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Digital Content Marketing: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Firms increasingly use digital content as a valuable tool to persuade consumers. Consequently, research on digital content has begun to explore which content elements help firms achieve positive outcomes. As the study of digital content continues to evolve, this systematic literature review aims to identify research gaps, thoroughly examine the state of the art, and provide researchers and managers with a comprehensive future agenda. To achieve this, we use the theory–characteristics–context–methods protocol, incorporating an analysis of 85 research articles. The findings classify digital content elements employed by firms into six broad categories—visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, social, and message—and identify their influence on various outcomes, including engagement, purchase intention and sales, brand-related outcomes, and consumers' content perceptions and attitudes. Additionally, the findings identify significant research gaps and propose several areas for further investigation. The article serves as a comprehensive review of digital content, addressing the fragmented nature of the field and proposing a comprehensive conceptual framework.

1 | Introduction

Digital transformation has profoundly reshaped societal structures, business practices, and consumer activities, driven by technologies such as artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, social media, mobile apps, metaverse, and information security (Al Kurdi et al. 2025; Paul, Ueno, et al. 2024; Paul et al. 2023; Shwedeh, Yas, et al. 2024). These technologies have induced significant changes across a variety of industries and contexts, particularly in banking (Shwedeh 2024a), tourism (Sharma et al. 2025), retailing (Patil et al. 2025), and higher education (Al Najdawi et al. 2024; Shwedeh 2024b; Shwedeh, Nour, and Akour 2024; Yas, Dafri, Sarhan, et al. 2024; Yas, Dafri, Yas, and Shwedeh 2024). In this context, digital content has evolved from a mere communication tool to a strategic asset that shapes how firms compete, engage consumers, and create value in today's economy (Fan et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2023). Such content serves as a crucial component of marketers' social media strategies, delivering the highest return on investment (HubSpot 2025). In 2022, the global marketing industry dedicated to digital content generated an estimated revenue of around $63 billion, with forecasts projecting growth to $107 billion by 2026 (Statista 2023). Despite its importance, many firms face challenges in identifying which types of digital content most effectively influence consumer behavior and generate positive outcomes. As a result, content creation remains a major challenge in marketing practice.

Digital content marketing refers to the strategic creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-aligned content by firms

through channels such as social media, digital advertising, websites, and emails. Its goal is to enhance brand engagement, build trust, and establish lasting relationships with current and prospective customers (Fan et al. 2024; Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Xie and Lou 2024). While research on digital content marketing has expanded in recent years, scholars continue to face two major challenges (Kumar et al. 2016; Tellis et al. 2019).

First, the terminology used to refer to the various digital content elements is fragmented, hindering cohesive comprehension and analysis. This fragmentation underscores the urgent need for a standardized and inclusive taxonomy that unifies terms within the digital content domain, thereby enabling more effective and comparable research. Although some literature reviews have addressed content marketing (Bubphapant and Brandão 2024), there is still no overarching classification that encompasses broad categories and their constituent elements, providing a holistic understanding of firms' digital content.

Second, although researchers have widely recognized the importance of certain content elements, such as brand logos and informative messages, in boosting consumer engagement, brand positioning, and sales (Kujur and Singh 2020; Meire et al. 2022; Salonen et al. 2024), they have tended to overlook other elements and their influence on diverse outcomes. This gap calls for a multidimensional analysis that transcends thematic categorization by integrating theoretical foundations, content characteristics, contextual factors, and methodological approaches. Without such an analysis, the field remains fragmented and lacks clear guidance for future research.

The current study aims to provide a deeper understanding of digital content and its potential to improve firms' outcomes. First, we seek to identify and classify an extensive range of digital content elements employed by firms across various digital platforms, thereby bringing clarity to the field of digital content marketing research. These elements share the common characteristic of falling under the firm's control, allowing it to decide how to combine them to create an effective overall message (Gómez-Suárez and Veloso 2022; Kluge et al. 2013; Tsai et al. 2025). Second, we aim to systematically organize the existing research on how digital content elements influence various firm outcomes. Our approach constructs a comprehensive, multidimensional framework that brings together theory, characteristics, context, and methods. This structure will allow us to identify patterns, gaps, and convergences of effects in the field of digital marketing.

We pose five research questions (RQs) to guide our study:

RQ1. *What theoretical perspectives have scholars applied to the study of firm-generated digital content?*

RQ2. *What characteristics of firm-generated digital content have scholars analyzed?*

RQ3. *In what contexts have scholars examined firm-generated digital content?*

RQ4. *How have scholars approached the study of firm-generated digital content from a methodological standpoint?*

RQ5. *What theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods should scholars explore in future research to advance the study of firm-generated digital content?*

To address these questions, we develop a systematic literature review (SLR) drawing on the theory–characteristics–context–methods (TCCM) framework (Paul and Rosado-Serrano 2019; Paul, Khatri, and Duggal 2024). By analyzing 85 articles published between 2003 and 2023, we identify 20 digital content elements that meet the previously established inclusion criteria and are described using 224 distinct terms (see Appendix A). These elements include: color; visual complexity; movement; music; audio; language complexity; technology-based linguistic elements; stylistic linguistic elements; emoji and GIFs; product-related symbols; brand-related symbols; presence of people; interactions between people in the content and consumers; informative messages; emotional messages; experiential messages; sales messages; corporate social responsibility messages; narrative messages; and messages that are task-oriented, interaction-oriented, or self-oriented. We group these elements into six categories: visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, social, and message. Moreover, these elements influence a range of outcomes, including engagement, purchase intention and sales, brand-related outcomes, and consumers' content perceptions and attitudes.

This study makes three main contributions to the literature on digital content marketing. First, it proposes a comprehensive six-dimensional taxonomy of digital content elements, which standardizes and integrates diverse concepts under a coherent conceptualization. This categorization not only enhances theoretical clarity and comparability across studies but also supports the development of cumulative theory. Second, the study identifies key outcomes affected by digital content and highlights the uneven attention these elements have received in the literature. To address this, we introduce a multimodal conceptual framework that captures the combined effects of content elements and clarifies their links to firms' outcomes, enabling the identification of underexplored areas. Third, the study offers a methodological contribution by applying the TCCM protocol to systematically analyze 85 peer-reviewed articles. This structured and transparent approach provides a replicable model for future literature reviews in digital marketing and related fields. The manuscript also adheres to the best practices outlined in Paul (2025); Paul (2024); and Paul and Menzies (2023), ensuring alignment with established guidelines for conducting systematic literature reviews in high-impact journals.

2 | Methodology

SLRs follow a rigorous methodology for assembling, arranging, and assessing existing literature within a specific research domain. This process involves several key steps: identifying and acquiring relevant literature, structuring and purifying the collected data, and analyzing and reporting the findings (Paul and Barari 2022; Paul, Lim, et al. 2021). An SLR provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of the art in a research area, identifies gaps, and stimulates new research directions, making it an essential tool for advancing knowledge in any field (Paul and Criado 2020).

To develop this SLR, we applied a framework-based review using the TCCM protocol (Paul and Rosado-Serrano 2019). TCCM organizes pertinent information into its four key components. Theories encompass the different theoretical underpinnings used to explain relationships between constructs. Characteristics describe the elements of a construct and how they interact with other variables. Contexts involve conditions that influence the research environment. Finally, methods cover details of samples, measurement scales, research designs, and analytical methods. This comprehensive, versatile approach facilitates the synthesis of existing research, helps to identify gaps, and sets future research agendas, thereby advancing knowledge with clarity and coverage (Paul, Lim, et al. 2021; Paul, Merchant, et al. 2021; Paul, Khatri, and Duggal 2024).

In order to identify relevant literature in the field of digital content, the search strategy utilized Boolean operators and truncation, using combinations of four main keyword sets related to firm, content, element, and digital. Specifically, the keywords used in the search queries were: (firm OR firms OR brand OR brands) AND content AND (element OR elements OR cue OR cues OR stimuli OR stimulus OR feature OR features OR message OR messages) AND (digital OR online OR "social media" OR "social networks" OR web). To ensure we detected relevant articles, the search was performed on the titles and abstracts (Cartwright et al. 2021).

