Qualitative Identification of Intervening Factors Affecting Digital Marketing Strategies in Successful Iranian Startups

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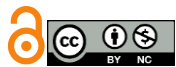
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ABSTRACT

Objective: The study aims to identify and analyze the key intervening factors that influence the digital marketing strategies of successful Iranian startups. It seeks to understand how these factors contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of digital marketing efforts in the startup ecosystem of Iran.

Methodology: Employing a qualitative research design, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 12 digital marketing experts from various successful Iranian startups. Grounded theory methodology was used to analyze the interview data, facilitating the identification of core themes and factors affecting digital marketing strategies.

Findings: The research identified several critical factors impacting digital marketing strategies, including organizational culture, technological adoption, market dynamics, and regulatory environment. It highlights the importance of adaptability, strategic alignment, and continuous learning within startups to navigate the challenges and opportunities of digital marketing.

Conclusion: The study concludes that for Iranian startups, a nuanced understanding of both internal and external factors is crucial for developing and implementing effective digital marketing strategies. It underscores the need for a strategic approach that incorporates flexibility, innovation, and customer engagement to achieve sustained growth and competitive advantage in the digital marketplace.

Keywords: *Qualitative, Intervening Factors, Digital Marketing, Strategies, Iranian Startups.*

1   Introduction

The rapid emergence and widespread adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social networks continue to have a significant impact on the way people communicate and meet their socio-economic, emotional, and material needs (Teixeira et al., 2018). ICTs and digital networks, such as email services, search engines, websites, and social networking sites, are extensively used by individuals for various activities including searching for daily news and new information about important events, communicating with family and friends, reviewing products, services, and various locations, buying and selling goods, accessing transportation, tourism, personal financial services, and workplace management (Brecht et al., 2021; Dong, 2019).

Additionally, the notable increase in temporal and geographical access to consumers has empowered them to exert influence on brands, products, and services (Kaoud, 2021). These technologies continue to be utilized for various purposes including distribution and sale of goods, consumer service sales, customer relationship management, and influencing consumer behavior (Goncalves & Bergquist, 2022; Purbasari et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2018). Thus, with the growth of ICT technologies including big data, artificial intelligence, GPS, Bluetooth, Zigbee, RFID, QR codes, and other mobile and internet-connected technologies, marketers can tailor their messaging for effective targeting of micro-consumer segments within any village or neighborhood, offering hyper-localized experiences/services/engagements (Centobelli et al., 2022; Pakulska & Poniatowska-Jaksch, 2022). In this regard, these technologies have highlighted digital marketing activities (Nazulfa & Santoso, 2023; Yang et al., 2023), which include display advertising, institutional marketing, search engine-based marketing, email marketing, social network-based marketing, and mobile marketing (Mancha et al., 2019).

Social networks have become a common channel for marketing and advertising activities (Goncalves & Bergquist, 2022). Companies face challenges when designing social network-based advertisements to successfully attract customers and motivate them to purchase their brands. Studies have been conducted to identify and test factors related to social network-based advertisements that predict purchase intent (Nazulfa & Santoso, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). There is also growing interest in measuring the impact and value of social network-based marketing activities, leading to the development of various social network-based metrics (Teixeira et al., 2018).

Some companies in such countries still rely more on traditional media for advertising their products and services, as these media are considered more reliable compared to social network channels (Brecht et al., 2021). Social networks have transformed the way companies conduct marketing activities, leading to new challenges and advantages (Mohammadi & Shafiee, 2021; Riyoko, 2023). When digital marketing is misused or implemented by inexperienced professionals, it can have a negative impact on companies. Therefore, it is crucial for companies to acquire expertise in social networks and pay special attention to aligning their digital marketing strategy with their organizational goals (Brecht et al., 2021; Mancha et al., 2019). Strategically applied social network-based marketing can lead to customer satisfaction, increased perceived value, brand loyalty, positive attitudes, and ultimately entrepreneurship (Goncalves & Bergquist, 2022; Kaoud, 2021).

