

Testing the Optimal Implementation Model of Digital Marketing in the Tourism Industry

Mahboubeh Nazari¹, Majid Fattahi^{2*}, Majid Fani³

¹ Department of Business Management, Sar.C., Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran. stu.nazari.mahboobeh@iausari.ac.ir

² Department of Business Management, Sar.C., Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran (Corresponding Author). Majid.fattahi@iausari.ac.ir

³ Department of Business management, Bob.C., Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran. Ma.fani@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to test the optimal implementation model of digital marketing in the tourism industry. This research is applied in terms of its objective and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection method. Data were collected using a researcher-developed standardized questionnaire. The statistical population consisted of managers and employees of tourism startups. Given the indeterminate size of the population, the sample size was determined to be 385 individuals using Cochran's formula for an unknown population, with sampling conducted through convenience random sampling. The composite reliability and reliability of each research component were calculated, indicating the reliability of the measurement tool. The validity of the questionnaire was assessed through content validity, with calculations of the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) for the questionnaire items, as well as divergent and convergent validity, confirming the questionnaire's adequate validity. Structural equation modeling was employed for data analysis using SmartPLS4 software. The results identified five main themes: experience-based marketing strategy, tourism-oriented technologies, interaction and trust-building with tourists, human resources and organizational agility, and performance evaluation and competitiveness. Among these, the experience-based marketing strategy theme, with a coefficient of 0.874, ranked first in priority and importance, followed by tourism-oriented technologies with a coefficient of 0.793 (second priority), interaction and trust-building with tourists with a coefficient of 0.786 (third priority), human resources and organizational agility with a coefficient of 0.762 (fourth priority), and performance evaluation and competitiveness with a coefficient of 0.468 (fifth priority).

KEYWORDS: Digital Marketing, Tourism-Oriented Technologies, Tourism Industry

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1. Introduction

According to statistics, by 2025, approximately 4 billion people will be using the internet, meaning more than half of the global population will have internet access. Among these, the MENA region (Middle East, North Africa, and West Asia) has experienced the highest growth in internet users, with an annual growth rate of approximately 20% (Munsch, 2021). Concurrently, in the field of marketing, we are witnessing the emergence of a digital marketing ecosystem. Evidence suggests that digital marketing is gradually replacing traditional marketing, with digital payments replacing cash and web- and cloud-based information technology replacing physical servers. Meanwhile, these ecosystems are becoming more profound, meaning their impact on customers' lives is gaining greater significance (Garg et al., 2022).

Internet-based businesses represent the dominant model of commerce in the current era. Given the competitive nature of this domain, branding is undoubtedly the key to achieving differentiation and gaining a competitive advantage (Messebi Amidabadi et al., 2023). In fact, digital marketing is one of the critical approaches for establishing customer relationships (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2020), profoundly influencing consumer behavior and engagement. By transforming passive consumer behavior through engaging and compelling interactions, new avenues for socialization between companies, particularly brands, and consumers are opened. In this process, the audience gains value, ultimately leading to improved organizational branding outcomes, such as increased loyalty or intent to support the brand (Lou & Xie, 2021).

Academic research has been unable to fully address certain questions regarding small businesses, their relationship with marketing, and how they utilize marketing strategies. Due to the lack of a systematic approach to marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), empirical and practical literature is often written on a case-by-case basis without prior or structured planning (Gilboa et al., 2019). Additionally, the numerous challenges faced by these businesses in the marketing domain, coupled with the absence of a clear marketing process due to their inherent limitations, underscore the need for a localized model (Rahmani et al., 2023).

In the tourism industry, digital marketing is no longer merely a need but an essential marketing method for industry stakeholders. Consequently, digital marketing in tourism has become a means to build trust and attract consumer attention. Marketers can leverage free or paid channels, depending on their marketing objectives and budgets, to connect with customers. Digital marketing in tourism enables companies to move beyond traditional methods, reaching a larger audience than before and targeting potential customers likely to purchase products or services. Precise targeting of potential customers is one of the most significant advantages of digital marketing in tourism. It allows tourism business owners to identify specific audience segments and target them with personalized messages. Furthermore, it provides the opportunity to focus on larger audience groups (Luafan, 2022).

