



Comparative Analysis of SEO and SEA Strategy Effectiveness in Building Competitive Advantage in International Markets

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Abstract

Search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine advertising (SEA) are usually compared as if one channel were durably superior to the other. This review argues that the durable question is not which channel wins but which channel posture fits a given international market situation, and it offers two authorial instruments to answer it. The first is a comparative matrix that scores SEO against SEA across six recognized decision axes: time horizon, cost structure, funnel and intent fit, click share and visibility, attribution measurability, and volatility and risk. The second is a four-class taxonomy of international market-entry situations, Beachhead Entry, Compounding Consolidation, Contested High-Volatility, and Multi-Market Rollout, each mapped to a recommended channel posture. Both instruments are grounded in a small core of studies read in full text and are populated with verified quantitative evidence: a reported cost crossover near 6.33 months between one-time SEO investment and recurring paid spend, organic click shares reaching 66% of total clicks in the studied campaigns, a controlled experiment in which 99.5% of brand paid-search clicks were retained by organic listings when paid advertising was switched off, and survey evidence that organic marketing correlates more strongly with business performance than paid, with the two strongest when coordinated. Read through the resource-based view of competitive advantage, SEO behaves as an asset that compounds toward an inimitable position, whereas SEA behaves as rented visibility that resets when spend stops. The synthesis reframes the two channels as complements sequenced by market maturity, and it names six practitioner-grounded gaps, including cross-market intent divergence and the erosion of organic visibility by search-result features, that current comparisons underplay.

Keywords: Search Engine Optimization, Search Engine Advertising, Paid Search, Competitive Advantage, International Markets, Channel Strategy, Resource-Based View, Cost per Acquisition, Attribution, Digital Marketing Strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Every company that expands across borders confronts the same allocation question at the search layer: how much of a finite acquisition budget belongs in search engine optimization (SEO), the discipline of earning organic visibility, and how much belongs in search engine advertising (SEA), the practice of buying paid placement through auctions such as Google Ads. The question looks tactical. It is strategic. The two channels differ not only in cost but in the kind of market position they build, and the wrong split can leave a firm renting attention indefinitely in a market where a competitor is quietly compounding an organic asset that cannot be bought back.

This article is written from the vantage point of a practitioner

who has made that allocation decision repeatedly and at scale. Over fourteen years the author has built structured methodologies for search performance and run SEO and paid-search programs for clients across Europe, the United States, Brazil, and Southeast Asia, and has trained more than 7,000 professionals in the two disciplines. Recognized as one of the leading experts in the field, a standing that rests on methods other teams adopted rather than on titles, the author was selected in April 2018 by Solocal Group, then France's largest provider of digital services to small and medium enterprises, to evaluate five of its internal SEO specialists at its Angoulême headquarters; out of that engagement came a Commercial SEO Literacy Model that standardized how large commercial teams read and sold search performance. That experience frames the argument here: the SEO-versus-SEA

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decision fails most often not because the analysis is hard but because the people allocating budget cannot read the two channels on the same economic terms.

The contribution of this review is deliberately structural rather than encyclopedic. It offers two instruments an operator can act on. The first is a comparative matrix (Table 1) that evaluates SEO and SEA across six decision axes drawn from established constructs, the marketing funnel and search intent, unit economics, attribution theory, and the resource-based view of competitive advantage, so that the two channels are judged on shared, cited criteria rather than folklore. The second is a taxonomy (Figure 3) of four international market-entry situations, each mapped to a recommended channel posture and each illustrated with the author's field practice. Neither instrument is claimed as the first or the only such framework; the value is in the assembly, which turns a scattered comparative literature into a single decision aid for cross-border operators.

