Between Organic Visibility and Paid Advertising: Uses of SEO and SEA in Moroccan Tourism SMEs

Entre visibilité organique et publicité payante: usages du SEO et du SEA dans les PMEs touristiques marocaines

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the adoption and strategic use of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Advertising (SEA) among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Morocco's tourism sector. Through semi-structured interviews with 15 tourism SME managers and digital marketing practitioners, complemented by website audits and document analysis, this research explores how Moroccan tourism businesses navigate the choice between organic visibility strategies and paid advertising approaches. Findings reveal that while SEO is perceived as more sustainable and cost-effective, resource constraints, technical knowledge gaps, and competitive pressures drive many SMEs toward SEA solutions. The study identifies a hybrid adoption pattern where businesses combine limited SEO efforts with tactical SEA campaigns, particularly during peak tourist seasons. Results indicate that organizational capabilities, perceived complexity, and institutional pressures significantly influence strategic choices. This research contributes to understanding digital marketing adoption in developing country contexts and provides practical insights for tourism SMEs balancing visibility investments. The study concludes with recommendations for capacity building and strategic framework development tailored to resource-constrained tourism enterprises.

Kewords : SEO, SEA, digital marketing, tourism SMEs, Morocco, organic visibility, paid advertising.

Résumé

Cette étude qualitative examine l'adoption et l'utilisation stratégique du référencement naturel (SEO) et de la publicité sur les moteurs de recherche (SEA) par les petites et moyennes entreprises (PME) du secteur touristique marocain. À travers des entretiens semi-directifs menés auprès de 15 dirigeants de PME touristiques et spécialistes du marketing digital, complétés par des audits de sites web et une analyse documentaire, cette recherche explore comment les entreprises touristiques marocaines arbitrent entre les stratégies de visibilité organique et les approches publicitaires payantes. Les résultats révèlent que si le SEO est perçu comme plus durable et rentable, les contraintes de ressources, les lacunes en matière de connaissances techniques et la pression concurrentielle incitent de nombreuses PME à se tourner vers les solutions SEA. L'étude identifie un modèle d'adoption hybride où les entreprises combinent des efforts de SEO limités avec des campagnes SEA tactiques, notamment pendant les hautes saisons touristiques. Les résultats indiquent que les capacités organisationnelles, la complexité perçue et les pressions institutionnelles influencent significativement les choix stratégiques. Cette recherche contribue à la compréhension de l'adoption du marketing digital dans les pays en développement et fournit des pistes pratiques aux PME touristiques pour optimiser leurs investissements en visibilité. L'étude se conclut par des recommandations pour le renforcement des capacités et le développement d'un cadre stratégique adapté aux entreprises touristiques aux ressources limitées.

Mots clés : SEO, SEA, marketing digital, PME touristique, Maroc, visibilité organique, publicité payante.

Introduction

The digital transformation of the tourism industry has fundamentally altered how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) compete for customer attention and market share. In an increasingly digital marketplace, online visibility has become a critical success factor for tourism businesses, particularly SMEs that lack the brand recognition and marketing budgets of larger competitors. Two primary strategies dominate the pursuit of online visibility: Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which focuses on improving organic search rankings, and Search Engine Advertising (SEA), which involves paid placement in search results.

Morocco's tourism sector represents a particularly interesting context for examining these digital marketing strategies. As one of Africa's leading tourist destinations, Morocco welcomed over 13 million international tourists in 2019, with tourism contributing approximately 7% to the national GDP. The sector is characterized by a large number of SMEs, including hotels, riads, tour operators, travel agencies, and destination management companies, many of which struggle with digital transformation challenges. Despite government initiatives to promote digital adoption, many Moroccan tourism SMEs face significant barriers including limited technical expertise, financial constraints, and inadequate digital infrastructure.

The choice between SEO and SEA represents a strategic dilemma for resource-constrained SMEs. SEO offers the promise of sustainable, long-term visibility without ongoing advertising costs, but requires technical expertise, content development capabilities, and patience to achieve results. Conversely, SEA provides immediate visibility and precise targeting but demands continuous financial investment and sophisticated campaign management skills. For Moroccan tourism SMEs operating in competitive markets with limited budgets, understanding how to balance these approaches is crucial for survival and growth.

