Design and Explanation of a Model for Factors Affecting the Digital Marketing Environment in Global Markets

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Objective: The primary aim of this study is to design a model for factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets.

Method: An exploratory mixed-methods research approach was employed. The qualitative part of the study is based on grounded theory. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 19 managers and experts in digital marketing, selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Data analysis followed grounded theory procedures, and data were collected using MAXQDA18 software. For testing the model, research hypotheses were formulated, and a questionnaire was designed. Data were collected from 205 managers of companies active in digital marketing. Data analysis and hypothesis testing were conducted using confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis methods, employing SPSS and AMOS software.

Results: A total of 242 codes and components of the model for factors affecting the digital marketing environment, comprising 41 key concepts and 20 main categories, were identified from the interviews and organized into a conceptual model based on grounded theory. The initial model was then revised and validated by experts. The quantitative phase results indicated that the path analysis model and the relationships within the model were confirmed with appropriate impact coefficients, consistent with the qualitative part.

Conclusion: The paradigmatic model suggests that the primary phenomenon of the digital marketing environment is influenced by two categories: internal factors and external factors, which in turn determine the strategies of the digital marketing environment. It is crucial to recognize that this influence is not pure and occurs with the intervention of other internal and external factors. Several strategies emerged from the insights of key informants, taking into account their experiences and perceptions of the digital marketing environment in global markets. These included four main categories: business strategies, educational strategies, innovative strategies, and performance evaluation.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Global Markets, Market Environment, Mixed-Methods Approach, Grounded Theory

1 Introduction

Since the advent of the internet in the commercial arena and the onset of the World Wide Web, businesses have undergone profound changes (Virat et al., 2018). The evolution of digital technologies has significantly reduced information asymmetry between customers and businesses. This reduction is most notably observed in customer behavior. It's evident that customer behavior is evolving due to access to various technologies and tools on mobile and online platforms, influencing information gathering about quality and price, search processes, and customer expectations. Moreover, the rise of digital platforms, as innovative institutions, has facilitated customer-to-customer interactions for brainstorming in new service/product development, thereby reducing businesses' information asymmetry. This shift has led to the inefficiency of traditional business theories in the global trade context. As a result, theories and techniques used for analyzing strategic components in traditional markets, including environmental analysis, competitor analysis, customer analysis, and analysis of organizational resources and capabilities, have lost their effectiveness (Martin et al., 2020; Rahimi Kaloor & Azarbayejani, 2021).

Organizations must constantly stay ahead of competitors. They strive to maintain their competitive edge, but as highlighted, they cannot compete in a market where the rules have fundamentally changed. The number of internet users and international internet networks are growing exponentially. Consequently, every commercial entity must cater to this vast customer base without geographical limitations. Electronic marketing, an emerging field shaped and expanded by the internet's development, necessitates the formulation of a model to develop and transform digital content by examining factors affecting the digital marketing environment for companies (Karimi et al., 2022; Trihadi Pudiawan et al., 2023). Digital marketing, a rapidly growing field, offers managers new methods to acquire, inform, and engage customers to promote and sell their products and services. This innovative marketing approach is highly effective and is expected to lead technological advancements and be a priority in senior marketing executives' investment strategies; influential factors in the digital marketing environment are those that impact this environment, contributing significantly to the success of digital marketing strategies (Buchanan et al., 2018; Karimi et al., 2022).

International marketing pertains to applying marketing concepts across multiple countries (Ehsanfar & Garousi, 2016). Through international trade, countries elevate their production levels and garner more profits. Almost a quarter-century has passed since the internet's commercial use and the global spread of the World Wide Web; during this period, the business landscape has rapidly evolved (Hisham, 2013). A significant capability of the internet is facilitating entry into international markets. The internet, due to its affordability and extensive reach, has become a primary factor in market penetration. Market changes globally, starting in the early 2000s due to advancements in information technology, domestic market saturation, and increased competition in developing economies, have ushered in a new era of entering international markets for companies. Especially, technological advancements have excessively influenced companies' behaviors and international strategies (Kotabe & Helsen, 2022).