The remainder proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets the conceptual foundations and defines the axes. Section 3 states the light review method and its limits. Section 4 presents the comparative matrix and then works through the four market-entry archetypes. Section 5 synthesizes the findings around the durability of competitive advantage and the organizational literacy that the allocation decision presupposes. Section 6 names six open challenges. Section 7 concludes.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

SEO and SEA both intercept demand at the moment a user queries a search engine, but they capitalize that interception differently. SEA buys a ranked slot for the duration of a paid campaign; the placement is immediate, controllable, and disappears the instant the budget stops. SEO earns a ranked slot through technical health, content relevance, and accumulated authority; the placement is slow to build, only partly controllable, and persists after active work pauses. Okutan (2025) frames the pair as complementary layers of the same search-marketing system rather than substitutes, and the multi-factor character of the organic layer is visible in decision-analytic work: Tsuei et al. (2020) weight the drivers of ranking and find meta tags (0.189), keywords (0.185), and site design (0.179) carry the most influence among six criteria, evidence that organic position is an engineered, multi-input asset rather than a single lever.

The strategic difference between the channels is best read through the resource-based view of the firm. Barney (1991) holds that a sustained competitive advantage arises from resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and organizationally exploited. Paid search fails the imitability test by construction: any competitor with a budget can occupy the same auction tomorrow, so SEA buys parity, not advantage, and the parity evaporates with the invoice.

Organic authority, by contrast, accumulates slowly, is costly for rivals to replicate, and, once built, keeps returning traffic at near-zero marginal cost. In resource-based terms SEO is a candidate for durable advantage while SEA is an operating expense that purchases temporary reach. This asymmetry, not any single performance number, is the analytical spine of the comparison that follows.

The channels also map differently onto the purchase funnel. Paid search excels at the lower funnel, where transactional intent is explicit and a controllable slot converts immediately; organic search covers the fuller journey from informational to transactional intent and compounds brand exposure along the way. On unit economics, the relevant contrast is between a recurring cost per click that rises with auction competition and an amortizing investment whose marginal cost per visit falls as authority builds, the CapEx-versus-OpEx analogy made concrete in Section 4. The recurring side of that contrast is now a very large market and an increasingly automated one: global pay-per-click investment runs to well over one hundred billion dollars a year, and bid setting has shifted from manual control to algorithmic optimization (Nuara et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2021), which lowers management cost but does nothing to change the underlying fact that the spend stops working the moment it stops. Paid search also carries brand consequences that a pure click metric misses: digital-marketing exposure moves purchase intention, an effect moderated by brand equity (Alwan & Alshurideh, 2022), and paid search and display influence firm performance and firm value in ways that differ from offline advertising (Bayer et al., 2020). Attribution theory sharpens the picture: last-click accounting, still the industry default, systematically over-credits the paid click that closes a journey and under-credits the organic and brand exposure that opened it (Ji & Wang, 2017), a measurement bias with direct budget consequences that Section 6 revisits.

Prior comparisons tend to answer the SEO-versus-SEA question with a single verdict or a feature checklist. This review refuses the single verdict. It treats effectiveness as conditional on market situation, and it organizes the evidence around a decision that an international operator actually faces, entering or scaling a specific market, rather than around an abstract ranking of channels. The two instruments below are the mechanism for that conditional answer.

METHOD

This is a narrative, analytical review with a light and honest search protocol, not a systematic review. A broad candidate pool was retrieved from OpenAlex (which aggregates Crossref, PubMed, and other indexes) using eight query families spanning organic-versus-paid effectiveness, search-marketing strategy and competitive advantage, unit economics and attribution, cross-border and international

search marketing, and the resource-based view. The pool was screened against four inclusion criteria: (1) peer-reviewed or authoritative industry research on SEO, SEA/PPC, or search-channel strategy; (2) evidence of comparative or channel-effectiveness outcomes (click-through, cost per acquisition, ROI, conversion, or strategic outcome) rather than pure tutorial material; (3) publication between 2015 and 2026, with foundational strategy constructs exempt; and (4) English language with retrievable metadata and abstract. Screening identified 320 records, of which 56 passed the relevance review and 30 were retained for close reading, with 28 sources cited here.

