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# Validation of a Digital Marketing Model in the Iranian Restaurant and Fast-Food Industry (Case Study: Restaurants in Tehran)

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## Abstract

This study was conducted with the aim of validating a digital marketing model in the Iranian restaurant and fast-food industry. In terms of purpose, the study was applied; in terms of approach, it was developmental; and regarding data analysis, it employed a mixed-methods (qualitative–quantitative) design. In the qualitative phase, the statistical population consisted of a group of experts, including senior restaurant managers, university faculty members specializing in digital marketing, and marketing consultants familiar with the restaurant and fast-food industry. Accordingly, 11 experts were selected using theoretical sampling. The primary data collection tool in the qualitative phase was in-depth, unstructured interviews with the experts. The interview data were analyzed using the Grounded Theory approach. In the quantitative phase, managers of restaurants and fast-food establishments actively engaged in digital marketing in the city of Tehran were considered as the study population. Among them, 400 participants were selected as the statistical sample using non-probability convenience sampling. In this phase, a researcher-developed closed-ended questionnaire consisting of 42 items was used as the primary data collection instrument. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were examined and confirmed using various methods. For descriptive and inferential statistical analyses in the quantitative phase, SPSS and SmartPLS software were utilized. The findings led to the development of a digital marketing model for the Iranian restaurant and fast-food industry in the form of a paradigmatic model (comprising six variables and seventeen main categories). Furthermore, the proposed model was empirically tested and validated.

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Restaurant, Fast-Food Industry.

## 1. Introduction

Digital marketing has emerged as one of the most transformative developments in contemporary marketing, fundamentally altering the ways organizations communicate with customers, create value, and build sustainable competitive advantages. The rapid expansion of internet technologies, social media platforms, mobile applications, artificial intelligence, and data-driven decision-making tools has enabled organizations to move beyond traditional marketing approaches and adopt more interactive, personalized, and measurable marketing strategies (Kannan, 2017; Salmani, 2020). In today's highly competitive business environment, digital marketing is no longer regarded merely as an optional promotional tool but rather as a strategic necessity



that influences customer acquisition, customer retention, brand development, and organizational performance across industries (Hasanah, 2025; Kannan, 2017).

The restaurant and fast-food industry is among the sectors most profoundly affected by digital transformation. Changes in consumer behavior, increased smartphone penetration, the growth of online food ordering platforms, and the widespread use of social networking sites have significantly reshaped how restaurants interact with consumers. Customers increasingly rely on digital channels to search for restaurants, evaluate menus, compare alternatives, read reviews, place orders, and share experiences with others. Consequently, restaurants must develop effective digital marketing capabilities to remain competitive and relevant in an evolving marketplace (Ku, 2024; Yaiprasert & Hidayanto, 2023). The growing dependence of consumers on digital touchpoints has transformed digital marketing from a supplementary activity into a core business function for restaurant organizations.

Recent developments in hospitality and food-service industries demonstrate that digital marketing innovations can substantially improve customer engagement, service quality perceptions, and organizational outcomes. Technological innovations such as service robots, artificial intelligence applications, machine learning algorithms, and predictive analytics are increasingly being integrated into restaurant operations and marketing activities to create personalized customer experiences and improve decision-making processes (Jaiswal, 2025; Ku, 2024). Such technologies enable restaurants to better understand customer preferences, tailor marketing communications, and strengthen long-term customer relationships. As digital technologies continue to evolve, restaurants face both opportunities and challenges in effectively leveraging these tools to achieve strategic objectives.

One of the most significant advantages of digital marketing is its ability to facilitate personalized communication between organizations and consumers. Unlike traditional mass marketing approaches, digital marketing enables businesses to deliver customized messages based on individual customer preferences, behavioral patterns, and purchasing histories. Personalized marketing strategies have been shown to enhance customer satisfaction, improve engagement levels, and increase conversion rates (Behera et al., 2020; Jaiswal, 2025). In the restaurant industry, personalized recommendations, targeted promotions, and customized content can significantly influence consumer decision-making processes and strengthen customer loyalty. Consequently, understanding the mechanisms through which digital marketing contributes to customer relationship development has become an important area of academic and managerial interest.

The increasing adoption of artificial intelligence in digital marketing has further expanded opportunities for personalization and strategic optimization. Artificial intelligence-based systems can analyze large volumes of customer data, identify consumption patterns, predict future behavior, and recommend appropriate marketing interventions (Jaiswal, 2025; Yaiprasert & Hidayanto, 2023). In the context of food-service businesses, AI-driven digital marketing strategies can improve targeting accuracy, optimize promotional campaigns, and support customer retention efforts. These developments suggest that digital marketing effectiveness increasingly depends on the integration of advanced technological capabilities with strategic marketing objectives.

Social media marketing has become one of the most influential dimensions of digital marketing in the restaurant industry. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube enable restaurants to showcase products, interact with customers, share promotional content, and cultivate online communities. Visual content, customer reviews, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content significantly influence consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Research has shown that social media engagement contributes to stronger brand awareness, improved customer relationships, and enhanced business performance (Karundeng et al., 2025; Toler, 2017). Given the visually oriented nature of food products, restaurants are particularly well-positioned to benefit from social media marketing initiatives that emphasize aesthetic presentation, authenticity, and customer interaction.

Content marketing constitutes another critical component of contemporary digital marketing strategies. Effective content marketing involves creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and engaging content that attracts and retains target audiences. Rather than focusing solely on direct sales promotion, content marketing seeks to establish trust, provide useful information, and foster long-term customer relationships (Jalali & Mortzaeian, 2020; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). In restaurant settings, content related to menu innovations, food preparation processes, nutritional information, customer experiences, and



brand stories can enhance consumer engagement and strengthen brand identity. Furthermore, content marketing contributes to the development of trust-based relationships that ultimately influence customer loyalty and advocacy behaviors.