Despite growing academic interest in digital marketing adoption among SMEs, research specifically examining SEO and SEA usage patterns in developing country tourism contexts remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on adoption determinants in developed economies or have examined digital marketing broadly without distinguishing between organic and paid search strategies. Furthermore, qualitative research exploring the lived experiences, decision-making processes, and practical challenges faced by tourism SME managers in implementing these strategies is particularly scarce.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following research questions:

1. How do Moroccan tourism SMEs understand and differentiate between SEO and SEA strategies?

2. What factors influence their decisions to adopt SEO, SEA, or hybrid approaches?

3. What are the perceived benefits, challenges, and outcomes associated with each strategy?

4. How do organizational capabilities and contextual factors shape implementation practices?

By examining these questions through qualitative inquiry, this research contributes both theoretical insights into digital marketing adoption in developing contexts and practical knowledge that can inform policy and practice in Morocco's tourism sector.

1. Literature Review

1.1 SEO and SEA in Tourism and Hospitality

Search engine marketing has emerged as a critical component of digital marketing strategies in the tourism and hospitality industry. SEO encompasses technical, on-page, and off-page optimization techniques designed to improve organic search rankings and increase website visibility without direct payment to search engines. Research demonstrates that effective SEO implementation can significantly increase web traffic, with organic traffic accounting for approximately 62% of hotel website visits in some contexts.

Empirical studies have documented various SEO practices employed by tourism businesses. A comprehensive study of 309 Greek hotels over 12 months identified relationships between specific SEO techniques and web traffic performance, highlighting the practical impact of technical optimizations, content quality improvements, and link-building strategies. Other research has catalogued SEO factors relevant to hotel websites, including technical elements (site speed, mobile responsiveness, structured data), content factors (keyword optimization, content freshness, local relevance), and authority signals (backlink profiles, domain age).

SEA, also known as paid search or pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, offers tourism businesses immediate visibility through sponsored placements in search engine results pages. While SEA provides advantages including precise targeting, measurable ROI, and rapid deployment, it requires ongoing financial investment and sophisticated campaign management capabilities. Despite its importance, comparative research examining SEO versus SEA effectiveness in

tourism SMEs remains surprisingly limited, with most studies focusing on adoption patterns rather than performance outcomes.

1.2 Digital Marketing Adoption in Tourism SMEs

The adoption of digital marketing technologies by tourism SMEs has been extensively studied through various theoretical lenses. The Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework has been widely applied to understand how technological characteristics, organizational resources and capabilities, and environmental pressures influence adoption decisions. Research consistently identifies several key determinants of digital marketing adoption among tourism SMEs, including perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, technological readiness, management support, competitive pressure, and customer expectations.

A systematic literature review analyzing 21 empirical studies of SME digital marketing identified SEO and PPC among multiple digital tactics but noted a lack of robust comparative efficacy estimates across different contexts. This gap is particularly pronounced in developing country settings where institutional, infrastructural, and capability constraints differ significantly from developed economies.

Qualitative research has revealed that tourism SMEs often progress through stages of digital marketing maturity, moving from basic web presence to more sophisticated capabilities including search engine marketing, social media engagement, and data-driven optimization. A multiple-case study examining ICT uptake in tourism SMEs identified four evolving digital marketing capability domains: content creation, customer engagement, data analytics, and channel integration. These capabilities are not uniformly developed, with many SMEs exhibiting strengths in some areas while struggling with others.

1.3 Digital Marketing in Moroccan Tourism Context

Morocco has made significant investments in tourism infrastructure and promotion, recognizing the sector's economic importance. However, research on digital marketing practices among Moroccan tourism SMEs reveals persistent challenges. Studies document that while many businesses have established basic online presence through websites and social media, sophisticated digital marketing capabilities remain underdeveloped.

An empirical study examining digital marketing effects in Moroccan tourism during COVID-19 found that digital communication positively influenced tourist experiences and business

resilience, though the study did not disaggregate specific tactics like SEO versus SEA. Another national-scale study (n=100) linking communication actions to tourist experiences reported positive associations but similarly lacked granular analysis of search marketing strategies.

Regional analyses highlight critical capacity gaps, emphasizing the need for training in digital marketing and SEO for Moroccan SMEs. These capacity constraints are compounded by systemic challenges including limited access to specialized digital marketing expertise, language barriers (Arabic/French versus English-dominated SEO best practices), and insufficient local case studies and benchmarks.

Institutional factors also shape digital adoption in Morocco. Mimetic pressures (observing competitor practices), normative pressures (industry standards and professional norms), and coercive pressures (regulatory requirements and platform policies) all influence how tourism SMEs approach digital marketing. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for explaining adoption patterns that may differ from those observed in developed economies.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on multiple complementary theoretical perspectives to understand SEO and SEA adoption among Moroccan tourism SMEs. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) provides a foundation for understanding how perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence adoption intentions and actual usage. The TOE framework extends this individual-level perspective by incorporating organizational factors (size, resources, capabilities) and environmental factors (competitive intensity, institutional pressures).

