to data utilization, platform participation, and customer experience management.

Marketing capabilities play a central role in the competitiveness of service firms because services rely heavily on customer relationships, interaction, and experience quality. Unlike goods marketing, service marketing is characterized by intangibility, simultaneity of production and consumption, and active customer participation in value creation, which makes customer engagement and relationship management particularly important (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016). In this context, marketing capabilities function as integrative, knowledge-based processes that enable firms to proactively sense complex customer needs, design compelling value propositions, and ultimately drive enduring customer loyalty (Moorman & Day, 2016; Mu et al., 2018). Prior research consistently shows that strong marketing capabilities are associated with improved firm performance, innovation outcomes, and sustained competitive advantage (Stefia et al., 2024). In increasingly digital service environments, these capabilities are becoming more technology-enabled, particularly through the use of digital platforms and interactive technologies that support more responsive and personalized service delivery (Rachamim & Hornik, 2025).

Digital transformation is not only introducing new technological tools but also reshaping how marketing capabilities develop and function in service industries (Chin et al., 2023; Pascucci et al., 2023). Digital technologies increasingly enable new forms of customer interaction, including personalized service offerings, real-time communication, and active participation in digital platforms, which enhance customer engagement and service value creation (Pascucci et al., 2023; Anwar et al., 2025). At the same time, analytics capabilities are becoming critical for understanding customer behavior, generating actionable insights, and supporting more informed marketing decision-making in data-rich environments (Aljehani et al., 2024). As a result, marketing capabilities increasingly reflect the integration of technological, relational, and strategic dimensions, requiring firms to continuously adapt their approaches to remain competitive in digitally evolving service markets.

Despite the growing body of research on digital transformation and marketing capabilities, understanding of digital marketing capabilities within service industry contexts remains fragmented. Existing studies often examine digital marketing, digital transformation, or dynamic capabilities separately rather than integrating these perspectives into a coherent understanding of service marketing capability development (e.g., Verhoef et al., 2021).

Moreover, relatively few studies systematically synthesize how marketing capabilities evolve specifically in service industries where customer interaction, experience co-creation, and service delivery processes play a central role. Empirical evidence of service marketing capabilities is also scattered across diverse sectors such as tourism, banking, digital platform services, and small and medium enterprises, making it difficult to identify common capability patterns or development trajectories. Therefore, an integrative synthesis is needed to clarify the types of digital service marketing capabilities, their sectoral distribution, and their development orientation within digitally transforming service ecosystems.

To address the identified gap, this study aims to systematically synthesize research on marketing capabilities in digitally transforming service industries. Specifically, the review is guided by the following research questions: RQ1. What types of digital marketing capabilities are discussed in service industry research? RQ2. How are these capabilities distributed across different service sectors? RQ3. How do digital service marketing capabilities develop and evolve in the context of digital transformation?

This framing helps clarify capability patterns while advancing understanding of digital transformation in service marketing contexts.

To address this gap, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of digital marketing capabilities in service industries undergoing digital transformation. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the key digital marketing capabilities emerging in service sectors, examine how these capabilities appear across different service industries, and understand how they develop as firms adapt to digitally evolving environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing capabilities are defined as complex bundles of organizational skills and knowledge that enable firms to sense market needs, cultivate strategic relationships, communicate superior value, and effectively design service experiences (Moorman & Day, 2016). These capabilities are particularly critical in service industries, where value creation depends on customer interaction, experience quality, and relational continuity rather than physical product attributes (Schiavone et al., 2020). In the context of digital transformation, their importance increases as service delivery shifts toward digitally mediated interactions such as online platforms, mobile applications, and data-driven personalization (Lemmens et al., 2025). Thus, marketing capabilities function not merely as communication tools but as strategic mechanisms that translate digital technologies into customer value and competitive advantage. Unlike manufacturing, service digitalization directly reshapes customer interaction processes rather than focusing solely on operational efficiency (e.g., Zahidi et al.,

2024; Lemmens et al., 2025). Technology adoption alone is therefore insufficient; firms must integrate technological resources with customer engagement, analytics, and platform ecosystems. However, diverse and fragmented terminology in existing studies (Anwar et al., 2025) complicates understanding of how digital service marketing capabilities evolve across sectors, highlighting the need for integrative synthesis.