The relationship between digital content marketing and electronic word-of-mouth communication has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Digital content can stimulate customer interactions, encourage information sharing, and generate positive electronic word-of-mouth outcomes that influence broader consumer audiences (Bu et al., 2020). Electronic word-of-mouth has become particularly important in the restaurant industry because consumers frequently consult online reviews, ratings, and customer testimonials before making dining decisions. Positive online discussions can significantly enhance a restaurant's reputation, while negative reviews can adversely affect customer perceptions and purchase intentions. Therefore, effective management of electronic word-of-mouth communication represents a strategic priority for restaurant organizations.

Brand development is another area in which digital marketing plays a pivotal role. Strong brands provide competitive advantages by differentiating organizations from competitors, enhancing customer trust, and increasing perceived value. Digital marketing activities facilitate brand-building processes by creating consistent brand messages, fostering customer engagement, and supporting relationship development across multiple communication channels (Liu & Jiang, 2020; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). In highly competitive restaurant markets, where consumers often face numerous alternatives, strong brand identities can significantly influence restaurant selection decisions. Consequently, understanding how digital marketing contributes to brand strengthening is essential for both researchers and practitioners.

Ethical considerations have also become increasingly important within digital marketing environments. As organizations collect and utilize customer data, concerns regarding privacy, transparency, authenticity, and responsible communication practices have intensified. Ethical digital marketing strategies contribute to organizational credibility, customer trust, and sustainable business performance (Nakhchian et al., 2022). In restaurant businesses, ethical considerations extend to the creation of truthful advertising messages, transparent communication practices, and responsible management of customer information. Organizations that prioritize ethical principles are more likely to establish positive relationships with consumers and maintain long-term reputational advantages.

Emerging technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT) further expand the scope of digital marketing capabilities. IoT-enabled devices generate valuable customer data, facilitate real-time interactions, and support personalized service delivery (Cocco, 2017; Zadtootaghaj et al., 2019). In restaurant contexts, connected technologies can enhance customer experiences through smart ordering systems, personalized recommendations, and data-driven service improvements. These technological developments illustrate the increasingly interconnected nature of digital marketing ecosystems and highlight the importance of integrating technological innovation into marketing strategies.

The effectiveness of digital marketing is also closely associated with customer experience management. Online customer experiences influence perceptions of service quality, trust, satisfaction, and purchase intentions. Positive digital experiences encourage customer engagement and repeat patronage, whereas negative experiences may discourage future interactions (Micu et al., 2019). For restaurants, managing digital customer experiences involves optimizing websites, maintaining active social media presence, facilitating seamless online ordering processes, and ensuring consistent communication across digital channels. These efforts contribute to customer satisfaction and organizational performance.

In addition to technological and customer-related factors, organizational factors play a crucial role in successful digital marketing implementation. Management commitment, organizational culture, employee competencies, financial resources, and strategic orientation significantly influence the effectiveness of digital marketing initiatives. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of managerial support and organizational readiness in facilitating digital transformation and achieving desired marketing outcomes (Balak & Zarinjoo, 2021; Hasanah, 2025). Without adequate organizational support, even technologically advanced marketing tools may fail to generate meaningful results.

The growing complexity of digital marketing environments has also encouraged organizations to adopt innovative communication approaches. Marketing innovation and digital communication capabilities have been found to enhance customer loyalty, improve sales performance, and strengthen competitive positioning (Karundeng et al., 2025). Similarly, digital corporate social responsibility initiatives can stimulate positive consumer responses and encourage electronic word-of-



mouth communication in hospitality settings (Jiang et al., 2025). These findings suggest that successful digital marketing strategies require a comprehensive understanding of both technological capabilities and consumer expectations.

Moreover, contemporary digital marketing extends beyond traditional advertising activities and increasingly incorporates integrated communication strategies. Product placement, digital storytelling, influencer collaborations, and immersive media experiences have emerged as valuable tools for influencing consumer perceptions and behaviors (Gündüzyeli & İpek, 2025). These approaches enable organizations to create emotionally engaging experiences that strengthen customer relationships and enhance brand value. As consumers become more sophisticated and digitally connected, restaurants must continuously adapt their marketing strategies to remain competitive and responsive to changing market dynamics.

Despite the growing importance of digital marketing in the restaurant industry, significant challenges remain regarding the identification of key determinants, strategic mechanisms, contextual conditions, and performance outcomes associated with successful implementation. Existing studies have often examined specific aspects of digital marketing in isolation, such as content marketing, social media marketing, artificial intelligence applications, or electronic word-of-mouth communication. However, there remains a need for comprehensive models that integrate these diverse dimensions into a coherent framework capable of explaining how digital marketing contributes to organizational success in restaurant and fast-food businesses (Jadiri Jabbarzadeh & Mousavi, 2018; Salmani, 2020). Such integrated models can provide valuable theoretical insights and practical guidance for industry stakeholders.

Given the strategic importance of digital marketing for contemporary restaurant organizations, the increasing digitalization of consumer behavior, and the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing successful implementation, the present study aims to validate a digital marketing model for the restaurant and fast-food industry in Iran, with a particular focus on restaurants in Tehran.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study is an exploratory mixed-methods research study (qualitative–quantitative). In terms of purpose, it is an applied study, and in terms of implementation method, it is descriptive–analytical with a mixed-methods approach.

In the qualitative section of this study, the statistical population consisted of a group of senior restaurant managers, university faculty members in the field of digital marketing, and marketing consultants familiar with the restaurant and fast-food industry who had the necessary educational and executive experience at decision-making levels and are referred to as knowledgeable experts. This group was selected to conduct the qualitative phase of the study and participated in the interview process. In fact, the sample used in the qualitative section of this research was selected through a non-probability purposive sampling method. In the quantitative section, managers of restaurants and fast-food establishments active in digital marketing in Tehran were considered the population. Based on the estimate, the size of this population was 1,300 individuals. According to the Krejcie and Morgan table, a population of this size requires at least 297 statistical samples. In this study, non-random convenience sampling was used to select the statistical samples, and given the researcher's appropriate access to the population, 400 individuals were ultimately selected as the statistical sample.