We included peer-reviewed academic articles collected from electronic databases in the field of business and management. We used Scopus and Web of Science, as they represent the most authoritative and comprehensive online databases available (Basu et al. 2022; Paul, Lim, et al. 2021; Paul 2025). These databases ensure quality control and methodological rigor, cover a wide range of disciplines, and offer advanced citation tracking that facilitates access to high-quality, peer-reviewed literature (Bubphapant and Brandão 2024). Both databases have served as primary sources in prior studies and offer a curated collection of the most influential scholarly publications in business, management, and the social sciences (Mariani et al. 2023; Ruparel et al. 2023; Vrontis et al. 2022). By selecting Scopus and Web of Science, we followed established standards for conducting SLRs, ensuring reliable, transparent, and internationally recognized academic coverage (Alwani and Bhukya 2025). We adopted this dual-database approach to minimize selection bias, as relying on a single source may compromise the comprehensiveness of a systematic review (Shibuya et al. 2022). We deliberately excluded other databases, such as ABI/INFORM, Google Scholar, and SSRN. While these sources may support exploratory research or provide access to emerging or specialized literature, they often include non-peer-reviewed materials (e.g., working papers, theses, or technical reports). Including these types of publications could introduce irrelevant or low-quality items that lack academic rigor, thereby increasing the risk of bias in the results (Haag and Brahm 2025). The search took place in late November 2023, with no time restrictions.

To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, we reviewed established protocols for systematic literature reviews. Among them, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) remains one of the most widely recognized and applied frameworks across disciplines, as it provides clear stages for identification, screening, and inclusion of studies (Page et al. 2021). At the same time, alternative protocols such as SPAR-4-SLR have been increasingly adopted, particularly in consumer and marketing research, because they offer rationales to guide and justify methodological choices in systematic reviews (Paul, Lim, et al. 2021). While both PRISMA and SPAR-4-SLR ensure rigor, transparency, and replicability, we selected PRISMA 2020 given its broad cross-disciplinary recognition and its suitability for mixed-methods systematic reviews, as in the present study.

In the identification stage, we removed duplicate and unavailable articles. In the screening stage, we applied mandatory inclusion and exclusion criteria at three key sub-stages: records screened, reports sought for retrieval, and reports assessed for eligibility.

In the records-screened sub-stage, we selected peer-reviewed academic articles written in English and accessible online, and left out articles in other languages, book chapters, and grey literature because they have less scholarly impact and are not always peer-reviewed (Lim et al. 2021). To prioritize high-quality, indexed literature and ensure adequate coverage of our emerging research topic, we focused on articles published in "Q1" and "Q2" journals indexed in Web of Science (Paul 2025). Previous SLRs by Garima et al. (2025) and Arman and Mark-Herbert (2024) also used Web of Science's Q1 and Q2 rankings to identify suitable journals for their samples.

In the reports sought for retrieval sub-stage, we evaluated the title and abstract using two inclusion criteria to determine the relevance of each article. The first criterion assessed whether articles focused on content generated by firms, rather than by influencers or users. The second criterion prioritized articles that addressed digital content elements that are within the control of the firm as a central concept. Moreover, we employed two exclusion criteria. We ruled out articles that did not consider marketing via digital platforms, as well as articles that primarily examined content elements measured exclusively through consumer perceptions or attitudes.

The two researchers independently reviewed all articles to ensure objectivity and reduce potential bias in both selection and classification. The strong consensus between reviewers regarding the appropriateness of the articles (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.90$) demonstrates the consistency and reproducibility of the selection process. The researchers discussed and resolved any discrepancies in their evaluations.

During the reports assessed for eligibility sub-stage, we analyzed the complete articles. We excluded studies relying on self-perceptual measurements of firm content elements (i.e., consumer perceptions or attitudes toward these elements). The final sample consists of 85 articles. Figure 1 comprises a PRISMA 2020 flowchart, which describes the literature search procedure.

Finally, we adapted and employed the Joanna Briggs Institute's critical appraisal tool (JBI) to further assess the quality and eligibility of the studies (Appendix B) (Barker et al. 2024). This tool supports methodological rigor and transparency, minimizing

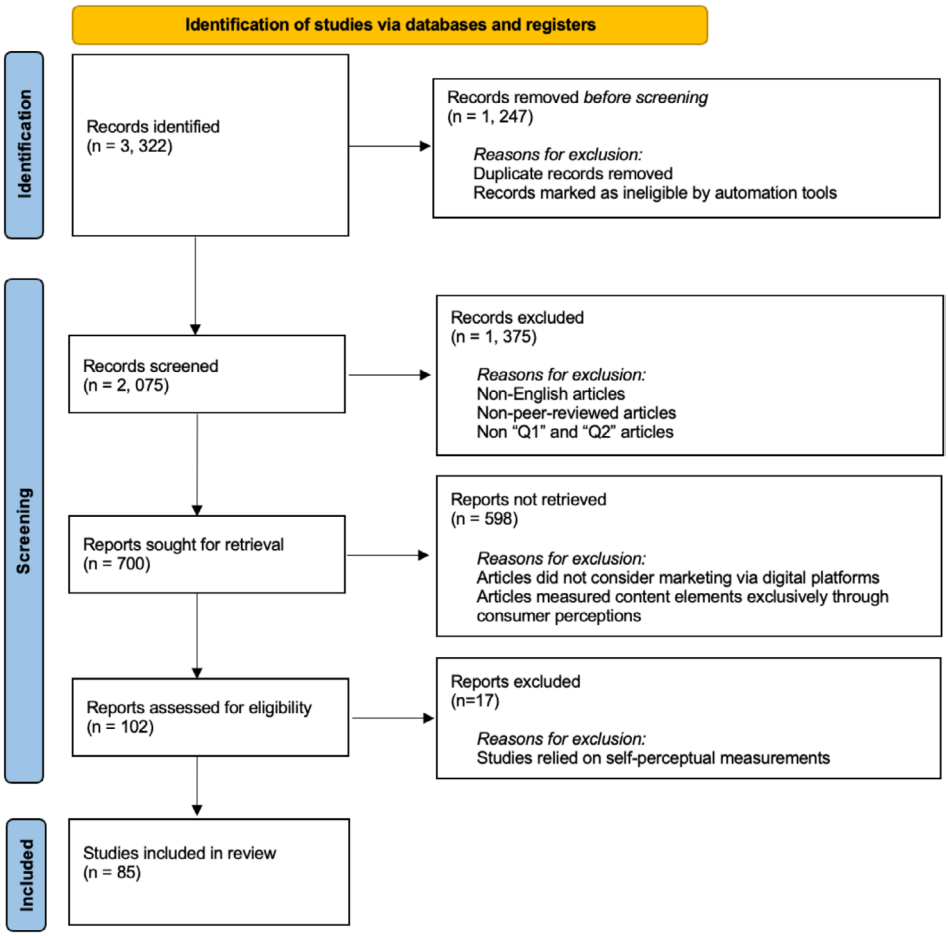

FIGURE 1 | PRISMA 2020 flowchart depicting the literature search procedure.

bias in systematic reviews (Munn et al. 2014). Two researchers independently skimmed the full-text articles in parallel and compared their evaluations. They discussed any discrepancies and reached consensus.

3 | Synthesis of Research

To synthesize the results, we compiled the bibliographic sources and tracked the progression of publications on digital content elements up to November 2023. This analysis reveals a clear evolution of interest in digital content elements over time. Notably, 47% of the publications were released between 2020 and 2023, indicating a significant increase in scholarly interest and reflecting the rapid growth of this emerging field. The increasing volume of publications covers a wide range of journals—over 42 different qualifying journals in total. Research was distributed across a diverse array of journals in fields such as marketing, business, management, and more.

3.1 | Synthesis of Research in Digital Content Elements

We identified six categories of digital content elements employed by firms: visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, social, and message. Each category differs based on the modality through which the audience perceives it and the communicative function it fulfills. We define them according to their form, function, and semiotic properties. Together, these elements support effective firm communication and ultimately strengthen business outcomes. The following sections explain each category in detail.

3.1.1 | Visual Elements

We define visual elements in digital content as the constituent resources of images or videos that are directly perceivable by sight (e.g., an image or video cannot exist without at least one color). Their significance lies in their ability to convey details of a real-world scene swiftly and effortlessly to viewers (Overgoor et al. 2022). Visual elements often capture attention before text because of their vivid and concrete nature, aiding content comprehension and shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Brubaker and Wilson 2018; Simonetti and Bigne 2022). We classify visual elements into three groups: color, visual complexity, and movement.