A core of twelve studies was examined in full text; the remaining studies were read at the level of their reported results and are cited for breadth and context. Any

classification of an abstract-level study into the taxonomy therefore rests on its reported results and carries some uncertainty. This is a normal bound on a narrative review rather than a defect, and it is stated here so the reader can weight the evidence accordingly. Numbers reported from the author's own consulting practice are identified as such and are offered as field illustration, not as controlled evidence.

ANALYTICAL BODY

The Comparative Baseline

Table 1 scores the two channels across the six decision axes. Cells carry a directional verdict and, where the core studies supply one, a verified number. The table is the compact form of the argument; the prose that follows reads the axes that matter most for cross-border strategy.

Table 1. Comparative matrix: SEO versus SEA across six decision axes

Decision axis (construct)	SEO (organic)	SEA (paid search)	Verified anchor
Time horizon to effect	Slow ramp, compounding; organic traffic surpassed paid within ~3 months and grew ~31.4% over four months in a monitored campaign	Immediate on activation; live within hours	Kritzinger & Weideman (2015)
Cost structure	Asset-like, largely one-time then amortizing; near-zero marginal cost per visit at scale	Recurring pay-per-click; cost scales with volume and competition; CPC R1.99 vs R0.48 organic	Kritzinger & Weideman (2015, 2017)
Durability of advantage (VRIO)	High; inimitable authority asset, persists after active work	Low; parity resets when spend stops; 99.5% of brand paid clicks retained organically when paid switched off	Barney (1991); Blake et al. (2015)
Funnel / intent fit	Full journey, informational to transactional; 66% of total clicks in studied campaigns	Lower funnel, transactional; controllable slot	Kritzinger & Weideman (2017)
Click share & effectiveness	66% of measured clicks; lower bounce (23.59%) and lower conversion (0.38%) in the monitored campaign; rated above paid on CTR/ROI in compiled industry benchmarks	34% of measured clicks; higher bounce (29.61%) but higher conversion (0.6%) in that campaign; rated below organic in compiled benchmarks	Kritzinger & Weideman (2017); compiled benchmarks in Marchuk & Kushnir (2025)
Attribution & volatility	Lagged, multi-touch, harder to credit; exposed to algorithm and SERP-feature change	Precise, near-real-time, last-click; exposed to CPC inflation and auction competition	Ji & Wang (2017); Gleason et al. (2023)

Two axes deserve emphasis because they drive the cross-border decision.

Cost structure and the crossover. The clearest way to see the CapEx-versus-OpEx difference is to plot cumulative cost. In the campaign studied by Kritzinger and Weideman (2015), SEO required a one-time investment of about R19,000 while paid search cost roughly R3,000 per month; the two lines cross near 6.33 months, after which every additional month favors the organic asset (Figure 1). In the same research program the cost per click was R0.48 for organic against R1.99 for paid, roughly four times lower, and the cost per

acquisition was R127.18 for SEO against R333.43 for paid search (Kritzinger & Weideman, 2017). These are single-campaign figures, not universal constants, and the argument does not rest on any one of them: the direction they describe, a front-loaded asset overtaking a recurring expense, is corroborated by compiled industry benchmarks that rate organic returns above paid (Marchuk & Kushnir, 2025) and by the positive search-optimization returns documented in a retail-positioning study (Linares-Cazola & Pantigoso-Leython, 2025). It is exactly the shape the resource-based reading predicts.