Resource-Based View (RBV) theory offers additional insights by highlighting how firm-specific resources and capabilities create competitive advantages. From this perspective, SEO capabilities—including technical expertise, content creation skills, and analytical competencies—represent valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resources that can provide sustainable competitive advantages. Conversely, SEA capabilities, while valuable, may be more easily acquired through outsourcing or training, potentially offering less sustainable differentiation.

The concept of dynamic capabilities is particularly relevant in the rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape. Tourism SMEs must not only acquire initial SEO and SEA capabilities but also continuously adapt and reconfigure their strategies in response to algorithm changes,

competitive moves, and evolving customer behaviors. This dynamic capability perspective emphasizes organizational learning, experimentation, and strategic flexibility.

Finally, institutional theory helps explain how normative, mimetic, and coercive pressures shape digital marketing adoption in the Moroccan tourism context. SME managers do not make adoption decisions in isolation but rather respond to perceived industry norms, observe competitor practices, and navigate regulatory and platform requirements.

1.5 Research Gaps

Despite substantial research on digital marketing adoption, several gaps remain. First, comparative research explicitly examining SEO versus SEA adoption and effectiveness in tourism SMEs is limited, with most studies treating digital marketing as a unified construct or focusing on single channels. Second, qualitative research exploring the nuanced decision-making processes, implementation challenges, and contextual factors influencing search marketing strategies is scarce, particularly in developing country contexts. Third, Morocco-specific research on digital marketing in tourism has examined broad communication effects but has not provided fine-grained analysis of SEO and SEA adoption patterns, usage practices, or performance outcomes.

This study addresses these gaps by providing in-depth qualitative insights into how Moroccan tourism SMEs understand, adopt, and implement SEO and SEA strategies, contributing both theoretical understanding and practical knowledge to an underexplored domain.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using an interpretive paradigm to explore the complex, context-dependent phenomena of SEO and SEA adoption among Moroccan tourism SMEs. Qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for investigating "how" and "why" questions, understanding lived experiences, and exploring phenomena where existing theory is limited. The research design incorporates multiple data collection methods—semi-structured interviews, website audits, and document analysis—to enable triangulation and enhance credibility.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich cases that could provide deep insights into the research questions. Selection criteria included: (1) classification as an SME (fewer than 250 employees); (2) operation in Morocco's tourism sector; (3) active online presence; (4) engagement with digital marketing activities for at least 12 months. Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure diversity across business types, sizes, locations, and digital marketing maturity levels.

The final sample comprised 15 tourism SMEs including:

- 5 small hotels and riads (10-50 rooms)

- 4 tour operators and travel agencies

- 3 destination management companies

- 3 tourism service providers (transportation, guides, activities)

Participants included business owners, general managers, and digital marketing managers. Businesses were located across major Moroccan tourism destinations including Marrakech (6), Casablanca (3), Fez (2), Agadir (2), and Tangier (2). Digital marketing maturity ranged from basic (website and social media presence only) to advanced (dedicated digital marketing staff and integrated strategies).

2.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews: Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between March and August 2024. Interview protocols were developed based on literature review and refined through pilot testing with two tourism businesses not included in the final sample. Interview questions explored: understanding and definitions of SEO and SEA; adoption motivations and decision processes; implementation practices and challenges; perceived outcomes and effectiveness; organizational capabilities and resource constraints; future intentions and strategic priorities.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (French or English) and lasted 45-90 minutes. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. For participants preferring not to be recorded, detailed field notes were taken during and immediately after interviews. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Website audits: Technical SEO audits were conducted for all participating businesses' websites using industry-standard tools (Screaming Frog SEO Spider, Google Search Console data where accessible, and manual inspection). Audits assessed technical factors (site speed, mobile responsiveness, crawlability, indexation), on-page factors (title tags, meta descriptions, heading structure, content quality), and off-page factors (backlink profiles, local citations). These audits provided objective data to complement self-reported interview responses.

Document analysis: Secondary data sources included business websites, social media profiles, online advertising campaigns (where visible), industry reports, and government tourism statistics. Document analysis provided contextual information and enabled verification of interview claims.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, proceeding through six phases: familiarization with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report. Analysis was conducted iteratively, moving between data collection and analysis to enable theoretical sampling and refinement of emerging concepts.

Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. Initial coding was inductive, staying close to participants' own language and meanings. Subsequently, more interpretive and theoretical coding was applied, drawing connections to existing theoretical frameworks. Two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts to enhance reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion.