First, color conveys meanings and influences factors such as perceptions of brand personality and likability, making it a vital tool for marketers (Kanuri et al. 2023; Kwon et al. 2022). Characteristics of color include hue, saturation, and value (HSV). In marketing research, hue, which is a function of the wavelength of light within the visible spectrum, has received the

most attention, as it reflects the appearance parameter of color (Kwon et al. 2022). Another line of research has explored color complexity, which refers to the degree of variation in pixel color within an image (Kanuri et al. 2023). Images with higher color variation are considered more complex than those with lower color variation.

Second, visual complexity is an inherent characteristic of images, ranging from elemental, disorganized variations to semantic, structured arrangements (Overgoor et al. 2022). Some researchers have considered visual complexity as a single construct, while others have argued that it originates from multiple image characteristics. Overgoor et al. (2022) classified visual complexity into two types: feature complexity and design complexity. Feature complexity assesses the variation in image pixels, including color, luminance, and edge quantity, while design complexity evaluates the design and arrangement of objects in the image.

Finally, the primary distinction between image and video is that the latter features dynamic and vivid aspects, such as movement. Video streaming and animated images can direct attention to key features and messages (Bruce et al. 2017; Dou and Krishnamurthy 2007; Virtsonis and Harridge-March 2008).

3.1.2 | Auditory Elements

We define auditory elements in digital content as any resource that individuals perceive through hearing. Despite its significance, audio remains largely overlooked in academic research, with only a few exceptions. Dou and Krishnamurthy (2007) examined the inclusion of audio in websites, while Yousaf et al. (2021) considered audio in conjunction with visual elements. Virtsonis and Harridge-March (2008) included the use of audio but found that none of the websites they studied incorporated this feature. Raney et al. (2003) analyzed the effect of audio (i.e., music) on consumer perceptions and behavior.

3.1.3 | Linguistic Elements

We define linguistic elements in digital content as text-based, numeric, and other non-alphanumeric characters that make up written language. These elements concern the formal and structural aspects of expression, such as composition and formatting, but do not address the semantic meaning of words or purely visual features (e.g., text color). We classify linguistic elements into three groups: language complexity, technology-based, and stylistic.

First, language complexity includes indicators related to textual length, such as the length of the message, post or description, title, sentences, and words (Deng et al. 2021; Kwon et al. 2022; Pachucki et al. 2022). Other common indicators of language complexity include prepositions, which signal concrete information about a topic, and conjunctions, which integrate multiple complex ideas and often introduce more intricate sentence structures (Bharadwaj et al. 2020; Deng et al. 2021; Mu et al. 2022). Finally, incorporating non-alphanumeric characters (e.g.,@) or incorrect word spacing can increase complexity and disrupt fluency, making it more difficult for readers to interpret the message (Deng et al. 2021; Mu et al. 2022).

Second, regarding technology-based elements, social media platforms incorporate interactive features such as hashtags, mentions, and links to help consumers manage the vast amount of information they encounter (Deng et al. 2021; Zhang and Su 2023). Hashtags, denoted by #, function as traceability elements by linking to topics and improving message detectability (Araujo et al. 2015; Swani et al. 2014; Tafesse 2020). Mentions, marked by@and followed immediately by an account name, also serve as traceability tools by facilitating direct communication between the firm and consumers, allowing targeted messages to be conveyed to specific individuals or groups (Deng et al. 2021; Zhang and Du 2020; Zhang and Su 2023). Links—that is, hyperlinks to external resources—give consumers access to more detailed information and help direct potential leads to corporate websites, thereby increasing traffic or sales (Araujo et al. 2015; de Vries et al. 2012; Deng et al. 2021).

Third, stylistic elements refer to the linguistic style and the level of formality in the written text, encompassing aspects such as personal pronouns, readability, questions, jargon, rhetorical forms, conversational language, language style, textual paralanguage, and typography.

Personal pronouns provide clarity about the roles of individuals in a text (Pachucki et al. 2022; ShabbirHusain et al. 2023). Other stylistic elements that serve to catch attention or enhance text clarity include readability, questions, jargon (de Vries et al. 2012; Drossos et al. 2023; Rooderkerk and Pauwels 2016), rhetorical forms such as alliteration and word repetition (Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019), conversational language (e.g., "wow" or "oh") (ShabbirHusain et al. 2023), language style (Jakic et al. 2017), and textual paralanguage, which represents nonverbal audio, tactile, and visual components that enhance or substitute written language (e.g., regular punctuation, !!!!!) (Luangrath et al. 2023). Finally, various typographies (e.g., Arial, Helvetica, or Sans-Serif) also contribute to the design of stylistic elements (Kluge et al. 2013).

3.1.4 | Symbolic Elements

We define symbolic elements in digital content as the use of signs and symbols to communicate abstract, specific, and complex concepts to consumers. These elements function as codes that can substitute or complement verbal language, often relying on cultural or contextual conventions for interpretation. Unlike visual elements such as colors and shapes, which operate primarily on a perceptual or aesthetic level, symbolic elements require cognitive processing to be fully understood.

In digital content, relevant symbolic elements include emojis and GIFs. Emojis are standardized digital icons used to express emotions, reactions, or concepts in a simplified, symbolic way. They can either substitute words or short phrases (e.g., a plant or a dog) or convey varying degrees of emotion—for instance, a smiling face versus a crying one (Balaji et al. 2023; Deng et al. 2021; Luangrath et al. 2023; Valenzuela-Gálvez et al. 2023). GIFs function as symbols and appear in either static or dynamic form.

Static GIFs are symbols that do not include animation or interactivity (Bruce et al. 2017), while dynamic GIFs are animated.

Symbolic elements often reflect associations with product attributes or brands (Butcher and Pecot 2022). Product-related symbols may include text, images, or sections on a website related to the product name, product pictures, or service solutions (Han and Lee 2022; Swani et al. 2017; Wajid et al. 2021; Zhang and Patrick 2021). Brand-related symbols may include logos, names, and/or nicknames (i.e., the informal names of brands) (Virtsonis and Harridge-March 2008; Wajid et al. 2021; Zhang and Patrick 2021). Other brand-related symbols may include slogans (Lee et al. 2006) and straplines (Virtsonis and Harridge-March 2008). Finally, researchers have examined the presence of brand-related symbols by analyzing their centrality (Butcher and Pecot 2022).

3.1.5 | Social Elements

We define social elements in digital content as resources related to individuals or to human characteristics. Thus, they refer to the inclusion of people or characters (Ashley and Tuten 2015; Dou and Krishnamurthy 2007; Pinto and Yagnik 2017). The presence of human faces, whether these display a neutral expression or convey emotions, can further enrich the humanization of digital content, which may help to cultivate relationships with consumers (Vaičiukynaitė and Gatautis 2018; Zhang and Su 2023).

Moreover, social elements vary depending on the type of interaction they generate between the viewer and the individuals included in content. This interaction may involve direct or indirect gaze (i.e., how individuals portrayed within content establish contact with the viewer), social distance between the individuals portrayed within content and the viewer (i.e., how close individuals portrayed within content are to the "camera"), as well as points of view or angles of shots (i.e., individuals portrayed within content being depicted from above, below, or at eye level) (Ang et al. 2018; Dhanesh et al. 2022; Gandhi and Kar 2022).

3.1.6 | Message Elements

We define the message in digital content as the underlying meaning or communicative intent conveyed through various formats, including text, images, and video (Zhang and Du 2020). While linguistic elements shape the structure and presentation of language (e.g., typography or wording), message elements pertain to what the content aims to communicate, such as emotional appeal, informational value, or call to action. This intended meaning plays a crucial role in influencing consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors and can ultimately drive desired outcomes (Mu et al. 2022; Veloso et al. 2023).

The message is a major strategic element and has received significant attention (Pinto and Yagnik 2017; Zhang and Du 2020). The absence of a standard for analyzing messages has led to a wide range of approaches being employed. Common approaches include informative and emotional messages (Bharadwaj et al. 2020; Dolan et al. 2019; Tellis et al. 2019), while other categorizations include experiential, sales, corporate social responsibility, narrative, task-oriented, interaction-oriented, and self-oriented, as well as other, less common, message types. Below, we explain the main types of messages.

Informative messages represent one of the most widely employed approaches for assessing content meaning on digital platforms (Archer-Brown et al. 2013; Chandrasekaran et al. 2017; Gu et al. 2023). We define informative messages as those that aim at appealing to rationality or cognition by providing resourceful and helpful information (Dolan et al. 2019; Okazaki 2006). They also present factual and objective information about products, services, or brands in a clear and logical manner (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Butcher and Pecot 2022; Drossos et al. 2023).