For data collection, considering the research method, unstructured interviews were used in the qualitative section, and a questionnaire derived from the qualitative interviews was used in the quantitative section. In the individual interviews with the interviewees, six questions were used in the interview protocol to examine their views. In addition, other supplementary questions were asked alongside the main questions to understand the participants' experiences during the interviews. During the interviews, the researcher controlled the accuracy of his understanding of the interviewees' statements by asking guiding questions, and the factors under discussion were examined and finalized. The qualitative data of the study were analyzed using inductive content analysis. Inductive content analysis is used to arrive at a core theory, construct a model, or develop a concept. Therefore, in this study, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and MAXQDA software were used in the qualitative section; in the quantitative section, considering the characteristics of the data, factor analysis and structural equation modeling were conducted using PLS software.



### 3. Findings and Results

Using the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin (1994), the blocks or meaningful units were first created through two stages, namely open coding and axial coding, and the process ended with selective coding.

Accordingly, after each interview, the researcher reviewed it several times, extracted the concepts embedded in the interview text, and coded them. From a total of 11 interviews, 130 initial concepts were extracted. After reviewing, grouping, and eliminating repeated concepts, 39 final concepts were identified, as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that the codes next to the concepts consist of a Latin letter and a number. The Latin letter, in alphabetical order, indicates the interviewee, and the number next to the letter indicates the number of the concept extracted from that specific interview.

**Table 1: Finalized Concepts in the Open Coding Stage**

Concepts	Codes
Ethical and professional competition among restaurants in the digital space benefits all of them.	A1, B4, E6
In general, competition in the country's restaurant industry is growing increasingly.	A2, B9, G5, K1
It is not always necessary to use trial and error and incur costs, because learning from others' experiences can be helpful.	A3, B1
Digital marketing can serve as a powerful lever for restaurant branding.	A4, F2
The proper application of digital marketing in the country's restaurant industry can improve customers' purchase intention.	A5, E4, J1
Restaurant managers' practical commitment to digital marketing is highly important in the success or failure of this approach.	G10, K2
Experience in the restaurant industry has shown that the intelligent use of digital marketing tools can increase market share, which is a very important point.	A6, C10, I4
The penetration rate and breadth of social media use in Iranian society are very high.	B2, D8
Restaurant management must provide the necessary resources for implementing various digital marketing techniques.	C1, F9, G4, H4
If restaurant managers do not have the necessary knowledge and awareness of digital marketing, they may not properly understand the importance of this approach.	A7, D7, G3, K3
The more financial resources restaurants can provide for using digital marketing tools, the easier it will be to move along this path.	A8, B12, C8, D3, G9, H5, J6
Today, SEO techniques can easily help businesses rank high in search engines.	B3, J2
If the dominant culture in a restaurant is receptive to digital approaches, moving toward digital marketing will be greatly facilitated.	A9, C11, E10
SMS marketing should accurately and directly target the restaurant's intended customer community, whether actual or potential.	A10, G2, H9
Ethical conduct in designing and producing advertising content can be highly trust-building.	B5, F4, I6
Purchase intention is a mental process that can be strengthened through digital marketing tools.	A11, B6, F6, K4
Restaurants in the country should regard digital marketing as a profitable factor rather than a cost, because this type of marketing can bring them greater market share and higher sales.	A13, E3, J1
Producing useful and specialized content by restaurants in cyberspace can help attract audiences and new customers.	D11, E2
Today, digital marketing is highly helpful in introducing the brand to audiences and reminding audiences of the brand.	A14, B7, D4, E13
Comments under advertising posts can play a significant role in strengthening or weakening customers' purchase intention.	D1, F3, H7
Many new restaurants enter this industry every day.	C3, F10, G8, H1
At present, social media such as Instagram is considered an important marketing tool.	B11, D6, E1, J3
Content marketing can play a significant role in enhancing restaurant brands.	A12, C9, F1, H3
The marketing power of social media is a major advantage for digital marketing in the restaurant industry.	B8, C2, E12, F8, G7, I7
SMS is an efficient marketing tool, but unfortunately it is used very ineffectively in our restaurant industry.	B10, C12, D10, E7
Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has become a special tool in the digital marketing of the restaurant industry.	F12, H8, I1, J4, K6
Restaurant managers should try to align all units under their management with the digital age.	C5, D9, I5, J4
Unless senior restaurant management has serious determination and will to move toward digital marketing, no fundamental action can be expected.	C4, D2, J2
Moving toward digital marketing requires the necessary financial resources.	A15, C14, E9
Today, members of society, especially in the country's metropolitan areas, face many options when choosing a restaurant.	E8, G11
Restaurant managers should first avoid unethical and destructive competition in the digital space.	C15, G1, I2
All restaurants seek to become brands and strengthen their brands.	D5, F7, J5
Digital marketing can encourage customers to purchase.	B13, C7
Restaurant managers should demonstrate their commitment to digital marketing and its importance in their daily conversations with staff.	E11, F13, G6, H2
Restaurants in the country should intelligently benchmark the digital marketing techniques used by successful restaurants around the world.	C13, I3, J3
Restaurant managers should keep themselves up to date in terms of digital marketing knowledge.	A16, C6, E5, J6
Restaurants' advertising content in the digital space should be designed and produced in a completely honest and ethical manner.	F5, G12, J7
In the restaurant industry, word-of-mouth marketing is highly influential.	F11, J5, K7



At this stage, by carefully examining the identified concepts and recognizing their similarities and differences, broader categories called “categories” were created, and homogeneous and aligned concepts were placed within these broader categories. The outcome of this process was the identification of 17 main categories, which, along with their related concepts, are shown in Table 2.