Modern digital communications, enabled by internet technology, constitute almost 22% of the global economic output, covering a significant volume. Advances in communication, logistics, and information technology, along with reduced economic distances among countries, cross-border economic integrations, and convergence in customer preferences, have fundamentally challenged companies' ability to understand the environment and increase sales in international markets (Dana et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2020). Therefore, despite companies investing in a wide array of products, they struggle to differentiate themselves and satisfy customers with these varied options. Today's informed, interconnected, and empowered customers seek tailored solutions for their individual needs (Rahimi Kaloor & Azarbayejani, 2021).

Considering the proliferation of services through web services and the internet, many users utilize these services. With numerous components influencing web service development (search engine-related components, database designs, UI, and UX), digital marketing emerges as the most advanced marketing form. It is recognized as an effective approach for business development in various countries and increasingly garners widespread societal attention. However, it has yet to be fully accepted as a distinct academic discipline, as it still needs to compete with concepts like marketing, international marketing, and web analytics to establish its identity and claim its place in academia, curricula, scientific classifications, and national and international regulations. It requires more global research focus. Statistics show that organizations focusing on digital marketing in recent years have seen significant progress (Muhcina & Popovici, 2008).

Our country, with its pioneering role in self-sufficiency, increased domestic production, and development goals, has potential across various organizations. However, despite numerous companies, success in digital marketing has been limited. A review of existing research in reputable national scientific databases reveals a lack of scientific research identifying factors affecting the digital marketing environment that could localize this concept within the country. Considering the above, our current contribution to developing and embedding this concept among our organizations and scientific research appears significantly lower than expected. In today's business environment, digital marketing has become the most effective marketing method for penetrating diverse consumer groups, with all organizations making substantial investments to leverage the benefits of digital marketing (Polanco-Diges & Debasa, 2020). A comprehensive review of digital marketing studies indicates that designing a comprehensive, localized model identifying factors affecting the digital marketing environment in organizations is highly impactful. Given the novelty of the digital marketing environment topic, the generality of existing research, and the absence of a comprehensive model for the factors affecting the digital marketing environment, the researcher aims to explore this environment through sufficient knowledge acquisition and experiences of academic consultants and company managers. This exploration seeks to identify dimensions and indicators, develop a comprehensive model for the factors affecting the digital marketing environment, and address the key question: What is the nature of the design and explanation of the model for factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets?

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Qualitative Stage

In this study, an exploratory mixed-methods approach was utilized as the research strategy. In mixed-methods research, the researcher gains a better understanding of phenomena through the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods; therefore, the aim of mixed-method research is to gather more evidence for a deeper understanding of phenomena.

This research is based on combined survey methods. Grounded theory, one of the qualitative research strategies, forms theories based on core concepts derived from data. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to provide comprehensive theoretical explanations about a specific phenomenon, which are inductively obtained from the study of that phenomenon. In the data analysis phase of this study, experts were selected based on expertise criteria (minimum of a master's degree, at least 10 years of work experience, and a minimum of 5 years of experience in management or digital marketing). In the initial coding process, the focus was on key points of the interviews for in-depth interpretation, resulting in 242 open codes, 19 axial codes, and ultimately 45 selective codes in the area of causal factors, 38 selective codes in the area of contextual factors, and 63 selective codes in the area of intervening factors, in addition to 40 codes for strategies and 37 codes for outcomes.

To determine validity and reliability in the qualitative section, Lincoln and Guba's evaluation method (1985) was used, equivalent to validity and reliability in quantitative research. Based on this method, four criteria - credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability - form the basis for achieving validity and reliability in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To attain credibility, sampling continued until data saturation was reached, and face validity was evaluated by ten company managers (expert panel). For this purpose, the interview text and extracted codes were presented to participants for their feedback on accuracy, and any discrepancies were considered and reviewed. To achieve transferability, participants from different organizational levels with varying expertise and experiences were selected. In this study, to ensure dependability, complete recording of interviews was used for repeated data review and potential coding by a colleague, avoiding prolonged data collection (interviews) as much as possible, and asking all participants about the same topic. For confirmability of research findings, a detailed description of research stages including data collection, analysis, and theme development was provided to several participants for verification of the research process and outcomes.

2.2 Quantitative Stage

In the second phase, based on the most recurrent constructs in the qualitative section, a questionnaire was developed.