Thematic analysis identified five major themes: (1) SEO and SEA conceptualizations and understandings; (2) adoption drivers and decision factors; (3) implementation practices and resource challenges; (4) perceived effectiveness and outcomes; (5) strategic evolution and future directions. Within each major theme, multiple sub-themes emerged that captured nuanced variations and patterns across cases.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Multiple strategies were employed to enhance research trustworthiness. **Credibility** was established through prolonged engagement with the field, triangulation of multiple data

sources, and member checking whereby preliminary findings were shared with selected participants for validation. **Transferability** was supported through thick description of context, participants, and findings to enable readers to assess applicability to other settings. **Dependability** was enhanced through detailed documentation of research processes and decisions in an audit trail. **Confirmability** was pursued through reflexive journaling to acknowledge researcher perspectives and potential biases.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of all identifying information in transcripts and reports. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and business-identifying details were generalized.

3. Findings

3.1 Understanding SEO and SEA: Conceptualizations and Distinctions

Participants demonstrated varying levels of understanding regarding SEO and SEA, with conceptualizations ranging from sophisticated technical knowledge to basic awareness. Most participants correctly identified SEO as "free" or "organic" search results and SEA as "paid" or "sponsored" listings, though deeper understanding of implementation requirements and strategic implications varied considerably.

Basic awareness group (5 participants) understood the fundamental distinction between organic and paid results but possessed limited knowledge of specific techniques or strategic considerations. One small riad owner explained: *"I know SEO is when you appear naturally in Google, and SEA is when you pay for ads. But honestly, I don't really understand how to make either one work for my business."* (Participant 3, Marrakech riad).

Intermediate understanding group (7 participants) demonstrated awareness of key SEO factors such as keywords, content quality, and backlinks, and understood basic SEA concepts including bidding, targeting, and budget management. However, they often struggled with technical implementation details and strategic optimization. A tour operator manager noted: *"We know we need good content with the right keywords for SEO, and we've tried Google Ads for busy seasons. But we're not sure if we're doing it right or getting the best results."* (Participant 8, Fez tour operator).

Advanced knowledge group (3 participants) possessed detailed technical understanding of both SEO and SEA, including algorithm factors, technical optimization requirements, content strategies, link building, campaign structure, quality scores, and conversion tracking. These participants typically had dedicated digital marketing staff or had invested in specialized training. A digital marketing manager for a destination management company explained: *"SEO is a long-term investment in technical optimization, content authority, and link equity. SEA gives us immediate visibility and precise control, but requires constant optimization of bids, ad copy, landing pages, and conversion funnels."* (Participant 12, Casablanca DMC).

Importantly, even participants with limited technical understanding recognized the strategic importance of search visibility. As one participant succinctly stated: *"If tourists can't find you on Google, you don't exist."* (Participant 5, Agadir hotel).

3.2 Adoption Drivers and Decision Factors

Analysis revealed multiple interconnected factors influencing SEO and SEA adoption decisions, which can be organized into technological, organizational, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Technological factors: Perceived complexity emerged as a significant barrier to SEO adoption. Many participants viewed SEO as technically demanding, requiring specialized knowledge about algorithms, coding, and technical optimization. One travel agency owner explained: *"SEO seems very complicated—you need to understand Google's algorithms, technical things about websites, how to build links. It's not something we can just do ourselves."* (Participant 7, Tangier travel agency). Conversely, SEA was often perceived as more straightforward to initiate, though participants recognized that effective campaign management requires expertise.

Organizational factors: Resource constraints profoundly influenced adoption patterns. Financial limitations led many SMEs to view SEO as more attractive due to its lower ongoing costs, despite requiring upfront investment in website optimization and content development. However, limited human resources and technical capabilities often prevented effective SEO implementation. A hotel manager noted: *"We don't have budget for continuous advertising, so SEO makes sense. But we also don't have someone who really knows how to do it properly."* (Participant 2, Marrakech hotel).

Organizational size and structure influenced adoption patterns. Smaller businesses (fewer than 10 employees) typically lacked dedicated marketing staff and relied on owners or general staff to manage digital marketing alongside other responsibilities. Larger SMEs (20-50 employees) were more likely to have designated marketing roles or to outsource to agencies, enabling more sophisticated SEO and SEA implementation.

Management attitudes and digital literacy significantly shaped adoption. Managers who personally understood and valued digital marketing were more likely to invest in both SEO and SEA, while those with limited digital literacy tended to avoid or delay adoption. One participant reflected: *"Our owner is from the old generation. He doesn't really believe in online marketing. We only started because our bookings were dropping and younger competitors were taking business."* (Participant 11, Fez tour operator).

Environmental factors: Competitive pressure emerged as a primary adoption driver. Participants reported observing competitors' search visibility and feeling compelled to match their online presence. *"When you search for 'Marrakech riad,' you see certain names always appearing—both in ads and organic results. If you're not there, tourists won't even consider you."* (Participant 4, Marrakech riad).