Despite the extensive studies conducted on digital marketing, little effort has been made to conceptualize this form of marketing. The existence of various definitions of digital marketing indicates a lack of complete consensus regarding its nature and components, highlighting a significant research gap in the field. Moreover, most studies conducted domestically have relied on models and variables adapted from foreign research. Therefore, this study aims to extract a model of factors affecting the optimal implementation of digital marketing in tourism industry startups.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

Digital marketing refers to a set of activities aimed at promoting products and services using digital tools. This is a simplified definition of digital marketing. In reality, digital marketing is far more comprehensive than traditional marketing methods in businesses. Digital marketing involves leveraging tools available on the internet and in the digital world to market services and products (Scholz et al., 2014). In the tourism industry, digital marketing enables precise targeting of potential customers, identification of audience segments, delivery of personalized messages, and the ability to focus on larger audience groups for tourism business owners (Luafan, 2022).

This section examines the theoretical foundations related to the factors influencing the successful implementation of digital marketing in tourism industry startups and provides a conceptual framework for this topic. Digital marketing encompasses activities that utilize digital channels such as websites, social media, email, and online advertising to promote products and services (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This type of marketing holds particular significance in the tourism industry due to its ability to deliver interactive, personalized, and targeted content (Li et al., 2020).

Based on the Technology Acceptance Model, perceived usefulness and ease of use of digital tools influence the adoption and success of these strategies (Cheung, Rosenberger, & Paulo, 2020; Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2020). In tourism startups, digital marketing includes activities such as search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, social media advertising, and the use of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and big data analytics (Prentice, Han, Hua, & Hu, 2019; Delbaere, Michael, & Phillips, 2021). These activities enable startups to create personalized experiences for tourists and enhance customer trust and loyalty by providing relevant content (Messebi Amidabadi et al., 2023).

Dimitrios et al. (2023), in a study titled "Digital Marketing: The Case of Digital Marketing Strategies in Luxurious Hotels," stated that digital marketing has been the focus of numerous studies. However, there is a need to clarify the current trends in digital marketing strategies, particularly for luxury hotels. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the tourism industry and influenced the digital marketing strategies of hotels. The purpose of their study was to evaluate the latest applications of digital marketing, particularly the use of social media by luxury hotels and their guests (e.g., Facebook, TripAdvisor). The findings indicate that social media plays a pivotal role in the marketing of luxury hotels. Specifically, hotels must take customer reviews on social media seriously, as a single review can significantly influence a hotel's reputation, either positively or negatively.

Behera et al. (2019) in a recent study conducted in India, proposed an intelligent model in the field of digital marketing that provides the necessary tools to create a customized platform for companies operating in the e-commerce sector. This model begins with programming the company's rules and the commercial regulations governing the industry. Subsequently, it establishes connections between these programs and the marketing information system and organizational information system. Strategic and operational digital branding strategies are delivered to customers through four primary tools: commercial websites, mobile applications, digital media, and social networks. Customer feedback is then reported to the marketing information database and the organizational information and communication technology database.

Bhagat et al. (2019) presented a simple model for the adoption of digital marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). According to this model, innovation and perceived experience

are introduced as the two fundamental elements of digital marketing. The concept of innovation is measurable based on product leadership in the market, introducing innovative products, flexibility in response to market demand, new product ideas, launching new products, and continuous improvement in product quality. The perceived experience is assessed based on usefulness, acceptability, and fostering a positive mental image.

Zu et al. (2019), in one of the latest studies conducted in China, identified and examined various dimensions of brand personality in the e-commerce domain. According to this study, five underlying factors of brand personality in e-commerce were identified: benevolence, wisdom and knowledge, courage, enjoyment, and aesthetics. Specific items were identified to measure each of these factors. Accordingly, benevolence is measurable based on being economical, authentic, operational, and family-friendly. The construct of wisdom and knowledge, as the most critical component of online brand personality, is measurable based on innovation, reliability, trustworthiness, expertise, technicality, responsiveness, and security. For a brand to exhibit a bold personality, it must evoke a sense of power and prominence in the audience while also possessing an enjoyable and pleasant character. Finally, the aesthetic dimension of a brand is evaluated based on its ability to evoke emotions in customers and its likability.

Bhati and Verma (2018) also proposed a digital marketing model for corporate branding in the United Arab Emirates. According to this model, a distinction should be made between offline and online branding. Offline branding is measurable based on positioning, brand communication, brand performance, and brand equity. In contrast, online branding emphasizes customer understanding and perception, interactivity, marketing communications, and content management.

This research aims to address these gaps by designing and testing an optimal implementation model for digital marketing in the tourism industry.