In the quantitative section, the goal of this phase was to determine relationship patterns, test the extent of relationships between categories, and achieve a level of generalizability of the model developed in the qualitative section. After fundamental screening steps and replacing

missing values, quantitative data analysis was conducted in two main stages: 1) Descriptive analysis of data, 2) Multivariate correlation analysis including Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The study's population comprised 205 managers from companies active in digital marketing. The research was conducted from the first half of 2022 to the second half of 2023, and in the statistical population (N=440), based on Morgan's table and convenience sampling, the sample size was estimated at 205 companies. Of these, 183 were men (89.27%) and 22 were women (10.73%), with the majority holding a master's degree (77.56%) and most having less than 15 years of service experience. They had fully responded to the questionnaires. The validity of the used questionnaire was content verified by experts. Additionally, the reliability of the tools was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and was above 0.7, indicating that the research questionnaire had appropriate reliability.

3 Findings and Results

Subsequently, descriptive characteristics related to 40 main categories and 20 subcategories resulting from the qualitative phase analysis, and 62 questions related to them in the questionnaire are presented.

Participants responded to 6 items related to the digital marketing environment, presented in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low (1) to very high (5). The average of the main category, the digital marketing environment, was 3.90, indicating that the current status of the digital marketing environment is at a medium level. Participants responded to 12 items related to causal factors presented in a 5-point Likert scale, which also consisted of 4 sub-components. The best status was for ease (M=3.82), and the weakest evaluation was for the factor of optimal management (M=3.77). Participants responded to 15 items related to contextual characteristics presented in a 5-point Likert scale, which also consisted of 5 sub-components. The best status was for cultural factors (M=3.81), and the weakest evaluation was for the education component (M=3.29). Participants responded to 7 items related to intervening factors presented in a 5-point Likert scale, which also consisted of 2 sub-components. Both the enhancing and weakening components, with an average of (M=3.77), had the same status. Participants responded to 13 items related to strategies presented in a 5-point Likert scale, which also consisted of 4 sub-components. The best status was for the assessment component (M=3.83), and the weakest evaluation was for innovative strategies (M=3.66). Participants responded to 9 items related to the outcomes category presented in a 5-point Likert scale, which also consisted of 3 sub-components. The best status was for the outcomes at the meso level (M=4.23).

As a preliminary step for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to establish the construct validity of the factors. Based on the findings of the qualitative section of the research, in the first-order CFA using Amos software, 62 questionnaire items of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets were used, categorized into 20 main factors. Table 1 shows the results of the CFA and some of the most important fit indices for each of the factors and compares them with the established criteria. Based on these results, the factor analysis is confirmed.

Table 1

The Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the First-Order Factors

First-Order Factors	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	NFI	IFI	CFI
Criterion	1 to 5	< 0.1	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9
Causal Factors	2.715	0.050	0.957	0.971	0.921
Digital Marketing Environment	1.909	0.020	0.999	0.946	0.949
Contextual Factors	4.961	0.060	0.951	0.926	0.921
Mediating Factors	1.275	0.015	0.961	0.993	0.992
Strategies	2.124	0.023	0.947	0.955	0.955
Consequences	1.459	0.041	0.954	0.978	0.972

The statistical indices in the second-order factor analysis indicate a completely satisfactory model fit. Specifically, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi2/df$) ranged from 1.175 to 2.427, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) from 0.011 to 0.085, the Normed Fit Index (NFI) from 0.955 to 0.990, the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) from 0.923 to 0.987, and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) from 0.923 to 0.987. The scales of internal and external factors constitute another latent construct named the central category. Scales of innovation, optimal management,

structural factors, and ease form another latent construct named causal factors. Subscales of cultural factors, infrastructural factors, education, leadership style, and strategies constitute another latent construct named contextual characteristics. Subscales of enhancing and weakening factors form another latent construct named intervening factors. Subscales of business, educational, innovative, and assessment strategies form another latent construct named strategies. Subscales of outcomes at micro, meso, and macro levels form another latent construct named outcomes.