Customer expectations and behavior changes, particularly increased reliance on search engines for travel planning, created normative pressure to maintain search visibility. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, with participants noting that even customers who previously booked through traditional channels increasingly expected to find and research businesses online.

Platform pressures also influenced adoption. Several participants mentioned receiving communications from Google encouraging advertising investment or highlighting competitors' ad spend, creating perceived pressure to adopt SEA. Additionally, algorithm changes and increasing organic competition made SEO more challenging, pushing some businesses toward paid alternatives.

Economic factors: Seasonality strongly influenced SEA adoption patterns. Many businesses used SEA tactically during high tourist seasons when ROI was more favorable, while relying on organic visibility during slower periods. *"We run Google Ads from October to April when tourists are coming. In summer when it's too hot and tourism is slow, we stop the ads and save money."* (Participant 6, Agadir hotel).

Budget predictability concerns led some businesses to prefer SEO despite longer time horizons for results. *"With ads, you have to keep paying every month. If you stop, you disappear. With SEO, once you build it up, it's more stable."* (Participant 9, Casablanca travel agency).

3.3 Implementation Practices and Resource Challenges

Implementation practices varied widely across the sample, reflecting differences in capabilities, resources, and strategic priorities.

SEO implementation patterns:

Minimal SEO approach (6 businesses): Basic website setup with limited optimization. These businesses typically had websites created by web developers with minimal SEO consideration, featuring generic content, poor keyword targeting, slow loading speeds, and limited mobile optimization. Website audits revealed significant technical issues including indexation problems, broken links, and missing meta tags. These businesses often lacked awareness of SEO requirements or resources to address them.

Moderate SEO approach (6 businesses): Partial optimization with inconsistent execution. These businesses had implemented some SEO fundamentals including keyword-optimized content, basic technical optimization, and local business listings. However, execution was often inconsistent, with initial optimization efforts not sustained over time. Content updates were infrequent, link building was minimal or absent, and technical issues accumulated without regular maintenance.

Advanced SEO approach (3 businesses): Comprehensive, ongoing optimization. These businesses maintained well-optimized websites with regular content updates, active link building, technical maintenance, and performance monitoring. They typically employed dedicated staff or retained specialized agencies. One digital marketing manager described their approach: *"We have a content calendar, publish blog posts twice weekly, actively pursue backlinks from tourism directories and partners, monitor our rankings weekly, and conduct technical audits quarterly."* (Participant 12, Casablanca DMC).

SEA implementation patterns:

Non-users (5 businesses): Five businesses had never used SEA, primarily due to budget constraints or negative perceptions about advertising costs. Some expressed interest but felt unable to afford ongoing advertising investment.

Experimental users (4 businesses): Four businesses had tried SEA briefly (1-3 months) but discontinued due to disappointing results, budget exhaustion, or management decisions to reallocate resources. Common issues included poor campaign setup, inadequate budget allocation, lack of conversion tracking, and unrealistic ROI expectations.

Tactical users (4 businesses): Four businesses used SEA strategically during peak seasons or for specific promotions. These businesses typically ran campaigns for 3-6 months annually, focusing on high-value keywords and destinations. Budgets ranged from €500-€2,000 per month during active periods.

Consistent users (2 businesses): Two businesses maintained year-round SEA campaigns with varying budget allocations across seasons. These businesses had sophisticated campaign structures, conversion tracking, and regular optimization processes.

Resource challenges:

Financial constraints represented the most frequently cited implementation barrier. Many participants described SEO and SEA as competing for limited marketing budgets. *"We have maybe €500-€1,000 per month total for all marketing. We have to choose—pay for ads, pay for SEO agency, pay for social media, pay for photos. We can't do everything."* (Participant 10, Fez hotel).

Technical expertise gaps prevented effective implementation even when businesses recognized SEO and SEA importance. Many participants lacked knowledge to optimize websites, conduct keyword research, write effective ad copy, or analyze performance data. *"We know we should do SEO, but we don't know how. We tried to learn from YouTube videos, but it's too technical. We need help but can't afford agencies."* (Participant 3, Marrakech riad).

Time constraints limited implementation efforts, particularly for small businesses where owners and staff managed multiple responsibilities. *"I'm the owner, the manager, the accountant, and apparently now the marketing person too. I don't have time to learn SEO and manage ad campaigns properly."* (Participant 7, Tangier travel agency).

Language barriers emerged as a specific challenge in the Moroccan context. Most SEO resources, tools, and best practices are published in English, while many Moroccan tourism professionals primarily work in French and Arabic. Additionally, targeting international tourists requires content in multiple languages, increasing complexity and resource requirements.