Emotional messages are also a prevalent approach for evaluating messaging in digital content (Chandrasekaran et al. 2017; Gopinath et al. 2014; Swani and Milne 2017). We define emotional messages as those that aim to evoke positive or negative feelings, establishing not only emotional connections between the consumer and the message or firm (Ashley and Tuten 2015; Dolan et al. 2019; Kulkarni et al. 2020), but also persuading customers, cultivating entertainment, or defining brand personality (Tan et al. 2021; Zhang and Du 2020).

Experiential messages convey meaning related to experiences. Generally, experiential messages involve dimensions such as informative, emotional, sensory, and social (Dennis et al. 2014; Veloso et al. 2023). Similar to informative messages, informative experiential messages integrate both physical and nonphysical aspects of experience to provide practical information and generate curiosity for consumers (Veloso et al. 2023). Similarly, akin to emotional messages, emotional experiential messages aim to evoke feelings. Sensory experiential messages rely on sensory attributes such as sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell (Ashley and Tuten 2015); conversely, social experiential messages refer to interactions between consumers and firm representatives (Veloso et al. 2023). Dennis et al. (2014) demonstrated that informative messages focus on analytic thoughts that elicit intellectual experiences, whereas sensory-emotional messages provoke affective experiences.

Sales messages are explicit statements designed to induce immediate purchase behaviors by promoting products or benefits to consumers (Dolan et al. 2019; Swani et al. 2017; Vaičiukynaitė and Gatautis 2018). They incorporate promotional techniques such as discounts (Ashley and Tuten 2015; Pinto and Yagnik 2017), or direct calls to purchase, such as "buy now" or "offer ends today" (Swani et al. 2014; Zhang and Du 2020). These messages aim to persuade consumers to make purchases, participate in an activity, or sign up for something (Pinto and Yagnik 2017; Swani et al. 2013).

Corporate social responsibility messages encompass information pertaining to responsible corporate activities or behaviors (Okazaki et al. 2020; Samoggia et al. 2019; Uzunoğlu et al. 2017). For instance, a firm may include a corporate social responsibility section on its website (Virtsonis and Harridge-March 2008) or communicate corporate social responsibility and sustainable consumption strategies through social media (Araujo and Kollat 2018; Crapa et al. 2023; Han and Lee 2022). Communication of corporate social responsibility fosters

dialogue and enables stakeholders to express their needs and expectations regarding responsible corporate behaviors (Okazaki et al. 2020; Uzunoğlu et al. 2017).

Narrative messages consist of a storytelling structure within branded content, depicting an event or action with multiple elements (Bonnin and Alfonso 2019; Dessart and Pitardi 2019). Key elements typically include characters, products, or story plots, as well as temporality or chronology, and causality (Bonnin and Alfonso 2019; Lim and Childs 2020). Firms use narrative messages to shape a positive organizational image and foster identification processes among internal and external stakeholders (Araujo and Kollat 2018; Dhanesh et al. 2022; Spear and Roper 2013).

Task-, interaction-, and self-oriented messages represent another typology used for classifying messages in academic literature. Task-oriented messages include product or service announcements, contests, or sweepstakes. Interaction-oriented messages incorporate personal statements, social conversations, or calls for interaction or action. Self-oriented messages include information about company events or products (Kim et al. 2015; Kusumasondjaja 2018; Zhang and Su 2023).

Other messages encompass a variety of types, each with its own distinct focus; for example, specific calls to action (Brubaker and Wilson 2018; Kujur and Singh 2020; Moran et al. 2020).

3.2 | Synthesis of Research Into Firm Outcome

Our findings reveal how digital content elements influence certain outcomes, shedding light on the nuanced relationship between digital content and its impact. We excluded from this review studies that do not address the specific influence of digital content elements on firms' outcomes, such as those that merely conduct content-based examinations or illustrative case reports. We identified 73 studies that analyze how digital content elements impact these outcomes. Since each study can assess various outcomes, we find that, among these, 59 studies address engagement, nine assess purchase intention and sales, 10 consider brand-related outcomes, and six evaluate consumers' content perceptions and attitudes.

3.2.1 | Engagement

Engagement refers to the dynamic interaction between consumers and firms, reflecting consumers' responses toward firms' communication outputs. It also reflects firms' intentional efforts to motivate, empower, and measure consumer contributions (Brubaker and Wilson 2018; Rietveld et al. 2020).

On social media, some studies employ an overall engagement metric by aggregating various forms of consumer behavior and interaction with the firm (Drossos et al. 2023; Kanuri et al. 2023). Others focus on individual engagement indicators, such as likes, comments, and shares, analyzing these measures separately (Bargoni et al. 2023; de Vries et al. 2012). Behavioral engagement can also include other response types, such as clicks and views (Gandhi and Kar 2022; Tafesse 2020).

3.2.2 | Purchase Intention and Sales

Purchase intention, booking intention, and sales refer to the consumer action, or consumers' likelihood, of engaging in purchase. Purchase intention is a behavioral response that indicates the degree of consumers' willingness to buy specific products or services displayed in content (Mazerant et al. 2021; Tan et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2020). Booking intention is a type of purchase intention applied to industries in which reservations are made in advance via digital platforms. Finally, daily sales serve as a metric reflecting product performance (Mu et al. 2022).

3.2.3 | Brand-Related Outcomes

Brand-related outcomes involve concepts pertaining to how consumers perceive and relate to brands. Specifically, we consider three different types of outcomes: those linked to emotions and feelings, such as brand emotion and affective brand experiences; those related to brand knowledge and perception, such as brand name recognition, brand awareness, intellectual brand experiences, brand evaluation, and brand positioning; and those concerning predispositions and beliefs, such as brand attitude and brand trust.

3.2.4 | Consumers' Content Perceptions and Attitudes

Some studies have analyzed consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward digital content based on their interactions with it. These studies identify three main types of responses: hedonic perceptions, such as arousal and site entertainment; content-related perceptions, such as perceived value and information authenticity; and attitudinal responses, such as attitudes toward advertisements.

3.3 | Synthesis of the Influence of Digital Content Elements on Firms' Outcomes

3.3.1 | Influence of Content Elements on Engagement

Table 1 highlights the uneven attention that researchers have given to the impact of content elements on engagement. Visual elements have attracted significant interest, and studies have consistently reported their positive effect on engagement. In contrast, researchers have largely overlooked auditory elements. Linguistic elements have undergone extensive analysis, revealing significant but variable impacts. Findings on symbolic elements remain inconclusive, whereas social elements tend to strengthen engagement (Ang et al. 2018; Vaičiukynaitė and Gatautis 2018). Finally, most message elements lack conclusive evidence, although studies have documented positive effects in the case of narrative messages (Araujo and Kollat 2018; Dhanesh et al. 2022).

TABLE 1 | Digital content elements studied in relation to engagement.

Digital content element	Frequency	Methods	Principal results	References
Visual	4	Experimental, interacting analysis, negative binomial regression, and zero-inflated count mode	Color: color complexity has a positive effect, different colors have mixed effects, while visual complexity has an inverted u-shape relationship Movement: Flash content has a positive effect	Bruce et al. (2017); Kanuri et al. (2023); Kwon et al. (2022); Overgoor et al. (2022)
Auditory	0	—	—	—
Linguistic	18	A variety of regressions (e.g., ordinary least squares, multiple linear regression), multivariate analysis, statistical tests.	Language complexity: longer messages boost engagement, but simpler sentences with basic words are also generally beneficial Technology-based elements: hashtags and links tend to reduce engagement whereas mentions have a positive impact Stylistic elements: textual paralanguage and first-person-plural pronouns positively influence engagement	Antoniadis et al. (2019); Deng et al. (2021); Drossos et al. (2023); Luangrath et al. (2023)
Symbolic	13	Experimental, a variety of regression analyses (e.g., logit, Poisson, negative binomial, zero-inflated), statistical tests and mixed methods	Emojis have mixed results on engagement Brand-related and product-related symbols are inconclusive	Araujo et al. (2015); Deng et al. (2021); Balaji et al. (2023), Butcher and Pecot (2022); Swani and Milne (2017); Valenzuela-Gálvez et al. (2023)
Social	5	Structural equation modeling, statistical tests, regression (e.g., negative binomial, linear) statistical tests, and experimental studies	Social presence: results are inconclusive Interactive effects between individuals featured in content and the viewer: no significant effects	Ang et al. (2018); Dhanesh et al. (2022); Gandhi and Kar (2022); Vaičiukynaitė and Gatautis (2018); Zhang and Su (2023)
Message	52	A variety of regression analyses (e.g., ordinary least squares, negative binomial, hierarchical), multivariate analysis, statistical tests, structural equation modeling, and other analyses (e.g., correlations, netnographic, interaction analysis, content analysis) Experimental, case and field studies, exploratory	Informative, emotional, experiential, sales, and corporate social responsibility messages exhibit mixed results on engagement Narrative messages consistently demonstrate positive effects on engagement	Araujo et al. (2015); Ashley and Tuten (2015); Bharadwaj et al. (2020); Butcher and Pecot (2022); Crapa et al. (2023); Dhanesh et al. (2022); Kulkarni et al. (2020); de Vries et al. (2012); Swani et al. (2017); Veloso et al. (2023)

Note: Some studies have assessed multiple digital content elements. For example, Dhanesh et al. (2022) have examined the influence of social and message elements, while Araujo et al. (2015) have analyzed symbolic and message elements.