Figure 1

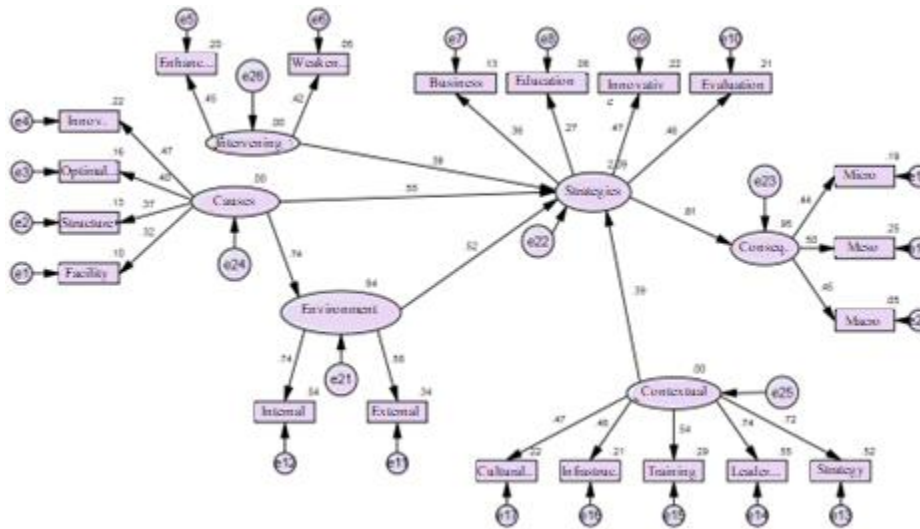*Structural Model with Standard Values*

Table 2

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis Number	Hypothesis Title	Path Coefficients	Critical Ratio	p	Test Result
H1	Causal factors (innovation, optimal management, structural factors, and ease) of the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets have an impact on the digital marketing environment.	2.958	0.74	0.000	Accepted
H2	Causal factors (innovation, optimal management, structural factors, and ease) of the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets influence the strategies for implementing this model.	3.242	0.55	0.001	Accepted
H3	The digital marketing environment influences the strategies of the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets.	2.241	0.52	0.000	Accepted
H4	Contextual factors (cultural factors, infrastructural factors, education, leadership style, and strategies) affect the strategies of the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets.	6.804	0.39	0.000	Accepted
H5	Intervening factors (enhancing and weakening factors) influence the strategies of the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets.	5.766	0.39	0.002	Accepted
H6	The strategies for implementing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets impact the outcomes at micro, meso, and macro levels.	5.543	0.81	0.000	Accepted

Structural Equation Modeling and AMOS software were used to validate the model designed for factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets. Based on the paradigmatic model extracted from the qualitative data analysis and factors from the second-order factor analysis, direct and indirect relationships between variables were determined. Given the conceptual model derived from the qualitative phase of the research, each of the model's constructs is presented as observed variables in the hypothetical research model, and the results from Table 2 indicate that the research hypotheses are confirmed.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices

Index Name	Confirmation Criterion	Estimated Value	Result
CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.982	Confirmed
IFI	Greater than 0.9	0.991	Confirmed
NFI	Greater than 0.9	0.942	Confirmed
CMIN/DF	Between 1 and 5	5.577	Confirmed
RMSEA	Less than 0.1	0.056	Confirmed

The results in the Table 3 suggest that all indices are reported at a very satisfactory level, and the model fits well with the data, indicating that there is a linear relationship between the variables.