METHODS

This study employed a structured systematic literature review (SLR) approach to map digital service marketing capabilities in the context of digital transformation (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). The Scopus database was used as the primary source due to its broad coverage of peer-reviewed international publications in business, management, marketing, and information systems. To ensure transparency and methodological rigor, the review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which provide a structured framework for documenting the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies in systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

The literature search employed a structured keyword strategy combining three conceptual anchors: (A) service marketing domain, (B) marketing capability focus, and (C) digital transformation context. The search string included terms such as (“service industry” OR “service sector” OR tourism OR hospitality OR banking OR healthcare OR “financial services” OR “e-commerce” OR “digital platform”), combined with capability-related terms (“marketing capability,” “service capability,” “customer capability,” “digital marketing capability,” or “digital capability”) and digital transformation context terms (“digital transformation,” “digital marketing,” digitalization/digitalisation, platform, or analytics). The initial Scopus search yielded 233 records. These results were refined using publication year (2021–2026), relevant subject areas, document type (articles and review articles), and English-language filters, resulting in 96 studies. A subsequent screening using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria further narrowed the corpus to 22 studies suitable for structured abstract-based analysis.

The coded data were analyzed descriptively using frequency analysis, sectoral cross-tabulation, and narrative synthesis. This approach enabled identification of dominant capability types, sectoral patterns, and orientations of capability development in digital service marketing literature. Given the abstract-based nature of the review, interpretations emphasize observed patterns rather than causal generalizations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Selected Studies

This review identified 22 relevant studies examining marketing capabilities within digitally transforming service industries. The selected studies were screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and analyzed at the abstract level to capture general research patterns, sectoral focus, and methodological tendencies. The overview presented in Table 2 summarizes the key characteristics of the reviewed corpus, including publication trends, sector distribution, methodological approaches, and geographical emphasis.

Typology and Distribution of Digital Service Marketing Capabilities

To identify the dominant forms of digital service marketing capabilities discussed in the reviewed literature, the selected studies were categorized based on capability type using the predefined coding framework. This classification aims to clarify how marketing capabilities are conceptualized in digitally transforming service industries and to provide an overview of their relative prevalence across the reviewed studies. Table 3 presents the resulting typology and distribution of digital service marketing capabilities derived from the abstract-level coding process.

Table 3. Typology and Distribution of Digital Service Marketing Capabilities

Capability Type	Frequency (n = 22)	Capability Meaning	Example Study
Communication Capability	15 (68.2%)	Capability related to digital promotion, branding, online marketing communication, and customer outreach through digital channels. Frequently linked to performance improvement and digital marketing adoption.	Tajeddini et al. (2026); Zhu (2026); Cuijten et al. (2024); Nuseir & ElRefae (2022); Amelda et al. (2021)
Customer Interaction Capability	7 (31.8%)	Capability focusing on managing customer relationships, engagement, CRM integration, and customer journey interaction in banking, tourism, and platform-based services	Hat et al. (2025); Panda et al. (2024); Acheampong et al. (2023); Mu & Zhang (2021)
Platform Ecosystem Capability	5 (22.7%)	Capability related to participation in digital platforms, ecosystem collaboration, platform embedding, cross-border e-commerce and leveraging platform networks for market access and performance.	Guo et al. (2025); Yan et al. (2025); Lyu et al. (2024); Yang et al. (2023)