TABLE 2 | Digital content elements studied in relation to purchase intention and sales.

Digital content element	Frequency	Methods	Principal results	References
Visual	0	—	—	—
Auditory	0	—	—	—
Linguistic	0	—	—	—
Symbolic	1	Experimental and hierarchical regression model	Brand-related symbols: no significant effects	Wu et al. (2020)
Social	1	Experimental and structural equation modeling	Social presence: positive effects	Ang et al. (2018)
Message	7	Experimental, laboratory and field studies, structural equation modeling, statistical tests, multilevel modeling	Informative, emotional, experiential: positive effects Corporate social responsibility exhibits mixed results	Akpinar and Berger (2017); Gómez-Suárez and Veloso (2022); Han and Lee (2022); Mazerant et al. (2021); Mu et al. (2022); Tan et al. (2021), Veloso et al. (2023)

Analyzing the specific engagement objectives pursued by firms reveals distinct patterns in how various content elements influence different forms of engagement, including overall engagement, likes, comments, shares, and other behavioral engagement responses.

Visual elements (e.g., color), linguistic features, and a variety of message types increase overall engagement (Drossos et al. 2023; Kanuri et al. 2023). Linguistic features, brand-related symbols, social elements (e.g., the presence of people), and diverse messages boost likes and comments (Crapa et al. 2023; de Vries et al. 2012; Gu et al. 2023; Zhang and Su 2023). For shares, firms see better results when using linguistic elements such as stylistic features and incorporating specific message types (Deng et al. 2021; Dolan et al. 2019; ShabbirHusain et al. 2023). Across all these forms of engagement, informative, emotional, experiential, corporate social responsibility, and call-to-action messages consistently show positive effects.

Finally, visual elements (i.e., movement), symbolic elements (i.e., emojis and GIFs), social elements (i.e., the presence of people), and diverse messaging types (i.e., informative, emotional, and call to action) primarily shape other behavioral engagement responses (Tafesse 2020; Vaičiukynaitė and Gatautis 2018; Valenzuela-Gálvez et al. 2023).

Appendix C provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of the six categories of digital content elements on engagement.

3.3.2 | Influence of Content Elements on Purchase Intention and Sales

A review of the studies summarized in Table 2 reveals that the influence of content elements on purchase intention and sales has received little attention. Visual, auditory, and linguistic elements remain largely untested in empirical research, while symbolic elements have not exhibited significant effects (Wu et al. 2020). Nevertheless, existing research shows that social and message elements exert a positive influence on purchase intention and sales (Ang et al. 2018; Tan et al. 2021).

We identify patterns of digital content elements that reliably drive purchase intention and actual sales. Purchase intention depends primarily on social elements, particularly social presence; and on messages such as experiential messages (Ang et al. 2018; Gómez-Suárez and Veloso 2022). Meanwhile, actual sales respond more directly to informative and emotional messages (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Tan et al. 2021). Appendix D offers additional detailed insights.

3.3.3 | Influence of Content Elements on Brand-Related Outcomes

As shown in Table 3, research has paid limited attention to visual, auditory, and social elements in relation to brand-related outcomes. In contrast, linguistic, symbolic, and message elements have demonstrated positive effects on these outcomes (Jakic et al. 2017; Li and Lo 2015; Wu et al. 2020).

We recognize patterns in how digital content elements influence the three types of brand-related outcomes. First, symbolic elements such as brand names and emotional messaging drive outcomes related to emotions and feelings (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Dennis et al. 2014; Wu et al. 2020). Second, longer advertisements and the use of informative and emotional messages enhance outcomes related to brand knowledge and perception (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Dennis et al. 2014; Li and Lo 2015; Tan et al. 2021). Finally, specific linguistic styles, along with promotional and corporate social responsibility messages, strengthen outcomes related to predispositions and beliefs (Han

and Lee 2022; Jakic et al. 2017). Appendix E presents further detailed results.

3.3.4 | Influence of Content Elements on Consumers' Content Perceptions and Attitudes

The findings indicate that only a limited number of studies have examined how content elements enhance consumers' content perceptions and attitudes (Table 4). Among the few articles identified, visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, and message elements show a significant influence on these outcomes (Dennis et al. 2014; Kluge et al. 2013; Zhang and Du 2020), while social elements remain underexplored.

We detect distinct patterns across the three main types of consumer responses. First, hedonic perceptions improve with auditory elements, especially the presence of audio, as well as with emotional messages (Raney et al. 2003). Second, content-related perceptions increase when the content includes

TABLE 3 | Digital content elements studied in relation to brand-related outcomes.

Digital content element	Frequency	Methods	Principal results	References
Visual	0	—	—	—
Auditory	0	—	—	—
Linguistic	2	Experimental statistical tests	Linguistic elements (i.e., language complexity and stylistic elements) have positive effects	Jakic et al. (2017); Li and Lo (2015)
Symbolic	1	Experimental and hierarchical regression model	Brand-related symbols: positive effect	Wu et al. (2020)
Social	0	—	—	—
Message	7	Experimental, regression analysis, case, laboratory and field studies, statistical tests	Informative, emotional, corporate social responsibility, and sales: positive effects	Akpinar and Berger (2017); Allagui and Breslow (2016); Chandrasekaran et al. (2017); Dennis et al. (2014); Han and Lee (2022); Molina-Castillo et al. (2012); Tan et al. (2021)

TABLE 4 | Digital content elements studied in relation to consumers' content perceptions and attitudes.

Digital content element	Frequency	Methods	Principal results	References
Visual	1	Experimental	Color: mixed effects	Kluge et al. (2013)
Auditory	1	Experimental	Audio: positive effect	Raney et al. (2003)
Linguistic	1	Structural equation modeling	Technology-based elements: mentions have a positive impact and links do not exert significant influence	Zhang and Du (2020)
Symbolic	1	Experimental	Brand-related and product-related symbols: positive effects	Zhang and Patrick (2021)
Social	0	—	—	—
Message	5	Experimental, Structural equation modeling, moderation analysis	Informative and emotional: positive effects	Archer-Brown et al. (2013); Dennis et al. (2014); Kluge et al. (2013); Raney et al. (2003); Zhang and Du (2020)

Note: Some studies have assessed multiple digital content elements. For example, Kluge et al. (2013) have examined visual and message elements; Raney et al. (2003) have evaluated auditory and message elements; and Zhang and Du (2020) have analyzed both linguistic and message elements.

mentions and features informative and emotional messages, and when brands use nicknames instead of formal names (Archer-Brown et al. 2013; Zhang and Du 2020; Zhang and Patrick 2021). Finally, attitudinal responses react positively to visual elements, the presence of audio, and both informative and emotional messages (Dennis et al. 2014; Kluge et al. 2013; Raney et al. 2003). Appendix F reports more in-depth findings on this aspect.

4 | Findings and Discussion

Based on the systematic synthesis of research on digital content elements, we present an integrated summary using the TCCM framework. In the theory subsection, we review and discuss the most commonly used theoretical approaches in digital content studies. Next, we provide a classification of digital content elements to organize the fragmented terminology used to describe them. In the context subsection, we review the various digital contexts explored by researchers. Finally, we summarize the methods employed in these studies.

TABLE 5 | Frequency distribution of theories utilized more than once.