4   Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to design and validate factors influencing the digital marketing environment in global markets. For this purpose, from a methodological perspective, we employed an exploratory mixed-methods strategy. In the first phase, the researcher used the systematic approach of Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify the main phenomenon of the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment and, through qualitative data analysis, reached the design of the research's paradigmatic model through open, axial, and selective coding. The paradigmatic model suggests that the primary phenomenon of the digital marketing environment is influenced by two categories: internal factors and external factors, which in turn determine the strategies of the digital marketing environment. It is crucial to recognize that this influence is not pure and occurs with the intervention of other internal and external factors. Several strategies emerged from the insights of key informants, taking into account their experiences and perceptions of the digital marketing environment in global markets. These included four main categories: business strategies, educational strategies, innovative strategies, and performance evaluation. In terms of strategies, factors such as fostering a digital marketing culture, greater involvement in global associations, and presence in digital marketing exhibitions and conferences align with the findings of Saura et al. (2017) and Ding et al. (2021) (Ding et al., 2021; Saura et al., 2017). Successful implementation of these strategies can significantly impact the factors influencing the digital marketing environment. However, the role of factors such as innovation, optimal management, structural factors, and ease, as well as seven subcategories included in structural factors and optimal management, and the role of contextual factors such as cultural factors, infrastructural factors, education, leadership style, and strategies, were determined not to be overlooked. These findings are consistent with the research by Buchanan et al. (2018) (Buchanan et al., 2018). Ultimately, with these actions and reactions and the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets, we should expect outcomes at the micro, meso, and macro-organizational levels. The development of entrepreneurship, sustainable competitive development, and productivity enhancement as outcomes of using the factors of the digital marketing environment align with the findings of Rahimi Kaloor et al. (2022) (Rahimi Kaloor & Azarbayejani, 2021). After achieving this narrative, it was necessary to answer whether the qualitative findings could be generalized to other organizations and companies in the research domain. The answer required the execution of the second, or quantitative, phase of the research. Quantitative findings showed that the causal conditions for establishing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment have a direct and significant effect (path coefficient = 0.74) on the digital marketing environment. Also, the causal conditions have a direct and positive effect (path coefficient = 0.55) on the strategies for implementing this model. The digital marketing environment has a direct and positive effect (path coefficient = 0.52) on the strategies for implementing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment. Contextual factors have a direct and positive effect (path coefficient = 0.39) on the strategies for implementing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment. Intervening factors have a direct and positive effect (path coefficient = 0.39) on the strategies for implementing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment, and finally, the phenomenon of strategies for implementing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment in global markets has a direct and positive effect (path coefficient = 0.81) on the outcomes at the micro, meso, and macro-organizational

levels. Ultimately, the validity and accuracy of the qualitative and quantitative findings of the research were gauged against the literature. In terms of comparing the results of the research with the findings of domestic and foreign studies, it can be stated that the research's focus on identifying factors affecting the digital marketing environment as the key task of marketing managers in organizations has led to comprehensive attention to the digital marketing environment. This not only reveals hidden aspects of this important area but also consolidates various research indicators into a comprehensive and localized model. While none of the existing research in the field of digital marketing environment separately discussed the factors affecting the digital marketing environment, providing a general view of the role of digital marketing in marketing approaches, the current research addressed various aspects such as social, economic, political, cultural, etc., in designing and explaining the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment at the global market level with a data-driven approach. The comprehensiveness of the model is demonstrated by identified indices and components for each aspect, but overall, existing research to some extent corroborates the indicators and components identified in this research.

5 Limitations and Suggestions

It must be acknowledged that no study or research is flawless and there are always limitations that prevent research results from being ideal. This research is no exception and comes with some limitations associated with qualitative research. The researcher's theoretical perspective in categorizing qualitative data and the involvement of the researcher's mindset, experience, and knowledge in classifying and naming categories was one of the limitations of this research. This was mitigated by having external evaluators review the qualitative data analysis. The use of non-random sampling in selecting interviewees was another limitation, potentially resulting in the collected data not fully covering the diverse scope of the research topic.

Based on the results of designing the model of factors affecting the digital marketing environment and achieving the identified outcomes, the following practical suggestions

are offered to companies active in the field of digital marketing and the statistical community under study:

- Utilize robust CRM software, including both foreign and domestic applications such as Hubspot CRM, Freshsale, Zoho, Adsafar, Pirasys, and Parand Technology Group, for activities in global markets.
- Continuously monitor the global market and market needs using tools like Keyword tool.io and Kwfinder.
- Employ a professional digital unit to identify strategies of other competitors.
- Hire experts in information security.
- Evaluate feedback on factors affecting digital marketing using application software.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions

Saeed Bagheri Anilu conceptualized the study's main framework and led the qualitative analysis, conducting in-depth interviews and employing grounded theory for data interpretation. Younos Vakil Alroaia, as the corresponding author, spearheaded the quantitative research, formulating hypotheses, designing the survey, and analyzing data using statistical software. Seyyed Abdollah Heydariyeh played a crucial role in integrating the qualitative and quantitative findings, contributing to the development and validation of the final model. All authors collectively participated in drafting and revising the manuscript, ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the research presented.

Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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