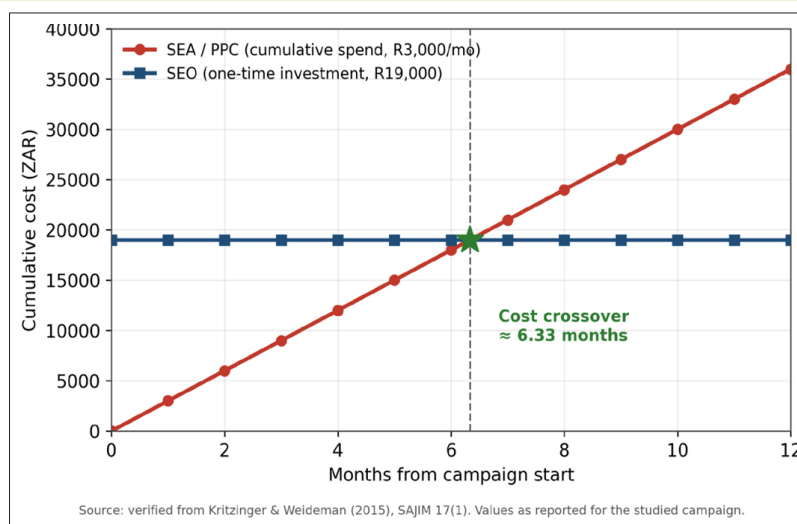


Figure 1. Cost-structure crossover between one-time SEO investment and recurring paid search. Cumulative cost lines cross near 6.33 months, after which the organic asset dominates on cost. Values verified from Kritzing and Weideman (2015).

Durability and the cannibalization finding. The most consequential number for the competitive-advantage argument comes from a large controlled experiment. Blake, Nosko, and Tadelis (2015) switched off brand-keyword paid search and found that 99.5% of the forgone paid clicks were simply recaptured by the firm's own organic listings; across the non-brand regime, paid-search returns were sharply negative, on the order of -63%, and the entire paid-search program added only about 0.66% to sales, with the real incremental effect concentrated among infrequent and new users. The lesson is not that paid search is worthless but that its incremental value is narrow and often masked by attribution that credits it for demand the organic asset already owned.

Figure 2 sets the two channels' measured outcomes from the monitored campaign side by side, and the picture is deliberately mixed. Kritzing and Weideman (2017) found paid search converting better than organic (0.6% vs 0.38%), yet organic carried the lower bounce rate (23.59% vs 29.61%) and a cost per click roughly four times lower, so no single metric crowns a winner. Compiled industry benchmarks point the other way on click-through and return, rating organic above paid (Marchuk & Kushnir, 2025). A review that

flattened these into a single verdict would misrepresent the evidence. The honest reading is that channel effectiveness is conditional, which is precisely why the decision belongs to a situational taxonomy rather than to a universal ranking.

The broader comparative literature corroborates the conditional reading rather than resolving it into a universal winner. Studies of e-marketing firms report SEO improving advertising outcomes and paid search attracting customers in the same market context (Khraim, 2015; Khraim & Alkrableih, 2015), and ROI studies confirm that well-run paid campaigns lift business profitability (Almestarihi et al., 2024), yet the size of the paid effect depends heavily on execution and on how users treat the paid slot itself. Two behavioral findings qualify the paid numbers. Users who recognize a result as an advertisement select it differently from an organic result, so a raw paid click-through figure conflates reach with trust (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2021); and consumer responses vary systematically with how a platform structures its paid ad sets, so paid effectiveness is partly a property of the platform's design rather than of the advertiser's offer (Cheng & Zhu, 2025). These qualifications do not overturn the comparison; they explain why single-campaign numbers scatter and why the durable question is situational.

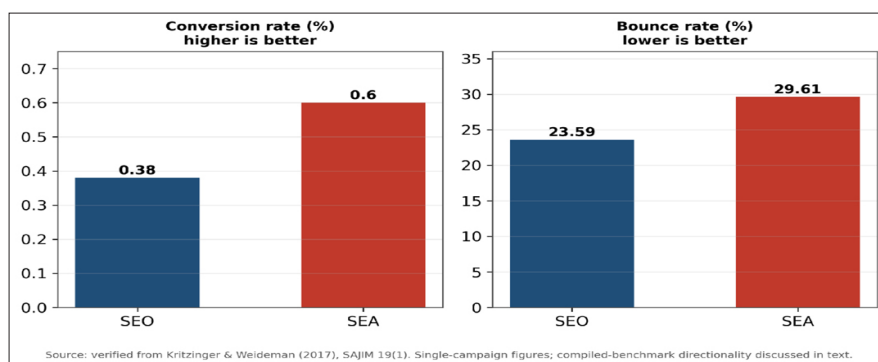


Figure 2. Measured channel outcomes from a single monitored campaign: conversion rate and bounce rate for SEO versus SEA (lower bounce is better). Values verified from Kritzing and Weideman (2017); compiled-benchmark directionality is discussed in the text.