Theoretical lenses	Frequency
Elaboration likelihood model	5
Uses and gratifications	3
Consumer engagement theory	3
Heuristic-systematic model	2
Narrative transportation theory	2

4.1 | Theory

The fragmented nature of research in this domain is reflective of the fact that researchers have applied a variety of theories. A total of 39 articles reference at least one theory, identifying 30 distinct theories in total. While these theories offer valuable insights, they often focus on individual elements of digital content or their isolated effects.

Theories span areas such as communication, information processing, and elaboration (e.g., elaboration likelihood model [ELM], communication accommodation theory). Some studies use theories related to visual content (e.g., visual complexity theory), narratives (e.g., storytelling theory), and psychological or social impact (e.g., psychological motivation theory, social impact theory). Additionally, widely accepted theories in marketing research, such as uses and gratifications theory, as well as those related to engagement and social networks (e.g., customer engagement theory, social network theory), are prominent. Among these, the ELM is the most frequently cited theory in this review (Kanuri et al. 2023; ShabbirHusain et al. 2023) (Table 5).

4.2 | Characteristics: Digital Content Elements Classification

We classify digital content elements into six categories, as illustrated in Figure 2. We further divide these categories into two groups. The first refers to elements related to how content is designed by firms, that is, visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, and social elements. The second concerns message elements, which refer to what content is conveyed.

The findings indicate that analyzing content elements individually often yields mixed or inconclusive results (e.g., the effect of

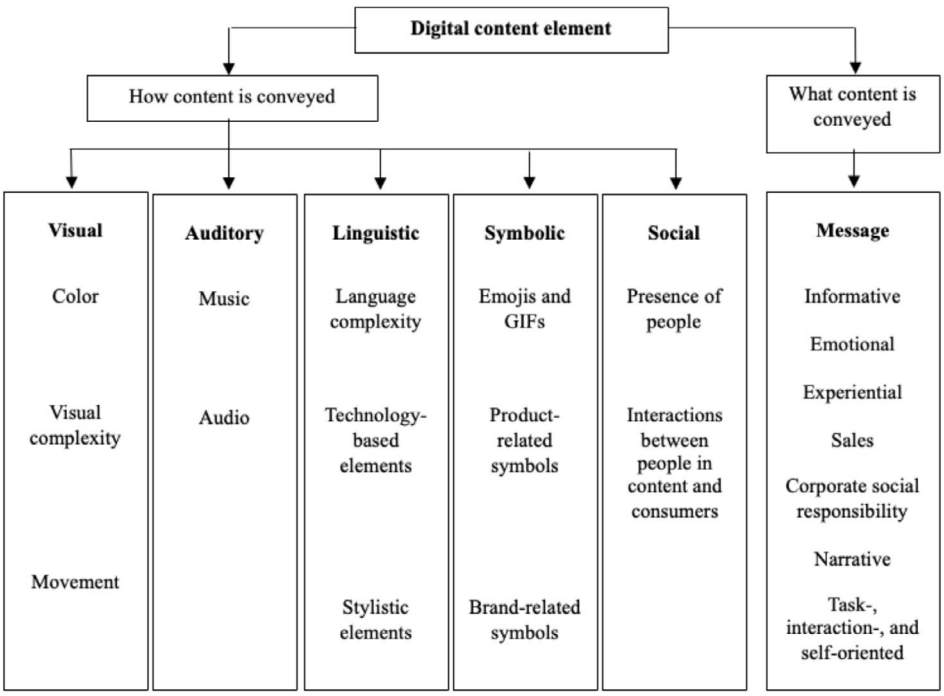

FIGURE 2 | Classification of digital content elements.

linguistic elements on engagement). These inconsistencies likely arise from the inherently interactive nature of digital content—digital elements rarely function in isolation; instead, they often co-occur with other elements that collectively shape consumer responses. In this way, combining content rich in linguistic elements with rapid audio or complex visuals may make processing more difficult, potentially reducing comprehension and engagement. Conversely, pairing the same content with simple images in a slower-paced context can increase its effectiveness.

4.3 | Context

To analyze the context of digital content elements, we first focus on the various digital platforms used for analysis. Next, we classify the studies based on whether they focus on business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) contexts.

Researchers have most frequently focused on social media platforms, with 65 studies examining this area. Within these studies, Facebook has been the most studied platform, followed by Twitter (now X) and Instagram. Researchers have paid limited attention to other social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Sina Weibo, Tripadvisor, and YouTube. The second-most commonly analyzed area, after social media, is digital advertising platforms, with 13 studies. This is followed by website-related research, with eight studies. Finally, four studies have involved broader investigations into digital platforms without identifying a specific one and other contexts such as emails. Some studies consider multiple contexts simultaneously.

To better understand the drivers of firms' outcomes across platforms, we examine the digital content elements that consistently contribute to positive results. Depending on the specific platform, several patterns emerge.

On social media platforms, visual elements enhance outcomes on Facebook and Instagram (Drossos et al. 2023; Overgoor et al. 2022). Linguistic elements improve firms' outcomes across most platforms, with the exception of Instagram (Antoniadis et al. 2019; Archer-Brown et al. 2013). Symbolic elements have stronger effects on X and YouTube (Deng et al. 2021). Finally, although no message type consistently drives firms' outcomes across all social media platforms, informative, emotional, and corporate social responsibility messages tend to generate the most positive effects (Crapa et al. 2023; Gu et al. 2023; Kujur and Singh 2020; Tan et al. 2021).

In digital advertising platforms, the use of visual elements (e.g., movement), linguistic features (e.g., language complexity), symbolic cues (e.g., GIFs), and informative and emotional messages contributes significantly to improved firms' outcomes (Akpinar and Berger 2017; Bruce et al. 2017; Gopinath et al. 2014).

On websites specifically, visual elements (e.g., color) and the presence of audio support positive outcomes (Kluge et al. 2013; Raney et al. 2003). More broadly, some authors have addressed digital platforms in general terms, without specifying particular ones, highlighting that brand-related symbols and the presence of people effectively enhance firms' outcomes (Ang et al. 2018; Dennis et al. 2014; Zhang and Patrick 2021). Informative and emotional messages consistently emerge as key drivers of effectiveness across these diverse digital contexts (Dennis et al. 2014).

Among the 85 studies analyzed, 75 examine the effects of digital content elements on consumers, 7 focus on a B2B context, and 3 compare both contexts, highlighting similarities and differences in their effects across these domains.

In the B2B context, the limited and inconsistent body of research prevents the identification of clear patterns regarding consumer engagement—the only outcome examined to date (Balaji et al. 2023; Meire et al. 2022; Rooderkerk and Pauwels 2016). When comparing B2B and B2C contexts, findings suggest that technology-based elements (e.g., mentions) and informative and emotional messages influence customer-perceived value (Zhang and Du 2020). Although some studies note differences in how firms use these elements across B2B and B2C contexts, they do not empirically test their actual effects (Kwon et al. 2022; Swani et al. 2014).

4.4 | Methods

The studies included in our SLR employ a range of methodological approaches. Quantitative methods are the most common, accounting for approximately 74% of the studies, followed by mixed methods (17%), exploratory approaches (7%), and case studies (2%). Table 6 provides an overview of the methodologies used in the analyzed studies.

Regarding dependent variables, most quantitative methods use regression analyses to examine the effects of digital content elements on engagement (Table 1). However, researchers more often rely on experimental designs to analyze outcomes such as purchase intention and sales (Table 2), brand-related outcomes (Table 3), and consumers' content perceptions and attitudes (Table 4). Some studies also apply structural equation modeling, analysis of variance, and other statistical tests as alternative methodological approaches.

The predominance of quantitative methodologies reflects a strong emphasis on numerical and statistical techniques in digital content research. While these approaches enhance comparability and generalizability, they also raise concerns about measurement bias. Quantitative methods often depend on predefined constructs and standardized tools, which may fail to capture the complex and context-dependent nature of consumer behavior (Woodside 2013). As a result, researchers may prioritize what is easily measurable over what is truly meaningful.

TABLE 6 | Frequency distribution of studies' methodological approaches.

Methodological approaches	Frequency
Quantitative	63
Mixed methods	14
Exploratory	6
Case studies	2

The limited use of qualitative and mixed methods may unintentionally constrain theoretical advancement and restrict insights into multidimensional contexts (Fiss 2007). These trends highlight the need for greater methodological diversity to reduce measurement bias and support a more comprehensive understanding of digital content.

5 | Future Research Agenda

In light of the findings, the SLR identifies numerous research opportunities in the areas of theory, characteristics, context, and methods related to digital content used by firms.