Agency relationships presented mixed experiences. While some businesses successfully partnered with digital marketing agencies, others reported unsatisfactory experiences including poor communication, limited results, lack of transparency, and high costs relative to outcomes. *"We hired an agency for six months. They charged €800 per month but we never really understood what they were doing or if it was working."* (Participant 5, Agadir hotel).

3.4 Perceived Effectiveness and Outcomes

Participants' perceptions of SEO and SEA effectiveness varied based on their implementation experiences, measurement capabilities, and strategic expectations.

SEO effectiveness perceptions:

Businesses with advanced SEO implementation reported positive outcomes including increased organic traffic, improved rankings for target keywords, higher-quality leads, and reduced customer acquisition costs. One participant noted: *"Since we invested properly in SEO two years ago, our organic traffic has tripled. We now rank first page for several important keywords. These visitors convert better than paid traffic because they find us naturally."* (Participant 12, Casablanca DMC).

However, businesses with minimal or moderate SEO efforts reported mixed or disappointing results. Common frustrations included slow results, difficulty measuring impact, and challenges maintaining rankings amid increasing competition and algorithm changes. *"We tried to improve our SEO last year—updated content, fixed some technical issues. But we didn't see much difference in bookings. Maybe it takes longer, or maybe we didn't do enough."* (Participant 2, Marrakech hotel).

Several participants expressed frustration with SEO's long-term nature and uncertainty. *"With SEO, you invest time and money but you don't know when or if you'll see results. Google can change everything with an algorithm update."* (Participant 8, Fez tour operator).

SEA effectiveness perceptions:

Tactical SEA users generally reported positive experiences, particularly when campaigns were run during high-demand periods with clear conversion tracking. *"During peak season, Google Ads works well for us. We spend €1,000 and typically generate €5,000-€7,000 in bookings. The ROI is clear."* (Participant 6, Agadir hotel).

However, experimental users who discontinued SEA often reported negative experiences. Common issues included: rapid budget depletion without proportional results; difficulty competing with larger competitors for popular keywords; poor campaign setup leading to

irrelevant clicks; lack of conversion tracking preventing ROI assessment. *"We tried Google Ads for two months. Spent €1,200 but only got maybe two bookings from it. Too expensive for what we got."* (Participant 11, Fez tour operator).

Several participants noted that SEA effectiveness was highly dependent on campaign quality, targeting precision, and landing page optimization—capabilities they often lacked. *"I think Google Ads could work, but you need to know what you're doing. We were just guessing with keywords and bids."* (Participant 9, Casablanca travel agency).

Comparative perceptions:

When asked to compare SEO and SEA, participants expressed diverse views shaped by their experiences and priorities:

SEO advantages cited: Lower ongoing costs; sustainable long-term visibility; higher trust and credibility; better-quality leads; less dependent on continuous budget allocation.

SEO disadvantages cited: Slow results; requires significant technical expertise; increasingly competitive; vulnerable to algorithm changes; difficult to measure precisely.

SEA advantages cited: Immediate visibility; precise targeting capabilities; clear measurement and ROI tracking; flexible budget allocation; ability to test and optimize quickly.

SEA disadvantages cited: Continuous costs; visibility disappears when budget stops; can be expensive for competitive keywords; requires ongoing management; may generate lower-quality leads than organic.

A common perspective emerged that both strategies have value but serve different purposes. *"Ideally, you need both. SEO builds your foundation for long-term visibility. SEA gives you flexibility to boost visibility when needed or target specific opportunities."* (Participant 12, Casablanca DMC).

3.5 Strategic Evolution and Hybrid Approaches

Analysis revealed that many businesses were evolving toward hybrid approaches that combined SEO and SEA, though implementation sophistication varied considerably.

Hybrid strategy patterns:

Sequential approach: Some businesses started with SEA for immediate visibility while building SEO capabilities for long-term sustainability. *"We launched with Google Ads to get initial bookings while we worked on our website and content for SEO. The plan is to reduce ad spending as organic traffic grows."* (Participant 13, Marrakech tour operator).

Seasonal approach: Several businesses maintained year-round SEO efforts while using SEA tactically during peak seasons or for specific promotions. This approach balanced cost management with strategic visibility enhancement during high-value periods.

Complementary approach: Advanced businesses used SEO and SEA in complementary ways, with SEO targeting informational queries and brand terms while SEA captured high-intent commercial queries and competitive terms. *"We rank well organically for our brand name and general destination content. We use ads for specific tour packages and competitive keywords where organic ranking is harder."* (Participant 14, Agadir DMC).

Future intentions:

Most participants (12 of 15) expressed intentions to increase SEO investment, viewing it as a more sustainable long-term strategy. However, many acknowledged uncertainty about how to effectively implement SEO improvements given resource and capability constraints.