The four situations below, visualized in Figure 3, structure the rest of this section. Each pairs a market condition with a recommended channel posture and an objective, and each is illustrated with the author's field practice. The archetypes

are analytical lenses rather than mutually exclusive boxes; a real market can be, for instance, both contested and part of a multi-market rollout, in which case the dominant binding constraint selects the posture.

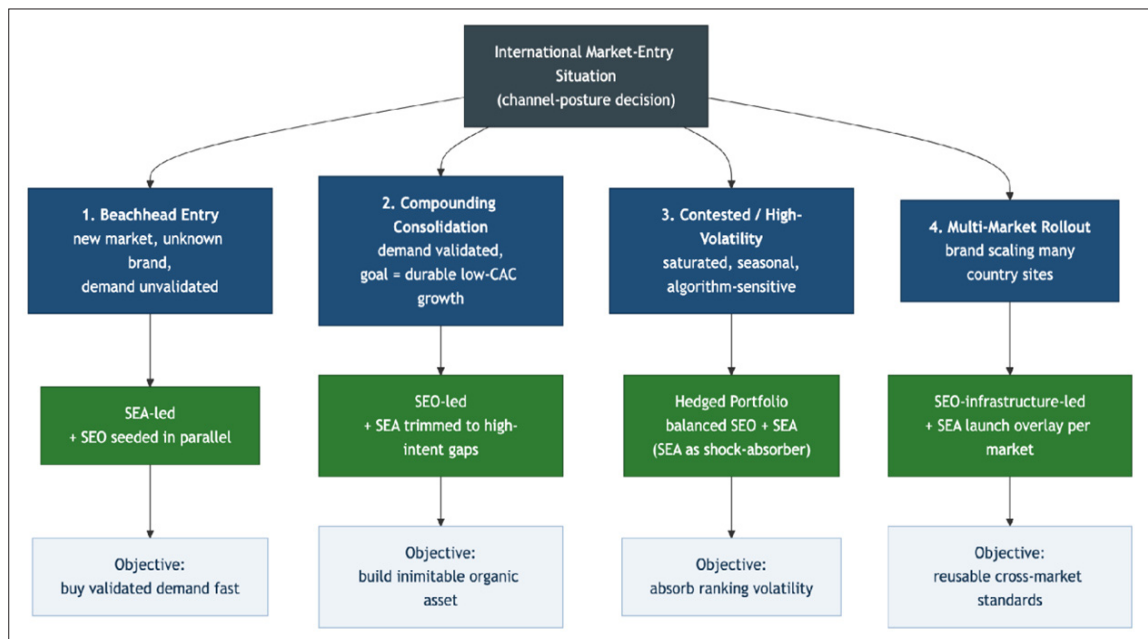


Figure 3. Authorial taxonomy of four international market-entry situations mapped to recommended SEO/SEA channel postures.

Archetype 1: Beachhead Entry

When a firm enters a market where its brand is unknown and demand is unvalidated, the binding constraint is learning speed, not cost efficiency. Here SEA leads. Paid search buys immediate lower-funnel presence and, in the same motion, buys data: which queries convert, which offers resonate, which locales respond, all within days rather than the months organic authority requires. The recommended posture is SEA-led with SEO seeded in parallel, so that the organic asset begins compounding while paid search validates the market. The caution, drawn from Blake et al. (2015), is to instrument the paid program for incrementality from the outset; a beachhead campaign that measures itself on last-click conversions will over-report its own contribution and delay the shift to the cheaper organic asset. The keyword portfolio matters here as much as the budget: generic keywords buy genuinely new demand while branded keywords largely recapture demand a firm would win organically, so a well-designed entry weights spend toward the former (Tunuguntla et al., 2023), the operational corollary of the brand-click cannibalization result. Paid search at entry also seeds repeat behavior, not only first purchases; it can build continuous service intentions that persist into the relationship (Rezaei et al., 2024), which is part of why it earns its place at the beachhead even though it is the more expensive channel per acquisition. In the author's international consulting practice, entries of this type routinely reached a return on ad spend of five to six times on well-structured paid campaigns while the organic foundation was being laid, a pattern consistent with paid search's strength at the validated lower funnel.