5.1 | Theory

Most existing theories overlook the synergy among various digital content elements, and few studies address this convergence from a theoretical perspective. We propose a holistic approach grounded in multimodality theory that considers the interactions between multiple content elements. This approach does not replace the theoretical perspectives identified in the SLR, but complements them by providing a broader lens through which to understand the combined effects of digital content elements across diverse contexts through multimodality theory as an integrative conceptual framework.

Future research should build upon this theory to examine how different content elements interact to influence communication outcomes (Grewal et al. 2022; Kress 2010). Multimodality broadens the scope of theories traditionally focused on individual content elements, such as visual complexity theory (visual), communication accommodation theory (linguistic), visual rhetoric theory (symbolic), social impact theory (social), and storytelling theory (message). It demonstrates that the effect of each individual element depends not only on its intrinsic properties but also on how it interacts with other co-present elements. Furthermore, unlike cross-element theories that typically examine pairwise relationships, multimodality accounts for the dynamic interplay among all content elements simultaneously. These interdependencies produce cumulative, emergent effects that ultimately shape firms' outcomes. By emphasizing how meaning emerges from the combination of multiple semiotic resources, multimodality theory provides valuable insights into the complexity of digital communication.

For instance, the ELM identifies two primary routes to persuasion: central and peripheral. Multimodality offers a framework for integrating both routes, addressing recent calls to adapt the ELM to modern multimodal environments, where consumers process information through multiple channels at once (Kitchen et al. 2014).

5.2 | Characteristics

The findings identify six categories of content elements that firms use and should consider when designing effective digital content marketing. These categories underscore the multimodal nature of digital content, encompassing a diverse array of elements. Future research should explore more specific terminologies of each group to thoroughly examine each content element.

Our analysis also shows that content elements have received unequal attention. Therefore, future lines of research should focus on intensifying the analysis of content elements that have garnered comparatively less consideration, such as auditory aspects, in order to understand their influence on different outcomes. Additionally, it is crucial to incorporate new content elements of digital platforms as they emerge.

Table 7 presents a set of refined future RQs organized by their theoretical and managerial relevance across five categories, ranging from "very high" to "very low". Theoretical questions ranked with very high priority address well-defined research gaps or underexplored areas and contribute to advancing the multimodal, holistic framework proposed in this manuscript. Managerial questions ranked as high priority are those with strong practical applicability and offer actionable insights for firms aiming to improve their outcomes.

Building on these questions, we advance theoretical propositions that both guide empirical testing and support theory development (Paul 2025). These propositions highlight the joint effects of existing digital content elements on firms' outcomes and offer a basis for integrating emerging elements into the multimodal framework.

Proposition 1. *Digital content elements (*i.e., *visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, social, and message) interact within a multimodal framework, where specific combinations improve firms' outcomes.*

Proposition 2. *Emerging digital content elements can be classified and integrated into the multimodal framework, allowing researchers to examine their interactions with established elements and predict their joint impact on firms' outcomes.*

5.3 | Context

In the current context of research on digital content elements, scholars have predominantly focused on social media platforms, with Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram receiving the most attention. However, the digital landscape continues to evolve, as new platforms and technologies rapidly gain popularity. Future research should consider less-explored social media platforms, such as TikTok, with particular attention to the distinct characteristics of their video formats. Additionally, studies could examine the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI)-based applications such as Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT) in content generation within firms (Paul and Menzies 2023; Shwedeh 2024b), as well as the integration of digital content into the physical environment through augmented reality and metaverse (Patil et al. 2025; Paul, Ueno, et al. 2024).

The findings also show that researchers have widely analyzed the B2C context, whereas the B2B context has received less attention, with only three articles comparing both contexts.

TABLE 7 | Proposed future research agenda on digital content elements.

Future research questions	Theoretical and managerial priority
Combining digital content elements	
Theoretical questions:	
How do different digital content elements interact to jointly influence firms' outcomes?	Very high
How can researchers theoretically model the interactions among visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, social, and message elements within the multimodal framework?	Very high
Managerial question:	
How can firms most effectively combine different digital content elements to maximize their outcomes?	Very high
Emerging new digital content elements	
Theoretical questions:	
How can researchers identify newly emerging digital content elements?	Very high
How can researchers classify and integrate newly emerging digital content elements theoretically within the multimodal framework?	Very high
Managerial question:	
How can firms strategically introduce new and diverse content elements to improve their outcomes?	Very high
Improving firms' outcomes	
Theoretical questions:	
How do sales respond to combinations of digital content elements?	Very high
How do engagement, brand-related outcomes, and consumers' content perceptions and attitudes respond to combinations of digital content elements?	High
Managerial questions:	
How can firms improve sales through specific combinations of digital content elements?	Very high
How can firms improve engagement, brand-related outcomes, and consumers' content perceptions and attitudes through specific combinations of digital content elements?	High
Combining visual elements	
Theoretical question:	
How do visual elements, such as color, visual complexity, and movement, interact to influence firms' outcomes?	Medium
Managerial question:	
What are the most effective combinations of visual elements to improve firms' outcomes?	Medium
Combining auditory elements	
Theoretical question:	
How do auditory elements, such as music and voice, interact to influence firms' outcomes?	Medium
Managerial question:	
What are the most effective combinations of auditory elements to improve firms' outcomes?	Medium
Combining social elements	
Theoretical question:	
How do different types of social interactions between people in content and consumers (e.g., greeting, smiling) interact to influence firms' outcomes?	Medium
Managerial question:	
What are the most effective combinations of social interactions between people in content and consumers to improve firms' outcomes?	Medium
Combining linguistic elements	
Theoretical question:	
How do linguistic elements, such as language complexity, technology-based elements, and stylistic elements, interact to influence firms' outcomes?	Low

(Continues)

TABLE 7 | (Continued)

Future research questions	Theoretical and managerial priority
Managerial question:	
What are the most effective combinations of linguistic elements to improve firms' outcomes?	Low
Combining symbolic elements	
Theoretical question:	
How do symbolic elements, such as emojis, and GIFs, interact to influence firms' outcomes?	Low
Managerial question:	
What are the most effective combinations of symbolic elements to improve firms' outcomes?	Low
Combining message elements	
Theoretical question:	
How do message elements (i.e., informative; emotional; experiential; sales; corporate social responsibility; narrative; task-, interaction-, and self-oriented) interact to influence firms' outcomes?	Very low
Managerial question:	
What are the most effective combinations of message elements to improve firms' outcomes?	Very low

Considering that these contexts may differ in how digital content elements influence various outcomes, future research should address this gap. Future research could examine content generated by other types of organizations, such as government agencies, which increasingly seek to engage more effectively with their constituents by implementing smart initiatives through digital platforms (Alzoubi et al. 2025).

5.4 | Methods

The findings demonstrate that most applied methodologies primarily examine the linear effects of digital content elements on various variables. Surprisingly, we have not found any studies analyzing complex causal relationships among multiple digital content elements.

Future research could benefit from employing advanced methods, such as tree-based models or fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), to better capture the complex, nonlinear nature of digital content effectiveness. These approaches move beyond simple linear models and isolating effects by focusing on how combinations of content elements jointly influence outcomes. For instance, tree-based models (e.g., decision trees, random forests) could reveal that high engagement arises specifically when music, the presence of people, and emotional messaging are combined, highlighting how certain content elements only become effective under specific conditions. Similarly, fsQCA allows for multiple pathways to success, acknowledging that different combinations can achieve similar outcomes. For example, it could identify a particular configuration of conditions that employs cool colors, emoji use, and stylistic linguistic elements, as well as another configuration that includes the presence of people and experiential messages. Both configurations consistently lead to high purchase intentions, even if none of these elements alone has a strong effect.

Figure 3 presents our conceptual framework, which illustrates the integrative role of the theory of multimodality.

6 | Conclusions

Digital content is not only widespread but also fundamental in the realm of marketing. However, the extensive and unrestricted use of its theoretical underpinning and of related terminology has led to semantic confusion and conceptual vagueness, making it difficult to understand the unique characteristics of different types of firm content.

In response to this challenge, we rigorously analyzed existing research on digital content from a marketing perspective using the TCCM protocol. This provides firms with a structured framework to effectively navigate the diverse digital content platforms.

6.1 | Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

This study makes three significant theoretical and methodological contributions to digital content marketing.

