

Digital Marketing Frameworks for Startups: A Comparative Review of Models and Gaps

Christos Ziakis & Konstantinos Fouskas

University of Macedonia, Department of Applied Informatics, Thessaloniki, Greece

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This research is part of an ongoing thesis at the University of Macedonia.

1. Introduction

Context and motivation

- Startups operate in a dynamic environment marked by rapid technological change and shifting consumer behavior, necessitating agile, data-driven marketing strategies (Andrade, 2020; Bargoni et al., 2023).
- Startups differ from established businesses in their resource constraints, need for speed, and evolving product-market fit, and thus require distinct digital marketing frameworks (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020).
- A strong digital presence fosters brand visibility and client engagement, both critical for attracting venture capital and sustaining growth (Rizvanović et al., 2023; Burton, 2024; Moradi, 2024).
- Digital marketing techniques such as growth hacking, SEO, and viral campaigns are commonly used by startups to scale efficiently and reach early adopters (Andrade, 2020; Bargoni et al., 2023).
- AI-powered tools like chatbots and analytics platforms enhance conversion rates through personalized experiences, contributing to lean customer acquisition (Patel, 2020).
- Social media marketing plays a key role in user acquisition and investor appeal, especially for startups seeking rapid traction (Jin et al., 2017; Nigam et al., 2020).

1. Introduction

Problem statement

- Existing digital marketing frameworks often assume stable resources and validated market positions—conditions that do not reflect startup realities (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020; Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023).
- As a result, many frameworks offer limited practical value for early-stage ventures, which must validate demand, operate under uncertainty, and continuously adapt (Moradi, 2024; Rizvanović et al., 2023).
- There is a lack of comprehensive guidance on how to adapt or select frameworks based on startup maturity, marketing budget, or stage-specific needs.

Aim

- This study compares 16 prominent digital marketing frameworks to evaluate their suitability for startups.
- The aim is to identify strengths and gaps in existing digital marketing frameworks.

2. Methodology

Research Design

A two-phase qualitative approach was adopted:

1. Literature Review to identify and categorize widely used digital marketing frameworks.

- Reviewed 16 digital marketing frameworks, selected based on academic relevance and practical usage.
- Sources included academic research, industry reports, and practitioner handbooks

2. Semi-structured Interviews with startup marketers to evaluate the applicability of these frameworks in practice.

- Conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with digital marketing professionals from Greek startups across sectors (e.g., SaaS, e-commerce, tourism, health tech).
- Interviewees provided insights focusing on evaluation criteria such as: user journey and funnel structure, data-driven decision-making, customer segmentation, multi-channel strategy, personalization and engagement, and cost-effectiveness

3. Digital Marketing Frameworks Overview

A selection of well-established and widely applied digital marketing frameworks was analyzed:

Framework Name	Key Elements	Best suitable for stage(s) (based on Interviewees' opinion)
Customer Journey Mapping	Touchpoints, Pain Points, Experience	Early, Growth (Helps refine user experience)
Marketing Funnel	Awareness, Interest, Decision, Action	Early (Lead conversion focus)
Flywheel Model	Retention, Referrals, Engagement	Growth, Maturity (Customer retention & advocacy)
STP Model	Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning	Early, Growth (Market positioning)
7 Ps Marketing Model	Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, Evidence	Growth, Maturity (Broad marketing strategy)
The Hook Model	Trigger, Action, Reward, Investment	Early (User engagement & habit formation)
RACE Planning	Reach, Act, Convert, Engage	Growth (Comprehensive digital marketing planning)
AARRR (Pirate Metrics)	Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Referral, Revenue	Early (Growth hacking for traction)
Forrester's 5 Is	Involvement, Interaction, Immersion, Integration, Influence	Growth (Customer engagement focus)
Lean Analytics Stage Framework	KPIs, Iteration, Data, PMF Validation	Early (Data-driven decision-making)
Bullseye Framework	Channel Testing, Prioritization, Optimization	Early (Finding the best marketing channels)
Inbound Marketing Methodology	Content, SEO, Social, Nurturing	Early, Growth (Content-driven organic growth)
Growth Marketing Loop	Experimentation, Feedback, Iteration	Early, Growth (Continuous optimization)
SOSTAC Framework	Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action, Control	Growth, Maturity (Strategic planning)
STDC Model	See, Think, Do, Care	Early (Customer decision-making process)
PESO Model	Paid, Earned, Shared, Owned	Growth, Maturity (Integrated media strategy)

4. Key Findings

A selection of well-established and widely applied digital marketing frameworks was analyzed.

- ✓ The **STP Model** excels at customer discovery and segmentation, making it ideal for defining and refining target markets.
- ✓ **Bullseye** and **Inbound Marketing** are particularly strong at prioritizing low-cost channels and maximizing limited resources.
- ✓ **AARRR**, **RACE**, **Lean Analytics**, and **Growth Marketing Loop** lead in supporting iterative testing, measurable pivots, and rapid expansion once traction is achieved.
- ✓ The **Hook Model** excels at crafting habit-forming experiences and tailored messaging, driving deeper customer engagement.
- ✓ No framework excels in Automation and Technology Integration