Archetype 2: Compounding Consolidation

Once demand is validated and the objective shifts to durable, low-cost growth, the posture inverts to SEO-led, with paid search trimmed to the high-intent gaps organic cannot yet cover. This is where the resource-based logic pays out: the firm stops renting visibility and starts owning it. The crossover in Figure 1 marks the point at which continued reliance on paid spend becomes a strategic error rather than a tactic, because each additional month of paid-only investment forgoes the compounding return of the asset. Linares-Cazola and Pantigoso-Leython (2025) report, in a retail-positioning study, that SEO was financially viable, with an internal rate of return of 85.97% for the search-optimization investment (Alva, 2022, as cited in Linares-Cazola & Pantigoso-Leython, 2025), and that the strongest-performing brand ran the most developed keyword footprint, evidence that the organic asset, once mature, both positions the brand and pays for itself. In the author's engagements, consolidation-stage clients achieved organic-traffic gains of roughly 200% to 300% as the asset matured, the operational counterpart to the compounding curve.

Archetype 3: Contested / High-Volatility Market

Some markets are saturated, seasonal, and acutely sensitive to algorithm change. Here neither pure posture is prudent, and the recommendation is a hedged portfolio: a durable SEO core for the compounding advantage, with paid search held as a shock absorber that can be scaled up when a ranking update or a seasonal spike disturbs organic visibility. The volatility is not hypothetical. Gleason et al. (2023) assemble

evidence of how changes to the search-results page itself redistribute clicks: a natural experiment around the launch of a dedicated results component shifted paid clicks up by 65% and organic clicks down by 55% (Edelman & Lai, 2016, as cited in Gleason et al., 2023), and answer-style components have been found to account for 56% of “good abandonments” where users never click through at all (Williams et al., 2016, as cited in Gleason et al., 2023). A firm whose entire visibility rests on organic listings is exposed to exactly this kind of platform-driven redistribution; a maintained paid capability is the hedge that keeps the funnel open while the organic position recovers. Competitive dynamics compound the volatility, because rivals in a contested market cluster into strategic groups whose bidding behavior is interdependent (Nie et al., 2021); a paid hedge in such markets is not only a technical shock absorber but a competitive one, holding position when a rival group escalates its auction pressure.

Archetype 4: Multi-Market Rollout

The fourth situation is the one most distinctive to international operators: a brand scaling many country sites at once, where the strategic problem is consistency and reuse rather than any single market’s channel mix. Here the posture is SEO-infrastructure-led, shared technical standards, a common semantic architecture, and unified performance measurement across markets, with a paid-search overlay tuned to each market’s launch. The author coordinated precisely this kind of program as senior consultant at the digital agency SQLI in

2020, leading the rollout of 33 Bioderma corporate websites worldwide and defining the technical SEO guidelines, analytics protocols, and performance standards that each country followed. The multi-market case exposes a scalability asymmetry that Table 1’s per-axis view understates: paid search scales linearly, every new market is a new budget, whereas an SEO infrastructure, once built, is a reusable asset whose standards transfer across markets at low marginal cost. Cross-border research supports treating the two market types differently: Goldman et al. (2021) find that strategic orientations and digital tactics diverge between developed and emerging markets, and Tolstoy et al. (2023) show that SME market creation abroad is effectual and experimental rather than uniform, both of which argue against a single global channel template and in favor of shared infrastructure with local paid tuning. Sector evidence reinforces the point: comparative reviews of digital-marketing practice across regions, for instance tourism in the United States and Africa, document markedly different channel norms and maturity between markets (Raji et al., 2024). The choice is also not only SEO against SEA but search against adjacent channels; analytical models comparing search-engine marketing with selling through an e-commerce marketplace show that the profitability ranking of channels flips with margin and traffic assumptions (Angeloni & Rossi, 2021), which is one more reason a rollout needs a shared measurement layer rather than a fixed channel rule.