Analytics/Data Capability	4 (18.2%)	Capability involving customer analytics, big data utilization, AI-driven insights, business intelligence adoption, and CRM analytics to support marketing decisions and service performance.	Tajeddini et al. (2026); Abd Aziz & Long (2023); Acheampong et al. (2023)
Service Experience Capability	3 (13.6%)	Capability focused on customer experience design, service journey management, and experiential aspects of digital service delivery.	Badari et al. (2024); Wu et al. (2024); Agus et al. (2021)

(Source : Author's Analysis)

As shown in Table 3, communication capability is the most dominant category, appearing in approximately two-thirds of the reviewed studies. It encompasses digital promotion, branding, social media marketing, and online customer outreach that enhance organizational performance in digital environments (e.g., Zhu, 2026; Panda et al., 2024; Nuseir and ElRefae, 2022). Customer interaction capability ranks second, reflected in CRM integration, engagement initiatives, and customer journey management across banking, tourism, and digital platforms (Hat et al., 2025; Acheampong et al., 2023). These findings indicate that communication and relationship management remain foundational in digital service marketing capability development.

Although less frequent, other capability types signal emerging research directions. Analytics and data capabilities stress the role of business intelligence and AI-driven insights in marketing decision making (Tajeddini et al., 2026; Abd Aziz and Long, 2023). Platform ecosystem capability highlights firms' participation in digital marketplaces and collaborative ecosystems (Yan et al., 2025; Lyu et al., 2024), while service experience capability focuses on customer journey design and value creation in digitally mediated services (Badari et al., 2024; Agus et al., 2021). Overall, the literature suggests a shift toward integrated, data-driven, and ecosystem-oriented capabilities.

Sectoral Patterns of Digital Marketing Capabilities

The distribution of digital marketing capabilities across service sectors provides insight into how digital transformation unfolds in different industry contexts. To examine this pattern, the reviewed studies were classified based on capability types and service industry sectors. Table 4 summarizes this cross-sector distribution, highlighting the relative prominence of communication, interaction, analytics, platform ecosystem, and service experience capabilities in banking, tourism and hospitality, digital platform industries, and general service sectors.

Table 4. Sectoral Patterns of Digital Marketing Capabilities

Capability Type	Banking	Tourism/Hospitality	Digital Platforms / E-commerce	General Service Sector
Communication	3	3	4	5
Customer Interaction	3	3	2	–
Analytics/ sData	2	2	–	–
Platform Ecosystem	–	1	4	–
Service Experience	–	1	2	–

(Source : Author’s Analysis)

As shown in Table 4, communication capabilities appear consistently across all sectors, confirming their foundational role in digital service marketing. Customer interaction capabilities are especially prominent in banking and tourism, where relationship quality and engagement are central. Analytics capabilities are more visible in banking and tourism, reflecting greater reliance on customer data for personalization and decision-making. Platform ecosystem capabilities dominate in digital platform and e-commerce sectors, emphasizing ecosystem participation and network positioning. Service experience capabilities are mainly observed in tourism and digital platform contexts, highlighting the importance of experience design in digitally mediated services. Overall, digital marketing capability development differs across sectors, reflecting variations in digital maturity and service characteristics.

Capability Development Orientation in Digital Service Marketing

The reviewed studies also differ in how digital service marketing capabilities are conceptualized in terms of development orientation. Table 5 summarizes the dominant orientations observed across the reviewed literature, indicating a strong emphasis on capability development and integration rather than simple technology adoption.

Table 5. Orientation of Digital Service Marketing Capability Development in the Reviewed Studies

Capability Development Orientation	Approximate Number of Studies	Interpretation
Capability Development Orientation	~12 studies	Most studies emphasize developing digital marketing capabilities, indicating that capability building rather than simple technology adoption is the dominant focus in digital service marketing research.