First, it proposes a classification of digital content elements, which encompasses six categories: visual, auditory, linguistic, symbolic, social, and message. This classification provides a taxonomy and enhances the theoretical understanding of firm-related digital content elements, helping to clarify the fragmented body of existing research from a conceptual perspective. Furthermore, we identify more specific features within each category (e.g., colors in visual elements). This comprehensive overview captures the current state of research on digital content and highlights the vast diversity of elements available to firms.

Second, the study highlights the main outcomes influenced by digital content elements—namely, engagement, purchase intention and sales, brand-related outcomes, and consumers' content perceptions and attitudes. This contributes to the field by clarifying the distinct influence patterns these elements exert on each outcome. In addition, we propose a conceptual framework grounded in multimodality theory that integrates relevant theoretical perspectives. This framework captures the combined effects of digital content elements on firms' outcomes, offering a holistic perspective.

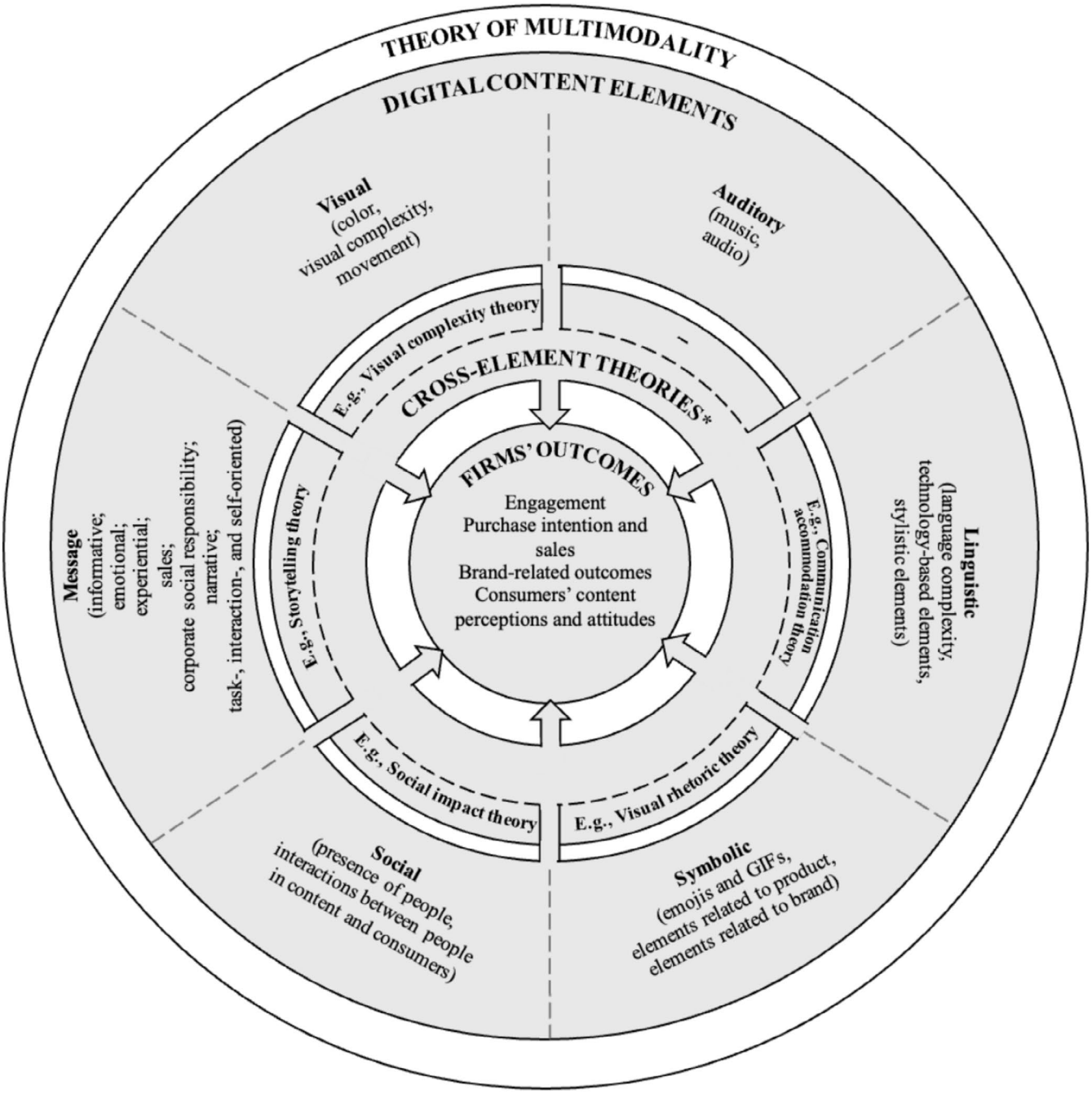

FIGURE 3 | Conceptual framework.

Note: The abbreviation "e.g." is used here to introduce examples of theories focused on individual content elements, such as visual complexity theory for visual elements. *Cross-element theories refer to those that examine pairwise relationships between digital content elements: ELM, process model of communication, social presence theory, uses and gratifications theory, social network theory, psychological motivation theory, speech act theory, persuasion knowledge, and narrative transportation theory.

Third, this study offers a methodological contribution by applying a structured and transparent approach to reviewing the literature on digital content marketing. Using the TCCM protocol, the review systematically analyzes 85 peer-reviewed articles, providing a replicable process for mapping and synthesizing fragmented research. This protocol enables a multidimensional examination of the field, going beyond thematic categorization to include theoretical foundations, content characteristics, contextual factors, and methodological approaches. By organizing digital content elements across six categories and linking them to specific outcomes, the study enhances the rigor and clarity of literature analysis. This methodological approach serves as a valuable reference for future systematic reviews in digital marketing and related disciplines, particularly in emerging or interdisciplinary research areas.

6.2 | Managerial Implications

Drawing on our findings, we provide the following checklist to help managers design high-value digital content by strategically selecting and combining content elements.

1. Match content elements to the intended outcome.

Each content element contributes differently depending on the outcome the firm is seeking. For instance, incorporating brand-related symbols has been shown to effectively enhance brand emotion (Wu et al. 2020), but it has no significant effect on comments and a negative effect on likes (Swani and Milne 2017). Similarly, the presence of people in content can positively influence purchase intentions (Ang et al. 2018), but it may have no significant—or even negative—effects on engagement (Zhang and Su 2023). Managers should therefore define their main objectives and then select content elements accordingly.

2. Combine multiple content elements to increase effectiveness.

Using a single type of element (e.g., informative messages) often results in limited impact. To improve effectiveness, it is advisable for firms to take advantage of the multimodal capabilities of digital platforms by combining various elements, such as messages and social elements, to create more salient content. For example, previous studies have shown that informative messages may have positive, neutral, or even negative effects on engagement (Butcher and Pecot 2022; de Vries et al. 2012; Gopinath et al. 2014). Incorporating social elements (e.g., the presence of people) into these messages may enhance their effectiveness by strengthening their relational appeal.

3. Align digital content elements with both the digital platform and the business model.

Effective content design requires alignment with the characteristics of platforms. For example, TikTok and Instagram, typically used in B2C contexts, favor emotionally driven messages, visually appealing aesthetics, and music-driven content. In contrast, LinkedIn and X, which are more commonly used in B2B settings, prioritize linguistic clarity and informative messages. Firms should select platforms that align with their business model and tailor their content elements accordingly, ensuring that both the platform's characteristics and the strategic goals of the business are taken into account.

4. Interpret B2C-based insights with caution in B2B contexts.

The contrast between B2C and B2B content strategies highlights a broader imbalance in both academic research and practical guidance. Most existing studies and recommendations focus on B2C contexts, leaving B2B contexts relatively underexplored. Consequently, managers in B2B environments should interpret these findings with caution and validate their effectiveness through empirical testing. To ensure content resonates with their specific audience, B2B firms should implement techniques such as A/B testing or feedback loops to identify what works best.

5. Be cautious with underexplored content elements.

When integrating emerging or underexplored content elements into marketing strategies, managers should proceed with caution. Because clear evidence does not exist regarding their impact on key outcomes, such as sales and brand aspects, testing these elements incrementally is advisable. A data-driven, experimental approach ensures innovation without compromising performance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix A:** Digital content terminology. **Appendix B:** Studies evaluation based on Joanna Briggs Institute's Critical Appraisal. **Appendix C:** Influence of digital content elements on engagement. **Appendix D:** Influence of digital content elements on purchase intention and sales. **Appendix E:** Influence of digital content elements on brand-related outcomes. **Appendix F:** Influence of digital content elements on consumers' content perceptions and attitudes.