Table 2. Taxonomy of international market-entry situations and recommended channel posture

Archetype	Market situation	Recommended posture	Primary rationale	Field anchor
1. Beachhead Entry	New market, unknown brand, demand unvalidated	SEA-led; SEO seeded in parallel	Buy validated demand and learning fast; instrument for incrementality	ROAS 5–6× on structured paid entries (author practice)
2. Compounding Consolidation	Demand validated; goal = durable low-CAC growth	SEO-led; SEA trimmed to high-intent gaps	Own the inimitable asset past the ~6.33-month crossover	+200–300% organic as asset matures (author practice); SEO internal rate of return 85.97% (Alva, 2022, as cited in Linares-Cazola & Pantigoso-Leython, 2025)
3. Contested / High-Volatility	Saturated, seasonal, algorithm-sensitive	Hedged portfolio; SEA as shock absorber	Absorb ranking and SERP-feature volatility	+65% paid / –55% organic click shift on a SERP-feature launch (Edelman & Lai, 2016, as cited in Gleason et al., 2023)
4. Multi-Market Rollout	Brand scaling many country sites	SEO-infrastructure-led; SEA launch overlay per market	Reusable cross-market standards vs linear paid spend	33-site Bioderma coordination (author practice); developed vs emerging divergence (Goldman et al., 2021)

DISCUSSION

The Channels are Complements Sequenced by Maturity

The recurring error the taxonomy corrects is treating SEO and SEA as rivals to be ranked once and for all. The evidence

points the other way. Priya et al. (2026), in a survey of 200 firms, find that organic marketing correlates more strongly with business performance (0.70) than paid marketing does (0.55), and that a paid-organic interaction term adds a positive, significant increment beyond either channel alone,

direct evidence that the two work better together than apart. Industry benchmarks compiled by Marchuk and Kushnir (2025) point the same way, reporting a markedly higher combined return when the channels are coordinated rather than run in isolation. Read together with the archetypes, the pattern is a sequence rather than a choice: paid search leads at entry to buy demand and data, organic takes over at consolidation to build the durable asset, and paid returns in a hedging role where volatility demands it. The strategic advantage accrues to firms that move along this sequence deliberately, not to those that pick a side.

Competitive Advantage Lives in the Organic Asset, but only if it is Measured

The resource-based reading explains why the sequence tilts toward SEO over time, yet the cannibalization and attribution evidence explains why so many firms fail to make the shift. If last-click accounting credits paid search for conversions the organic asset already earned, as Blake et al. (2015) demonstrate for brand keywords, then the very measurement system a firm relies on will argue against building the cheaper, more durable channel. The competitive advantage is real but invisible to a last-click dashboard. This is not primarily an analytics problem; it is an organizational one.

The Literacy Layer: Why the Allocation Decision Needs Readable Economics

Here the author's own contribution to the field connects directly to the analysis. The Commercial SEO Literacy Model developed for Solocal addressed exactly the failure this review exposes: commercial teams were selling and allocating around search performance they could not read, so they defaulted to the channel whose numbers looked immediate, paid search, and underinvested in the asset whose value was lagged and multi-touch. Known for a significant contribution utilized by other professionals, that model standardized how large teams interpret channel economics, translate technical SEO metrics into business terms, and align technical and commercial functions, and it was reused across business units for several years. The generalizable point is that the SEO-versus-SEA decision is only as good as the reader making it; a firm that cannot read the compounding curve in Figure 1 will keep paying the recurring bill in Figure 1, whatever the strategy deck says. Building the interpretive capability is therefore a precondition for capturing the advantage, not a soft add-on, a view consistent with dynamic-capabilities accounts of marketing that tie performance to the firm's ability to sense and act on data (Brewis et al., 2023).