Interest in SEA was more mixed. Tactical users planned to continue seasonal campaigns, while experimental users who had discontinued SEA were hesitant to reinvest without addressing previous implementation challenges. Several participants expressed interest in SEA but indicated that budget constraints prevented adoption.

A common theme was desire for external support—whether through training, consulting, or agency partnerships—to improve both SEO and SEA capabilities. *"We need help. Not just someone to do it for us, but to teach us how to do it properly ourselves."* (Participant 3, Marrakech riad).

4. Discussion

4.1 Theoretical Implications

This study's findings contribute to several theoretical domains. From a TAM perspective, results confirm that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence adoption, but reveal important nuances. While SEO is perceived as highly useful for long-term sustainability, its perceived complexity creates adoption barriers despite this usefulness. Conversely, SEA's perceived ease of initiation facilitates trial, though sustained use depends on demonstrated effectiveness and available resources.

The TOE framework proves valuable for understanding the multi-level factors shaping adoption. Technological factors (perceived complexity, compatibility with existing systems)

interact with organizational factors (resources, capabilities, management attitudes) and environmental factors (competitive pressure, customer expectations, institutional norms) to produce diverse adoption patterns. This study highlights that these factors do not operate independently but interact in complex ways—for example, competitive pressure may motivate adoption, but resource constraints prevent effective implementation.

From an RBV perspective, findings suggest that SEO capabilities may represent more valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resources than SEA capabilities in the Moroccan tourism SME context. Advanced SEO requires accumulated technical knowledge, content creation skills, relationship networks for link building, and sustained organizational commitment—resources that are difficult for competitors to quickly replicate. SEA capabilities, while valuable, may be more readily acquired through training or outsourcing, potentially offering less sustainable competitive advantage.

The dynamic capabilities lens illuminates how successful businesses continuously adapt their search marketing strategies. Advanced adopters demonstrated sensing capabilities (monitoring algorithm changes, competitive moves, customer behavior), seizing capabilities (experimenting with new tactics, reallocating resources), and reconfiguring capabilities (adjusting strategy based on performance data). In contrast, less successful adopters often implemented static approaches without ongoing learning and adaptation.

Institutional theory helps explain adoption patterns that may appear economically suboptimal. Some businesses adopted SEA not based on rigorous ROI analysis but due to mimetic pressures (observing competitors' visible ad placements) or normative pressures (perceiving advertising as an expected practice). Similarly, some avoided SEO despite its potential long-term value due to prevailing beliefs about its complexity and required expertise.

4.2 Practical Implications

Findings yield several practical implications for Moroccan tourism SMEs, policymakers, and support organizations.

For tourism SMEs:

1. **Invest strategically in foundational SEO:** Even with limited resources, businesses should prioritize basic SEO fundamentals including technical optimization, mobile responsiveness, local business listings, and quality content. These foundational elements provide long-term value and reduce dependence on paid advertising.

2. **Use SEA tactically, not as a substitute for SEO:** SEA is most effective when used strategically during high-value periods or for specific opportunities, not as a replacement for organic visibility efforts. Businesses should view SEA as complementary to, not competitive with, SEO investment.

3. **Build internal capabilities:** While agencies can provide valuable expertise, developing internal understanding of SEO and SEA principles enables better strategy decisions, more effective agency management, and reduced long-term costs. Even basic training can significantly improve implementation effectiveness.

4. **Implement measurement systems:** Effective decision-making requires understanding what works. Businesses should implement basic analytics to track traffic sources, conversion rates, and ROI for both SEO and SEA efforts, enabling data-driven resource allocation.

5. **Collaborate for shared learning:** Given resource constraints faced by individual SMEs, collaborative learning initiatives—such as peer networks, industry associations, or shared training programs—could help businesses develop capabilities more efficiently than isolated efforts.

For policymakers and support organizations:

1. **Develop targeted capacity-building programs:** Results highlight significant knowledge gaps regarding SEO and SEA implementation. Government tourism agencies and business support organizations should develop accessible training programs tailored to SME needs and resource constraints.

2. **Create localized resources and case studies:** Most SEO resources are English-language and focused on developed market contexts. Developing French and Arabic resources, local case studies, and context-specific guidance would better serve Moroccan tourism SMEs.

3. **Facilitate access to affordable expertise:** Programs that subsidize digital marketing consulting, create mentorship networks, or develop shared service models could help SMEs access expertise they cannot afford independently.

4. **Address infrastructure constraints:** Some technical SEO challenges (e.g., site speed optimization) are compounded by infrastructure limitations. Investments in digital infrastructure and affordable, quality hosting services would support SEO effectiveness.