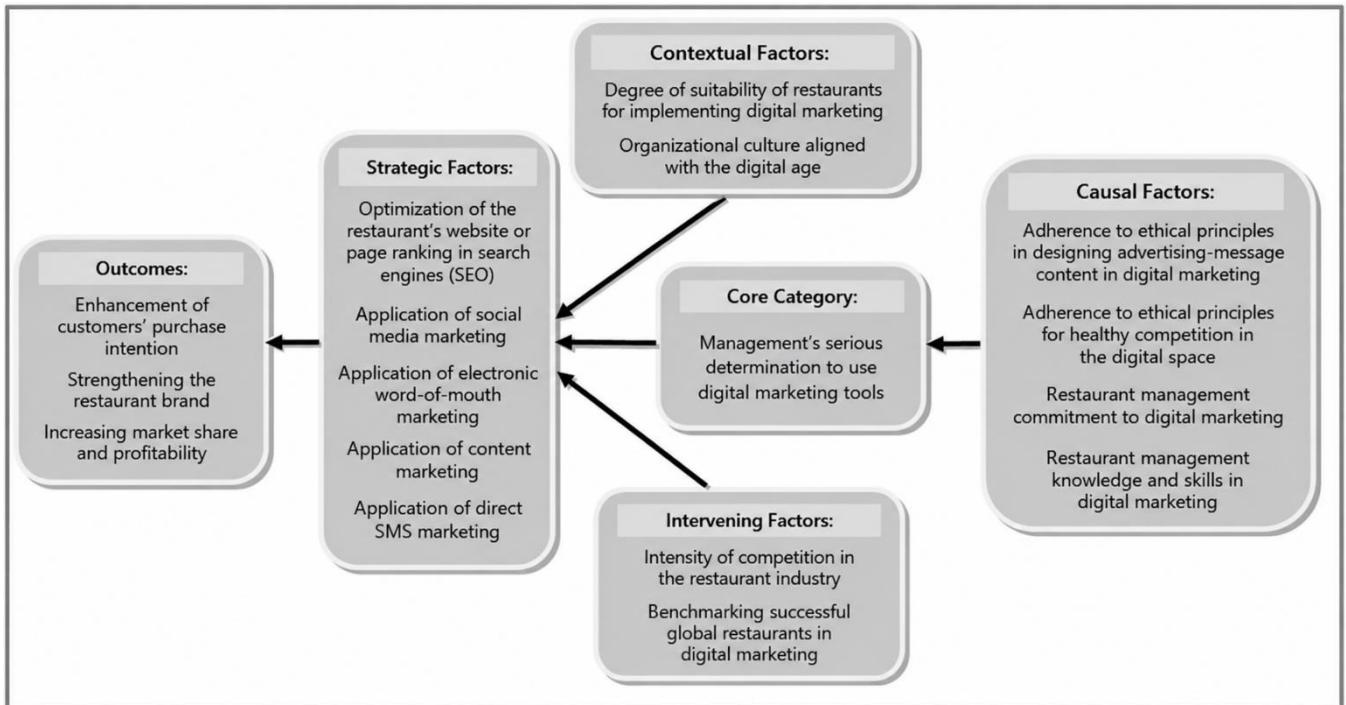
**Table 2: Identified Categories and Their Related Concepts**

Row	Categories (Axial Coding)	Concepts (Open Coding)
1	Adherence to ethical principles for healthy competition in the digital space	Restaurant managers should first avoid unethical and destructive competition in the digital space.
1	Adherence to ethical principles for healthy competition in the digital space	Ethical and professional competition among restaurants in the digital space benefits all of them.
2	Increasing market share and profitability	Experience in the restaurant industry has shown that the intelligent use of digital marketing tools can increase market share, which is a very important point.
2	Increasing market share and profitability	Restaurants in the country should regard digital marketing as a profitable factor rather than a cost, because this type of marketing can bring them greater market share and higher sales.
3	Organizational culture aligned with the digital age	Restaurant managers should try to align all units under their management with the digital age.
3	Organizational culture aligned with the digital age	If the dominant culture in a restaurant is receptive to digital approaches, moving toward digital marketing will be greatly facilitated.
4	Restaurant management commitment to digital marketing	Restaurant managers should demonstrate their commitment to digital marketing and its importance in their daily conversations with staff.
4	Restaurant management commitment to digital marketing	Restaurant managers' practical commitment to digital marketing is highly important in the success or failure of this approach.
5	Application of social media marketing	At present, social media such as Instagram is considered an important marketing tool.
5	Application of social media marketing	The marketing power of social media is a major advantage for digital marketing in the restaurant industry.
5	Application of social media marketing	The penetration rate and breadth of social media use in Iranian society are very high.
6	Adherence to ethical principles in designing advertising-message content in digital marketing	Restaurants' advertising content in the digital space should be designed and produced in a completely honest and ethical manner.
6	Adherence to ethical principles in designing advertising-message content in digital marketing	Ethical conduct in designing and producing advertising content can be highly trust-building.
7	Intensity of competition in the restaurant industry	Many new restaurants enter this industry every day.
7	Intensity of competition in the restaurant industry	Today, members of society, especially in the country's metropolitan areas, face many options when choosing a restaurant.
7	Intensity of competition in the restaurant industry	In general, competition in the country's restaurant industry is growing increasingly.
8	Intelligent application of direct SMS marketing	SMS is an efficient marketing tool, but unfortunately it is used very ineffectively in our restaurant industry.
8	Intelligent application of direct SMS marketing	SMS marketing should accurately and directly target the restaurant's intended customer community, whether actual or potential.
9	Enhancement of customers' purchase intention	Digital marketing can encourage customers to purchase.
9	Enhancement of customers' purchase intention	Purchase intention is a mental process that can be strengthened through digital marketing tools.
9	Enhancement of customers' purchase intention	The proper application of digital marketing in the country's restaurant industry can improve customers' purchase intention.
10	Optimization of the restaurant's website or page position in search engines (SEO)	SEO knowledge can greatly help restaurants improve their ranking in Google searches.
10	Optimization of the restaurant's website or page position in search engines (SEO)	Today, SEO techniques can easily help businesses rank high in search engines.
11	Management's serious determination to use digital marketing tools	Unless senior restaurant management has serious determination and will to move toward digital marketing, no fundamental action can be expected.
11	Management's serious determination to use digital marketing tools	Restaurant management must provide the necessary resources for implementing various digital marketing techniques.
12	Application of electronic word-of-mouth marketing	In the restaurant industry, word-of-mouth marketing is highly influential.
12	Application of electronic word-of-mouth marketing	Comments under advertising posts can play a significant role in strengthening or weakening customers' purchase intention.
12	Application of electronic word-of-mouth marketing	Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has become a special tool in the digital marketing of the restaurant industry.
13	Benchmarking successful global restaurants in digital marketing	It is not always necessary to use trial and error and incur costs, because learning from others' experiences can be helpful.