Limitations

Three bounds temper these conclusions. The quantitative anchors come from a small full-text core, several of them single-campaign case studies in one market and currency, so the specific magnitudes travel less well than the directions

they establish. Some of the effectiveness figures, such as the click-through and combined-return comparisons, are industry benchmarks compiled by the cited studies rather than those authors' own controlled measurements, and are treated here as indicative rather than definitive. The assignment of abstract-level studies to the taxonomy rests on their reported results rather than full-text reading and carries some classification uncertainty. None of these undercuts the central argument, that channel posture should track market situation, but each is a reason to validate a specific number locally before transferring it to a specific market.

OPEN CHALLENGES

Six problems recur in cross-border practice that the current comparative literature underplays. Each is stated with why it matters and a concrete first step.

- 1. Attribution across a compounding and a rented channel.** Last-click accounting structurally under-credits SEO and over-credits SEA, biasing budgets toward the rented channel (Ji & Wang, 2017; Blake et al., 2015). First step: adopt an incrementality test, holding out paid on brand terms and measuring true organic recapture, before setting the annual split.
- 2. Cross-market intent divergence.** A keyword taxonomy that converts in one market often mistranslates in another, because search intent is culturally specific; a single global keyword set silently misallocates spend. First step: validate intent per market with a short paid-search learning phase before committing organic architecture.
- 3. The organizational literacy gap.** Teams that cannot read channel economics default to the channel with the most immediate dashboard, underinvesting in the durable asset. First step: install a shared measurement vocabulary, the specific problem the Solocal literacy model was built to solve, before centralizing the budget decision.
- 4. Algorithm and SERP-feature volatility budgeting.** Firms lack a standard way to size the paid hedge against ranking and results-page volatility, which can shift a majority of clicks with no change in the firm's own site (Gleason et al., 2023). First step: reserve a defined, pre-agreed paid contingency tied to observed organic-visibility variance rather than to a fixed percentage.
- 5. Short-termism in the mid-market.** Quarterly-ROI pressure pushes smaller international entrants to over-rely on paid search and forgo the crossover, paying more in the long run for less durable positioning. First step: report the cumulative-cost crossover explicitly in the channel plan so the compounding trade-off is visible to the budget holder.
- 6. Erosion of organic click share by results-page features.** Answer boxes, platform self-preferencing,

and AI-generated result components are absorbing clicks that once reached organic listings; direct-answer components have been found to account for a majority of no-click “good abandonments” (Williams et al., 2016, as cited in Gleason et al., 2023). First step: shift part of the organic objective from ranking position to presence within these features, and monitor click-share erosion as a first-class metric.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of SEO and SEA is usually posed as a contest and resolved with a verdict. This review has argued that the verdict is the wrong deliverable. What an international operator needs is a way to match channel posture to market situation, and the two instruments offered here, a six-axis comparative matrix and a four-class taxonomy of market-entry situations, provide exactly that. Read through the resource-based view, the evidence is coherent: SEO builds an inimitable, compounding asset that carries durable competitive advantage, SEA buys fast, controllable, but rented visibility, and the firms that win coordinate the two as a maturity-sequenced portfolio rather than opposing them. The verified figures, a cost crossover near 6.33 months, organic recapturing 99.5% of brand paid clicks, and organic marketing’s stronger correlation with firm performance than paid (0.70 versus 0.55), all point in the same direction. The decision, finally, is only as good as the team that reads it, which is why the author’s work on commercial SEO literacy is not a digression from this analysis but its operational precondition. For firms building competitive advantage across international markets, the task is not to choose SEO or SEA but to sequence them, measure them honestly, and build the organizational capacity to tell the difference.

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