3. Research Methodology

This study is applied in terms of its objective and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection method. The data collection approach in this research is quantitative. Quantitative data were collected using a researcher-developed standardized questionnaire. The statistical population consisted of managers and employees of tourism startups. Based on the investigations, no precise statistics were found regarding the number of employees in startups. Therefore, due to the indeterminate size of the population, the sample size was determined to be 385 individuals using Cochran's formula for an infinite population, with sampling conducted through convenience random sampling. To collect data related to the variables, a researcher-developed questionnaire adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Nazari et al. (2025) was used. Subsequently, the composite reliability and the reliability of each research component were calculated, indicating the reliability of the measurement tool. The validity of the questionnaire was assessed through content validity, with calculations of the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) for the questionnaire items, as well as divergent and convergent validity, confirming the questionnaire's adequate validity. For data analysis, structural equation modeling was employed using SmartPLS4 software. Unlike variance-based structural equation modeling, which evaluates the fit of the proposed model and is used for explaining, testing, and confirming theories, the PLS method is prediction-oriented and can be used for theory development.

4. Findings

To assess the model fit, the measurement model fit, structural model fit, and overall model fit were examined. To evaluate the reliability of the measurement model, factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and composite reliability were analyzed. The threshold for acceptable factor loadings is 0.4. All factor loading coefficients for the questions exceeded 0.4, indicating that this criterion was met. According to the data analysis algorithm in SmartPLS4, after assessing the factor loadings of the questions, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and composite reliability were calculated and reported. The second criterion for evaluating the measurement model fit is convergent validity, which examines the correlation of each construct with its respective questions (indicators). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted for Latent Variables

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha (Alpha > 0.7)	Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.5)
Performance Evaluation and Competitiveness	0.853	0.890	0.773
Experience-Based Marketing Strategy	0.869	0.873	0.795
Interaction and Trust-Building with Tourists	0.917	0.917	0.857
Tourism-Oriented Technologies	0.799	0.804	0.712
Human Resources and Organizational Agility	0.810	0.833	0.720

Given that the acceptable threshold for Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability is 0.7, and based on the findings in the table above, these criteria have been met for the latent variables, the reliability of the research can be confirmed. Additionally, since the acceptable threshold for Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is 0.5, and the values for the latent variables in the table above meet this criterion, the convergent validity of the research is also confirmed.

To assess divergent validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was used. Since the values of the main diagonal (square root of AVE) for each latent variable are greater than the correlations of that variable with other latent variables in the model, the divergent validity of the model is confirmed. Chen (1998) introduced three values—0.19, 0.33, and 0.67—as thresholds for weak, moderate, and strong R^2 values, respectively. The structural model of this research, based on the R^2 criterion, demonstrates an acceptable overall fit.

According to Henseler et al. (2014), regarding the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), a value less than 0.1, or conservatively 0.08, is considered appropriate (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In this model, the overall model fit was deemed satisfactory.

Table 2. Results of Overall Model Fit with Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and NFI Criterion

Latent Variables	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.092	0.092
NFI	0.905	0.905
d_ ULS	2.325	2.325
d_ G	1.711	1.711

Table 3. Results of Overall Model Fit Using GoF Criterion

Latent Variables	R ²	Communality	GoF
Performance Evaluation and Competitiveness	0.219	0.619	0.59
Experience-Based Marketing Strategy	0.764	0.558	
Interaction and Trust-Building with Tourists	0.618	0.499	
Tourism-Oriented Technologies	0.629	0.687	
Human Resources and Organizational Agility	0.581	0.749	
Average	0.458	0.6224	

Hair (2010, 2011) introduced three values—0.01, 0.15, and 0.35—as thresholds for weak, moderate, and strong GoF, respectively. Given the calculated GoF value of 0.59, a strong overall model fit is confirmed.

Table4. Results of Overall Structural Model Tests and PLS Model Test

Test Result	Calculated Value	Desired Value	Index
Confirmed	0.419	> 0.15	CV Red
Strongly Confirmed	0.59	> 0.15	GoF
Confirmed	0.092	< 0.1	SRMR

Table 5. Results of Direct Relationships and Significance Coefficients of the Research Model Hypotheses

Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T-Value	Significance Level	Result
Optimal Implementation of Digital Marketing in Tourism Startups → Performance Evaluation and Competitiveness	0.468	7.539	0.000	Accepted
Optimal Implementation of Digital Marketing in Tourism Startups → Experience-Based Marketing Strategy	0.874	105.282	0.000	
Optimal Implementation of Digital Marketing in Tourism Startups → Interaction and Trust-Building with Tourists	0.786	24.095	0.000	
Optimal Implementation of Digital Marketing in Tourism Startups → Tourism-Oriented Technologies	0.793	47.779	0.000	
Optimal Implementation of Digital Marketing in Tourism Startups → Human Resources and Organizational Agility	0.762	43.621	0.000	