13	Benchmarking successful global restaurants in digital marketing	Restaurants in the country should intelligently benchmark the digital marketing techniques used by successful restaurants around the world.
14	Application of content marketing	Producing useful and specialized content by restaurants in cyberspace can help attract audiences and new customers.
14	Application of content marketing	Content marketing can play a significant role in enhancing restaurant brands.
15	Restaurant management knowledge and skills in digital marketing	Restaurant managers should keep themselves up to date in terms of digital marketing knowledge.
15	Restaurant management knowledge and skills in digital marketing	If restaurant managers do not have the necessary knowledge and awareness of digital marketing, they may not properly understand the importance of this approach.
16	Strengthening the restaurant brand	All restaurants seek to become brands and strengthen their brands.
16	Strengthening the restaurant brand	Digital marketing can serve as a powerful lever for restaurant branding.
16	Strengthening the restaurant brand	Today, digital marketing is highly helpful in introducing the brand to audiences and reminding audiences of the brand.
17	Appropriate budget for implementing digital marketing	Moving toward digital marketing requires the necessary financial resources.
17	Appropriate budget for implementing digital marketing	The more financial resources restaurants can provide for using digital marketing tools, the easier it will be to move along this path.

At next stage of the analysis, the main action was to position the identified categories within the paradigmatic model. Figure 1 shows the result of this process.



**Figure 1: Paradigmatic Model of Selective Coding of Categories**

To analyze the data and select the relevant tests, the normality status of the distribution of the variables must first be examined. At this stage, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used. The results of this test are presented in the following table.

**Table 3: Examination of the Normal Distribution of Variables**

Variable	Kolmogorov–Smirnov	Significance	Status
Causal factors	1.245	0.333	Normal
Management's serious determination to use digital marketing tools	3.751	0.089	Normal
Strategic factors	3.645	0.107	Normal
Intervening factors	3.069	0.539	Normal
Contextual factors	2.428	0.058	Normal
Outcomes	3.128	0.317	Normal

The results of this test show that the significance level of the research variables in the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test is greater than 0.05; therefore, the research data were identified as normally distributed.



Before conducting any analysis on the collected data and making statistical inferences, the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument must first be ensured. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha test, and the results showed that the questionnaires used had the required reliability and accuracy. The results of this test are presented in later sections. Various methods exist for assessing validity. In this study, because the research variables consisted of several components, confirmatory factor analysis was used. In conducting factor analysis, it must be ensured whether the available data can be used for analysis. In other words, it must be determined whether the number of data points is appropriate for factor analysis. For this purpose, the KMO index and Bartlett's test were used. According to these two tests, the data are suitable for factor analysis when the KMO index is greater than 0.60 and close to one, and the significance level of Bartlett's test is less than 0.05. The outputs of these tests are presented in the following table.

**Table 4: KMO and Bartlett's Test for the Questionnaire Items**

Test	Statistic	Value
KMO test	—	0.924
Bartlett's test	$\chi^2$	7113.306
Bartlett's test	Degrees of freedom	656
Bartlett's test	Sig.	0.000

According to Table 4, the KMO value is 0.924, which is greater than 0.60; therefore, the sample size, namely the number of respondents, is sufficient for factor analysis. In addition, the significance level of Bartlett's test is less than 0.05, indicating that factor analysis is appropriate for identifying the structure of the factor model and that the assumption that the correlation matrix is known is rejected.

In inferential analysis, before testing the hypotheses, construct validity must be tested using confirmatory factor analysis. In confirmatory analysis and path analysis, the fit test includes the RMSEA index, or root mean square error of approximation, which should be less than 8%; the  $\chi^2/df$  index should be less than 3; and GFI, CFI, IFI, and NNFI should be above 90%. If the T-value of the significance coefficients of each variable is greater than +1.96 or less than -1.96, the model has good fit; in other words, it provides a reasonable approximation of the population.

Since the software output is presented unchanged in this section, before presenting the software output, the following table is provided to identify the abbreviations of the latent and observed variables.

**Table 5: Guide for Identifying the Abbreviations of Model Variables**

Variable	Label in the Software	Related Items in the Questionnaire
Causal factors	Var1	1 to 9
Management's serious determination to use digital marketing tools	Var2	10 to 13
Strategic factors	Var5	14 to 25
Intervening factors	Var4	26 to 31
Contextual factors	Var3	32 to 34
Outcomes	Var6	35 to 42

To examine the model, confirmatory factor analysis was first used to assess the relationships between the latent variables and their measurement items. Each research variable is a latent variable. Each measurement item, which constitutes the questionnaire questions, is an observable variable.

The measurement model, or confirmatory factor analysis, examines the relationship between the items, namely the questionnaire questions, and the constructs. Then, using the structural model, the relationships among the factors are examined to test the hypotheses.

In fact, until it is established that the indicators, namely the questionnaire questions, have properly measured the latent variables, the relationships cannot be tested. Therefore, the measurement model or confirmatory factor analysis is used to demonstrate that the concepts have been properly measured. Considering that this study used a combination of two models, confirmatory factor analysis was used both as a tool for confirming construct validity and as one of the stages of structural equation modeling.

In the structural equation modeling method, there are two main stages for analyzing models: the model fit stage and the hypothesis testing stage.



Model fit assessment includes three sections: fit of the measurement models, fit of the structural models, and fit of the overall model.