Capability Integration Orientation	~5 studies	Several studies highlight integration of marketing capabilities with CRM systems, digital platforms, or broader organizational strategies, reflecting increasing complexity in service marketing transformation.
Strategic Transformation Orientation	~3 studies	A smaller group explicitly frames digital marketing capability within broader organizational or strategic transformation contexts, suggesting an emerging research direction.
Technology Adoption Orientation	Minimal / rare	Pure adoption of digital technology without explicit capability development emphasis is rarely discussed, indicating a shift from technology-centric to capability-centric perspectives.

(Source : Author's Analysis)

The orientation analysis in Table 5 shows that research on digital service marketing capabilities primarily emphasizes capability development rather than mere technology adoption. Most studies view digital marketing capability as a result of deliberate organizational learning, skill enhancement, and strategic alignment. Several also stress capability integration, particularly aligning marketing capabilities with CRM systems, digital platforms, analytics tools, and broader strategies. Only a few studies frame digital marketing capability within wider organizational transformation, linking it to strategic repositioning, digital business model evolution, and long-term competitiveness. Pure technology adoption is rarely highlighted, indicating a shift from technology-centric to capability-centric perspectives. Overall, digital transformation in service industries appears to progress through capability development, integration, and strategic transformation rather than simple technology implementation.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that digital service marketing capabilities are primarily conceptualized as outcomes of capability development rather than simple technology adoption. As shown in Table 5, many studies emphasize capability building through organizational learning, digital skill development, and strategic alignment (Tajeddini et al., 2026; Cuijten et al., 2024). Integration with customer relationship management systems, analytics tools, and digital platforms is also frequently highlighted (Hat et al., 2025; Acheampong et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2025), reflecting the complexity of digital service ecosystems. Only a limited number explicitly frame digital marketing capability within broader organizational transformation narratives (Zhu, 2026; Guo et al., 2025). Overall,

digital transformation in service industries is understood as a progressive capability development process rather than a one-time technological shift.

Sectoral analysis indicates uneven capability development across industries. Platform-based sectors emphasize ecosystem participation and platform-related capabilities (Yan et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025), tourism and hospitality prioritize customer interaction and service experience (Panda et al., 2024), while banking and financial services focus more on analytics and customer relationship management integration (Acheampong et al., 2023; Abd Aziz & Long, 2023). These variations suggest that industry characteristics and digital maturity influence capability evolution.

Typology analysis shows that communication capability remains dominant, followed by customer interaction, platform ecosystem, analytics, and service experience capabilities. Earlier studies focus on communication and customer outreach (Mu & Zhang, 2021; Amelda et al., 2021), whereas more recent research highlights analytics-driven decision making, ecosystem engagement, and experience management (Tajeddini et al., 2026; Guo et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2024), indicating increasing sophistication in digital marketing practices.

These findings imply the need for more integrative research linking service marketing, digital transformation, and capability development perspectives. Future studies could adopt longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-method approaches to better capture capability progression and sectoral differences, particularly in emerging markets, and further examine the interaction among communication, analytics, platform ecosystem, and service experience capabilities.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the review is based on abstract-level analysis rather than full-text examination, which may limit the depth of insight into how digital service marketing capabilities are conceptualized and operationalized across studies. Second, the reliance on published academic literature may introduce publication bias, potentially overlooking emerging practices documented in industry reports or practitioner-oriented sources. Third, the findings reflect general patterns across sectors and may not fully capture firm-level contextual differences such as organizational culture, resource availability, or market maturity. Finally, given the rapidly evolving nature of digital transformation, the identified capability trends may shift as new technologies and service models continue to emerge.

Suggestion

Building on these findings, future research can further strengthen understanding of digital service marketing capabilities. While this review is constrained by its reliance on abstract-level analysis and a relatively focused corpus of studies, it underscores the growing role of digital service marketing capabilities as strategic assets within evolving service ecosystems. Subsequent studies may expand this work through full-text systematic reviews, longitudinal investigations of capability development, and more in-depth sector-specific analyses to better explain how digital marketing capabilities emerge and evolve across service industries.

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