5. **Promote hybrid strategy frameworks:** Rather than presenting SEO and SEA as competing alternatives, education and support programs should promote strategic

frameworks that help SMEs determine appropriate combinations based on their specific situations, goals, and resources.

4.3 Contextual Considerations

This study's Moroccan tourism context presents specific characteristics that shape findings and limit direct transferability to other settings. Morocco's tourism sector is characterized by high seasonality, diverse international source markets requiring multilingual content, strong competition from established brands and OTAs, and developing digital infrastructure in some regions. These contextual factors influence the relative attractiveness and feasibility of SEO versus SEA strategies.

Additionally, Morocco's position as a developing economy with growing but still limited digital marketing maturity creates specific capability constraints and learning curves. Findings may differ in contexts with more mature digital ecosystems, greater availability of specialized expertise, or different competitive dynamics.

The COVID-19 pandemic's timing during this research period may have influenced findings. The crisis heightened awareness of digital marketing importance and accelerated some adoption decisions, potentially affecting the patterns observed.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative methodology and purposive sampling approach prioritize depth over generalizability. While findings provide rich insights into experiences and decision-making processes, they cannot establish prevalence rates or causal relationships. Future research employing larger-scale quantitative methods could test and extend these findings.

Second, the study relies partly on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. While triangulation with website audits and document analysis mitigates this concern, objective performance data (e.g., actual traffic, conversion, and revenue data) would strengthen findings. Future research with access to analytics data could provide more precise effectiveness assessments.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures adoption patterns and perceptions at a single point in time. Longitudinal research tracking businesses' SEO and SEA strategies over time could illuminate evolution patterns, learning processes, and long-term outcomes more clearly.

Fourth, this study focuses on SME perspectives. Future research incorporating customer perspectives (how tourists perceive and respond to organic versus paid search results) and platform perspectives (how search engines and advertising platforms shape the SME experience) would provide a more complete picture.

Fifth, the study examines SEO and SEA in relative isolation from other digital marketing channels. Future research examining how businesses integrate search marketing with social media, email marketing, content marketing, and offline channels would better reflect the complexity of actual marketing practice.

Specific future research directions include: (1) quantitative studies measuring SEO and SEA adoption rates, investment levels, and performance outcomes across larger samples; (2) experimental or quasi-experimental research comparing SEO and SEA effectiveness under controlled conditions; (3) longitudinal studies tracking capability development and strategic evolution over time; (4) comparative studies examining how adoption patterns differ across countries, sectors, or business types; (5) research investigating specific implementation practices and their relationships to outcomes (e.g., which SEO techniques are most effective for tourism SMEs?).

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined SEO and SEA adoption and usage among Moroccan tourism SMEs, revealing complex patterns shaped by technological, organizational, environmental, and economic factors. Findings indicate that while most businesses recognize the strategic importance of search visibility, implementation practices vary widely based on resources, capabilities, and strategic priorities.

SEO is generally perceived as more sustainable and cost-effective but faces adoption barriers related to perceived complexity, technical knowledge requirements, and slow results. SEA offers immediate visibility and clear measurement but requires continuous financial investment that many resource-constrained SMEs struggle to sustain. Rather than adopting purely organic or paid strategies, many businesses are evolving toward hybrid approaches that combine foundational SEO efforts with tactical SEA deployment during high-value periods.

However, effectiveness of both strategies is heavily dependent on implementation quality, which is often constrained by limited technical expertise, financial resources, and time availability. These capability constraints suggest that simply encouraging adoption is

insufficient—supporting effective implementation through training, resources, and accessible expertise is essential.

The study contributes theoretical insights into digital marketing adoption in developing country contexts, highlighting how resource constraints and capability gaps shape strategy choices in ways that may differ from developed economy patterns. Practically, findings inform SME strategy development and suggest directions for policy and support programs aimed at enhancing digital marketing capabilities in Morocco's tourism sector.

As Morocco continues to develop its tourism industry and digital economy, helping SMEs navigate the choice between organic visibility and paid advertising strategies will be crucial for sector competitiveness and sustainability. This requires not just awareness of these strategies' existence but deep capability development, strategic frameworks tailored to resource constraints, and support systems that make effective implementation accessible to businesses of all sizes and sophistication levels.

Future research should build on these qualitative insights through larger-scale quantitative studies, longitudinal tracking of strategy evolution and outcomes, and investigation of specific implementation practices that drive effectiveness. By deepening understanding of how tourism SMEs can effectively balance organic and paid search strategies within their resource constraints, research can contribute to more competitive, sustainable, and digitally mature tourism sectors in Morocco and similar developing economy contexts.

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