The measurement model examines how latent variables are explained and interpreted by their related observed variables, namely questions. In fact, the measurement model is the part of the overall model that includes a variable together with the questions related to that variable. Four criteria are used to examine the fit of the measurement model: factor loading coefficients, indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Indicator reliability is assessed using two criteria: 1) Cronbach’s alpha and 2) composite reliability.

One of the criteria used to assess reliability in the structural equation modeling method is the internal stability, or internal consistency, of the measurement models. Internal stability indicates the degree of correlation between a construct and its related indicators. A high amount of explained variance between a construct and its indicators, compared with the measurement error related to each indicator, results in high internal stability. A Cronbach’s alpha value higher than 0.70 indicates acceptable reliability. Some researchers have introduced 0.60 as the threshold value for Cronbach’s alpha for variables with a small number of questions.

**Table 6: Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficients of the Model Variables**

Variable	Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient	Reliability Status
Causal factors	0.862	Confirmed
Management’s serious determination to use digital marketing tools	0.751	Confirmed
Strategic factors	0.804	Confirmed
Intervening factors	0.794	Confirmed
Contextual factors	0.816	Confirmed
Outcomes	0.798	Confirmed
Total questionnaire	0.814	Confirmed

Because Cronbach’s alpha is a traditional criterion for determining construct reliability, path analysis uses a more modern criterion than alpha, namely composite reliability. Its advantage over Cronbach’s alpha is that construct reliability is not calculated absolutely, but rather based on the correlations among the constructs. Therefore, to better assess reliability in the path analysis method, both criteria are used. The composite reliability value of a construct is obtained from a ratio in which the numerator includes the variance between a construct and its indicators plus the measurement error. If the CR value for each construct is greater than 0.70, it indicates appropriate internal stability for the measurement model, whereas a value less than 0.60 indicates a lack of reliability.

**Table 7: Results of the Composite Reliability Test**

Variable	CR Coefficient	Reliability Status
Causal factors	0.804	Confirmed
Management’s serious determination to use digital marketing tools	0.719	Confirmed
Strategic factors	0.738	Confirmed
Intervening factors	0.729	Confirmed
Contextual factors	0.744	Confirmed
Outcomes	0.764	Confirmed
Validity		

Convergent validity is the second criterion used to assess the fit of measurement models in the path analysis method. The AVE criterion indicates the average variance shared between each construct and its indicators. AVE shows the extent of correlation between a construct and its indicators; the stronger this correlation, the better the fit. An AVE value greater than 0.50 indicates acceptable convergent validity. Some researchers have considered 0.40 as the minimum acceptable value.

**Table 8: Results of the Convergent Validity Test**

Variable	AVE Coefficient	Validity Status
Causal factors	0.745	Confirmed
Management’s serious determination to use digital marketing tools	0.628	Confirmed
Strategic factors	0.529	Confirmed
Intervening factors	0.543	Confirmed
Contextual factors	0.670	Confirmed
Outcomes	0.594	Confirmed



Several criteria are used to examine the fit of structural models. The first criterion for assessing the relationships among constructs in the model is the significance numbers, or t-values. These values must be greater than +1.96 or less than -1.96 in order to confirm the validity of the relationships among constructs and the research hypotheses at the 95% confidence level. It should be noted that the strength of the relationships among the constructs can be observed in Figure 3.

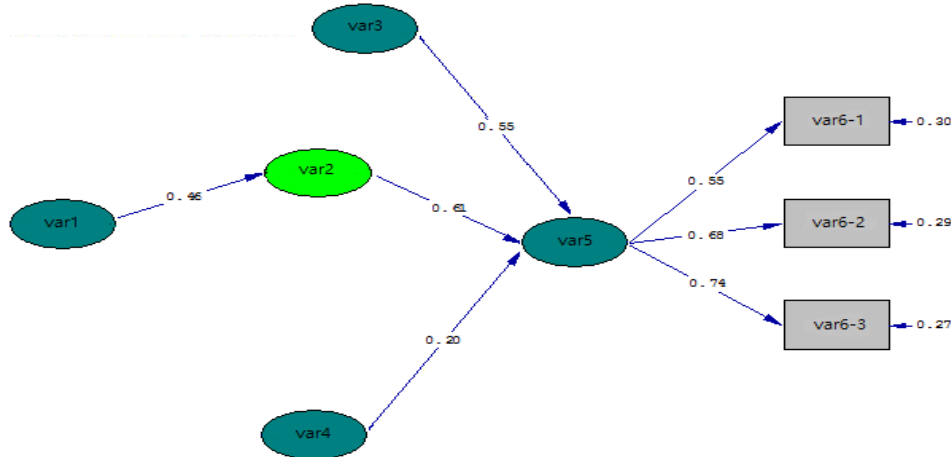


Figure 2: Fitted Research Model in Standardized Mode

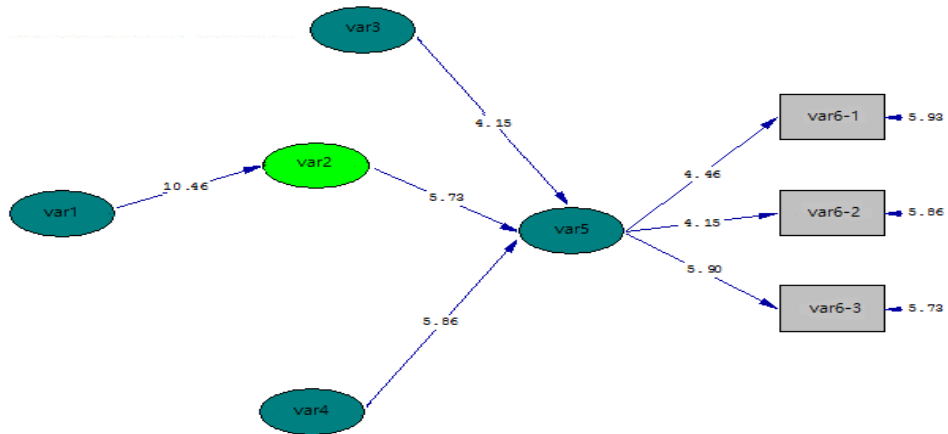


Figure 3: Fitted Research Model in Significance Mode

According to the software output, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.069. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI) is 0.976, the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) is 0.92, the comparative fit index (CFI) is 0.928, the Bentler–Bonett non-normed fit index (NNFI) is 0.95, and the incremental fit index (IFI) is 0.93.