As shown in Table 5, all paths in the model are accepted, with t-values outside the specified range, indicating that all paths and relationships between variables are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results, the main themes include five categories: experience-based marketing strategy, tourism-oriented technologies, interaction and trust-building with tourists, human resources and organizational agility, and performance evaluation and competitiveness. Among these, the experience-based marketing strategy theme, with a coefficient of 0.874, holds the highest priority and importance, followed by tourism-oriented technologies with a coefficient of 0.793 (second priority), interaction and trust-building with tourists with a coefficient of 0.786 (third priority), human resources and organizational agility with a coefficient of 0.762 (fourth priority), and performance evaluation and competitiveness with a coefficient of 0.468 (fifth priority). Considering the findings from the quantitative section and the explanation of relationships between the main themes of the model of factors affecting the optimal implementation of digital marketing in tourism industry startups, as well as the appropriate fit of the derived model in these startups, it can be stated that models integrating technology, trust, and user experience effectively tend to exhibit better fit in tourism startups. Tourism startups typically have limited resources and require agility. A model focusing on low-cost technologies (such as social media) and digital interactions is more aligned with the needs of these businesses. Additionally, the model should reflect tourists' digital behaviors (e.g., online searches, importance of feedback, and preference for mobile bookings). Studies indicate that positive customer experiences and electronic trust are key factors in tourists' decision-making processes. These findings are somewhat consistent with the results of studies by Asadnejad et al. (2022), Alaviyun et al. (2011), Farzaneh (2010), Dimitrios et al. (2023), and Lou (2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that the proposed model for the optimal implementation of digital marketing in tourism startups should focus on integrating these themes, with digital marketing strategy as the central pillar, aligned with technology, personalization, and trust. The model should be flexible and scalable to accommodate the resource constraints of startups and the rapid changes in the tourism market. For practical implementation, startups can begin with low-cost digital platforms (e.g., Instagram and Google Ads) and gradually integrate advanced technologies (e.g., AI for analyzing customer behavior). Moreover, fostering trust through transparency and positive customer feedback ensures the model's success. To strengthen the relationships between the main themes of the model of factors affecting the optimal implementation of digital marketing in tourism industry startups (including experience-based marketing strategy, tourism-oriented technologies, interaction and trust-building with tourists, human resources and organizational agility, and performance evaluation and competitiveness), the following practical recommendations are proposed. These recommendations focus on integration and synergy among the themes to enhance the effectiveness of digital marketing in these startups:

Integration of Experience-Based Marketing Strategy with Tourism-Oriented Technologies:

Utilize AI and augmented reality (AR) technologies to enrich customer experiences in marketing strategies. For example, implement an AI-powered chatbot on online booking platforms that provides personalized recommendations based on customers' travel data (e.g., previous searches) and integrates with AR/VR virtual tours to create interactive and engaging experiences.

Synergy Between Interaction and Trust-Building with Tourists and Performance Evaluation and Competitiveness:

Develop a system for monitoring online feedback (e.g., reviews on TripAdvisor) using tools like Hootsuite, and use the collected data as input for key

performance indicators (KPIs) such as customer satisfaction rates. These feedbacks can be leveraged to improve user-generated content and enhance trust through prompt responses to reviews.

Linking Human Resources and Organizational Agility with Tourism-Oriented Technologies: Empower marketing teams with specialized training in digital technologies (e.g., online courses on data analytics or online booking tools) and adopt agile methodologies (e.g., Scrum) to accelerate the implementation of new technologies (e.g., booking platforms or AI chatbots).

Connecting Experience-Based Marketing Strategy with Interaction and Trust-Building with Tourists: Design digital marketing campaigns targeting niche markets (e.g., ecotourism) and leverage user-generated content (UGC) on social media (e.g., Instagram with dedicated hashtags) to enhance engagement and build trust. For instance, share authentic tourist stories through short videos.

Aligning Performance Evaluation and Competitiveness with Human Resources and Organizational Agility: Create performance analysis dashboards (e.g., using Tableau or Power BI) to display key metrics (e.g., conversion rates or customer acquisition costs) and share these data in agile team meetings (e.g., sprint review sessions) to enable rapid decision-making for strategy improvement and collaboration with the tourism ecosystem.

Establishing a Feedback Loop Among All Themes: Implement a digital knowledge management system (e.g., Notion or Confluence) that integrates data from performance evaluations (e.g., competitor analysis and customer feedback), human resources experiences, and outcomes of implemented technologies. This system can serve as a reference for updating marketing strategies and strengthening collaboration within the tourism ecosystem.

These recommendations help startups implement digital marketing cohesively and effectively by strengthening the relationships among the main themes.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Authenticity of the texts, honesty and fidelity has been observed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author/s confirmed no conflict of interest.