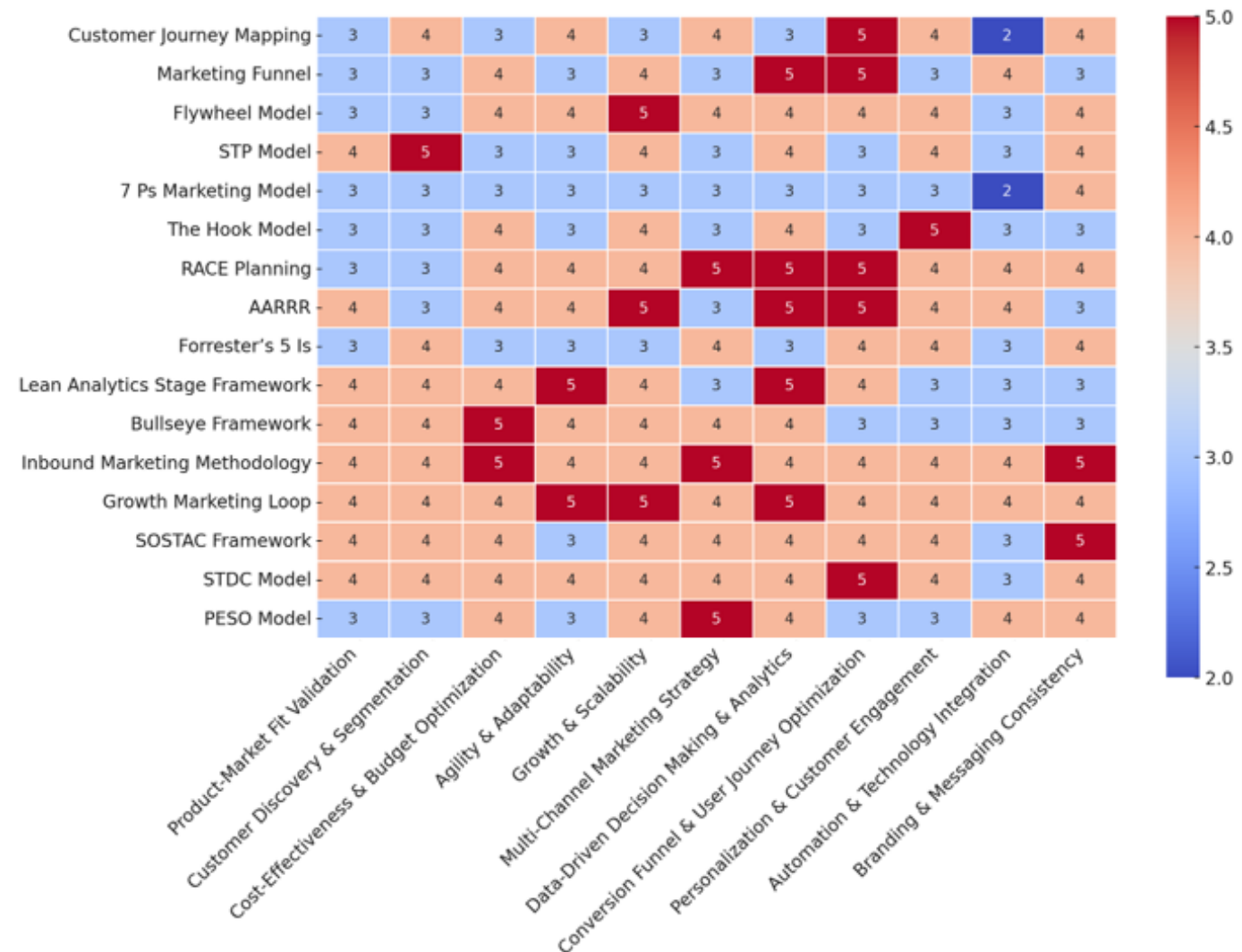


Fig. 1 Comparison of key dimensions across marketing frameworks

5. Identified gaps

Assumed Audience Validation - Absence of Early-Stage Validation

- Most frameworks presuppose that startups have already validated their target market and customer needs (Patil et al., 2022)
- No existing digital marketing framework explicitly integrates customer need identification and validation at the ideation phase
- In reality, many early-stage startups still struggle with product–market fit and rely on costly trial-and-error approaches. This gap can lead to misaligned marketing efforts before a viable value proposition is confirmed.

Unrealistic Budget Assumptions

- Frameworks often assume access to sufficient marketing resources (e.g., paid ads, automation tools), which may not be feasible for lean startups (Rizvanović et al., 2023)

Lack of AI-Driven Optimization

- While data-driven insights are essential, few models include built-in mechanisms for AI-powered optimization or automation (Joel, 2024)
- Startups risk falling behind if they cannot leverage AI for real-time personalization and budget reallocation.

6. Conclusion

- ✓ Existing frameworks each exhibit unique strengths (e.g., analytics focus, segmentation, channel optimization) but show notable gaps in automation and market-fit validation. Most of them focus on growth and optimization, taken into consideration that start-ups have already validated their audience.
- ✓ Future models should embed product-market fit validation, real-time personalization, and scalability as core components.
- ✓ A hybrid framework that unites AI-driven automation, multi-channel optimization, and sustainable growth strategies can address current deficiencies.
- ✓ Without an integrated approach to validating consumer needs early on, startups risk spending on marketing activities that don't resonate with their target audience.
- ✓ Effective startup marketing requires a strategic framework beginning at the ideation stage, explicitly incorporating customer need identification into digital marketing efforts.

7. Next Steps in our Research

Need for a Hybrid Startup-Centric Digital Marketing Framework that should combine:

- Lean Demand Validation
- AI-Augmented Channel Prioritization with AI-driven forecasting and real-time budget reallocation
- Segment-Driven Personalization
- Multichannel Growth Orchestration
- Continuous Feedback & Scale Audits

As part of the ongoing research, we propose the CRUX (Customer Research & User Experience-driven) Digital Marketing Framework.

We are currently analyzing a dataset of startups to uncover patterns of success, refine the CRUX components, and validate the framework's effectiveness.

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Thank you!

Any questions or suggestions for
our future research?

Konstantinos Fouskas