Table 9: Fit Indices of the Conceptual Research Model

Fit Index	Desired Value	Model Value
$\chi^2/df$	< 3.00	1.77
GFI (Goodness of Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.97
AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.92
RMR (Root Mean Square Residual)	< 0.05	0.034
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.97
PNFI (Parsimony Normed Fit Index)	> 0.50	0.93
NNFI (Non-Normed Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.95
IFI (Incremental Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.93
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.92
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	< 0.08	0.069

The significance coefficients of the model paths show whether the research hypotheses are significant. If the significance coefficient of the path between two variables is greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96, this indicates that the effect of the two



variables is significant at the 95% confidence level, and the hypothesis is confirmed. Table 10 summarizes the significance coefficients and the results of the proposed hypotheses.

**Table 10: Results of Testing the Research Hypotheses**

Hypotheses	Standardized Coefficient	Significance	Result
Causal factors have a significant effect on management's serious determination to use digital marketing tools.	0.46	10.46	Confirmed
Management's serious determination to use digital marketing tools has a significant effect on strategic factors.	0.61	5.73	Confirmed
Contextual factors have a significant effect on strategic factors.	0.55	4.15	Confirmed
Intervening factors have a significant effect on strategic factors.	0.20	5.86	Confirmed
Strategic factors have a significant effect on enhancing customers' purchase intention.	0.55	4.46	Confirmed
Strategic factors have a significant effect on strengthening the restaurant brand.	0.68	4.15	Confirmed
Strategic factors have a significant effect on increasing market share and profitability.	0.74	5.90	Confirmed

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to validate a digital marketing model for the restaurant and fast-food industry in Iran, focusing on restaurants in Tehran. The findings confirmed the proposed paradigmatic model consisting of six major variables, including causal factors, the core category (management's serious determination to employ digital marketing tools), contextual factors, intervening factors, strategic factors, and outcomes. Furthermore, all hypothesized relationships among the constructs were statistically significant, indicating that the proposed model provides a valid explanation of how digital marketing can be effectively implemented and leveraged within restaurant businesses. The model fit indices also demonstrated an acceptable level of fit, suggesting that the conceptual framework adequately represents the empirical relationships among the variables.

One of the most important findings of the study was the significant influence of causal factors on management's serious determination to employ digital marketing tools. This finding highlights the critical role of managerial characteristics, ethical commitment, digital marketing knowledge, and organizational awareness in initiating digital transformation efforts within restaurants. The results suggest that managers who possess a stronger understanding of digital marketing concepts and who recognize the strategic value of digital technologies are more likely to demonstrate commitment toward implementing digital marketing initiatives. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that managerial knowledge and strategic awareness are prerequisites for successful digital marketing adoption (Balak & Zarinjoo, 2021; Hasanah, 2025). Similarly, Kannan argued that digital marketing success requires managerial understanding of customer-centric digital ecosystems and the strategic integration of digital tools into organizational processes (Kannan, 2017). The significance of ethical considerations observed in this study also aligns with the findings of Nakhchian et al., who emphasized that ethical digital marketing practices strengthen organizational performance by fostering customer trust and enhancing organizational legitimacy (Nakhchian et al., 2022).

The findings further demonstrated that management's serious determination significantly influences strategic digital marketing actions. This result indicates that strategic initiatives such as social media marketing, content marketing, search engine optimization, electronic word-of-mouth marketing, and direct digital communication largely depend on managerial commitment and organizational leadership. This finding is theoretically consistent with the notion that organizational transformation begins with leadership support and strategic vision. Previous research has repeatedly emphasized that successful digital transformation requires active managerial engagement, allocation of resources, and organizational encouragement of innovation (Hasanah, 2025; Salmani, 2020). In the restaurant industry specifically, Ku reported that digital innovations and technology-based services are more likely to succeed when managers actively support technological adoption and customer-oriented innovation (Ku, 2024). Therefore, managerial determination serves as a central mechanism through which digital marketing strategies are translated into practical actions.

Another important finding was the significant effect of contextual factors on strategic factors. The identified contextual factors included organizational culture aligned with the digital age and the degree of organizational readiness for digital marketing implementation. This result suggests that digital marketing success is not solely dependent on technology but also on organizational conditions that facilitate adoption and utilization. A supportive organizational culture encourages



experimentation, innovation, and continuous learning, all of which are essential for effective digital marketing. This finding corresponds with the literature emphasizing organizational readiness and digital maturity as important antecedents of successful digital transformation (Kannan, 2017; Salmani, 2020). Restaurants operating in environments that support digital innovation are more likely to implement advanced marketing strategies and adapt to rapidly changing consumer preferences.

The significant influence of intervening factors on strategic factors also deserves attention. The study identified competitive intensity and benchmarking successful international restaurants as major intervening factors. This finding indicates that external environmental conditions shape organizational strategic behavior. In highly competitive markets, restaurants are compelled to seek innovative marketing solutions to differentiate themselves and attract customers. Benchmarking successful organizations provides opportunities for learning and adaptation, reducing uncertainty associated with digital transformation initiatives. These findings align with contemporary marketing theories suggesting that organizations respond strategically to environmental pressures and market dynamics (Hasanah, 2025; Kannan, 2017). Furthermore, the increasing competitiveness of digital markets has encouraged firms to adopt innovative communication methods and technology-enabled marketing approaches to maintain relevance and competitiveness (Karundeng et al., 2025).

Among the strategic factors identified in the model, social media marketing emerged as a particularly important component. The prominence of social media marketing is understandable given the widespread use of platforms such as Instagram and other digital networks among restaurant consumers. Social media enables restaurants to communicate directly with customers, present visual representations of products, promote offers, and build online communities. The importance of this factor is supported by previous studies demonstrating that social media engagement contributes significantly to customer interaction, brand awareness, and customer loyalty (Karundeng et al., 2025; Toler, 2017). The restaurant industry is especially suited to social media marketing because food-related products are highly visual and capable of generating substantial consumer engagement through digital platforms.

The study also identified search engine optimization (SEO) as an important strategic factor. The significance of SEO reflects the growing tendency of consumers to search online for restaurant information before making dining decisions. Restaurants that achieve higher visibility in search engine results are more likely to attract potential customers and increase online traffic. This finding is consistent with the broader digital marketing literature, which identifies online visibility as a critical determinant of consumer awareness and business performance (Kannan, 2017; Salmani, 2020). Effective SEO strategies contribute to stronger digital presence and enhance opportunities for customer acquisition.

Content marketing represented another major strategic factor within the model. The findings suggest that creating useful, relevant, and engaging content contributes significantly to digital marketing effectiveness. Content marketing facilitates customer engagement, information sharing, and relationship development by providing value beyond direct promotional messages. This result strongly aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of content marketing in enhancing trust, customer engagement, and brand value (Jalali & Mortazaeian, 2020; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). Furthermore, Bu et al. demonstrated that high-quality digital content stimulates electronic word-of-mouth communication and encourages consumers to share experiences with broader audiences (Bu et al., 2020). For restaurants, content related to menu innovations, culinary experiences, and brand stories can strengthen emotional connections with customers and improve competitive positioning.

The importance of electronic word-of-mouth marketing identified in this study further supports contemporary marketing theories regarding consumer influence in digital environments. Customer reviews, comments, ratings, and online recommendations increasingly influence purchasing decisions. The findings indicate that electronic word-of-mouth functions as a strategic mechanism through which restaurants can shape customer perceptions and influence purchase behavior. This result corresponds with previous studies demonstrating that online interactions and consumer-generated content significantly affect customer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Bu et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2025). In hospitality and food-service industries, positive electronic word-of-mouth can substantially enhance organizational reputation and customer trust.

A notable finding of the study was the significant influence of strategic factors on customer purchase intention. The results indicate that effective implementation of digital marketing strategies encourages customers to consider and ultimately purchase restaurant products and services. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that digital marketing enhances



consumer engagement, strengthens trust, and positively influences purchasing behavior (Behera et al., 2020; Toler, 2017). Personalized communication, targeted promotional efforts, and engaging digital experiences contribute to stronger purchase intentions by increasing perceived relevance and customer involvement.

The study also revealed a significant relationship between strategic factors and restaurant brand strengthening. Digital marketing contributes to brand development by increasing visibility, improving customer engagement, and creating consistent brand experiences across multiple channels. This finding is supported by research demonstrating that digital marketing facilitates brand awareness, customer loyalty, and perceived value creation (Liu & Jiang, 2020; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). In competitive restaurant markets, strong brands provide differentiation advantages that influence consumer choice and long-term organizational performance.

Perhaps the most important practical outcome identified in the study was the significant effect of strategic factors on market share growth and profitability. This finding demonstrates that digital marketing is not merely a communication tool but also a strategic investment capable of generating measurable business outcomes. Through improved customer acquisition, enhanced customer retention, stronger brand equity, and increased purchase intention, digital marketing contributes directly to organizational financial performance. This result supports the findings of Karundeng et al., who reported positive relationships between digital communication capabilities, customer loyalty, and sales performance (Karundeng et al., 2025). Similarly, research on AI-driven digital marketing strategies indicates that advanced digital marketing practices can improve targeting efficiency and contribute to superior business outcomes (Jaiswal, 2025; Yaiprasert & Hidayanto, 2023).

The findings of the present study additionally highlight the growing importance of technological innovation in digital marketing. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, service robotics, and the Internet of Things increasingly shape customer experiences and organizational marketing capabilities. Prior studies have shown that AI-driven personalization enhances customer satisfaction and engagement, while IoT technologies facilitate data collection and customer interaction (Cocco, 2017; Jaiswal, 2025; Yaiprasert & Hidayanto, 2023; Zadtootaghaj et al., 2019). The present findings suggest that restaurant managers should view digital marketing as an evolving strategic capability requiring continuous investment, innovation, and adaptation to technological developments.

Overall, the validated model demonstrates that digital marketing effectiveness in the restaurant and fast-food industry results from a complex interaction among managerial commitment, organizational readiness, environmental influences, strategic digital actions, and customer-related outcomes. The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the view that digital marketing should be approached as a comprehensive organizational strategy rather than a collection of isolated promotional techniques. Through the integration of ethical practices, technological innovation, customer engagement strategies, and organizational commitment, restaurants can strengthen their competitive position and achieve sustainable growth in increasingly digitalized markets.

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the quantitative data were collected exclusively from restaurant and fast-food managers in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions and cultural contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the research prevents the examination of causal relationships over time. Finally, rapid technological changes in digital marketing may influence the long-term stability of some identified relationships.

Future studies may examine the proposed model in other cities, regions, and countries to evaluate its cross-cultural validity. Researchers may also investigate the role of emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, augmented reality, and blockchain in digital marketing effectiveness. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how digital marketing capabilities evolve over time and influence organizational performance. In addition, future research may compare different segments of the hospitality industry, including hotels, cafés, and food delivery platforms, to identify industry-specific digital marketing dynamics.

Restaurant managers should prioritize the development of digital marketing competencies and continuously update their knowledge regarding emerging technologies and marketing practices. Organizations should establish a digital-oriented culture that supports innovation, learning, and customer-centric decision-making. Investments in social media marketing, content marketing, search engine optimization, and electronic word-of-mouth management should be considered strategic priorities rather than operational expenses. Furthermore, restaurant owners should allocate sufficient financial resources to digital



marketing initiatives, implement ethical communication practices, and systematically benchmark successful international organizations to enhance competitiveness and long-term profitability.

### Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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