Digital marketing is a hot and exciting topic for research due to its relative novelty and rapid growth. Today, digital marketing is one of the key areas of interest in the field of marketing studies (Teixeira et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2023). However, a wide variety of perspectives have been presented in this area. Moreover, many startups in our country are unaware of marketing principles and strategies and often fail shortly after starting their business (Namaayande & Khamseh, 2019). Startups in our country face numerous challenges in developing their business, with the most important being the determination of optimal marketing strategies to achieve their goals (Mohammadi & Shafiee, 2021).

Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) are a significant part of the economy in all countries but are highly affected by rapid changes in the external environment, especially demographic and economic shifts (Namaayande & Khamseh, 2019). These rapid changes impact the marketing sector of these businesses in meeting customer needs and expectations to maintain a competitive position in the market. Startups, as a subset of SMBs, are also affected by these changes and require appropriate marketing strategies to survive in this dynamic environment (Mohammadi & Shafiee, 2021). The marketing strategy of these organizations differs from that of large organizations due to the internal characteristics and environmental factors that encourage startups to use innovative marketing approaches. Entrepreneurial marketing, leveraging

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innovation, helps startups adapt to environmental changes and achieve their desired market share (Peixoto et al., 2023; Şahin & Siğri, 2022; Trad & Dabbagh, 2020).

In relational marketing strategy, the focus shifts from economic or informational exchanges to individual relationships between buyer and seller. This strategy benefits both the buyer and the customer. The internet enhances two-way personal communications, and the company, by understanding and recognizing the needs and expectations of customers, provides greater satisfaction (Kaoud, 2021; Trad & Dabbagh, 2020). In a knowledge-based marketing strategy, the company has created a strong database of customers, competitors, and other environmental conditions and variables, allowing it to engage with its customers on a one-to-one basis. The strategy involves attracting new customers while retaining existing ones, and the company has a very high level of interaction with its informed customers, offering customized products (Day & Shi, 2020; Teixeira et al., 2018). Customer-centric marketing strategy is an integrated combination of transactional, database, relational, and knowledge-based strategies (Woehler & Ernst, 2022). Given market conditions and the company's position, it is essential to choose one of these strategies, considering the increasing number of organizations and competition between them, and the need for targeted marketing of products. Emphasizing internet marketing and especially an appropriate and regular strategy with it can play a fundamental role in the success of a business. Today, one of the challenges regarding professions is the lack of proper insight into the capabilities and incentives that enable the potential success of an individual's career fields. In fact, individuals have an inadequate understanding of their job, leading to compulsory work, meaning that without considering skills, interests, and motivations, one engages in a job towards which they are indifferent and also does not achieve good results (Mancha et al., 2019; Nurcahyo et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2020).

Therefore, based on the information presented, researchers in this study seek to investigate the intervening factors of digital marketing strategy in successful Iranian startups.

2   Methods and Materials

2.1   Study Design and Participants

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing grounded theory methodology to explore the intervening factors in digital marketing strategies within the startup sector. Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, is a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theories through the methodical gathering and analysis of data. This approach is particularly suited to this study as it allows for the in-depth exploration of complex phenomena, such as digital marketing strategies, through the identification of patterns, themes, and categories emerging directly from the data itself.

The research involved semi-structured interviews with 12 experts who possess both academic knowledge and practical experience in the startup industry. Participants were selected based on their expertise in digital marketing and their involvement in the strategic planning processes within their respective organizations. This criterion was essential to ensure that the insights gained were both theoretically informed and practically relevant. Efforts were made to include a diverse group of participants, encompassing a range of roles including managers and scholars, to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on digital marketing strategies in startups.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of the interviews.

2.2   Measures

2.2.1   Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a flexible, yet structured, qualitative data collection method that allows for in-depth exploration of participants' views, experiences, and insights. The interview guide was developed to include open-ended questions, facilitating a conversation that could explore the intricacies of digital marketing strategy intervention factors within the startup context. This approach enabled the researchers to probe deeper into specific areas of interest or clarify responses when necessary, while allowing the conversation to flow naturally and explore topics that emerged spontaneously from the dialogue. The interviews were conducted over a period of three months, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. They were held in locations convenient to the participants or via video conferencing platforms, depending on their preference and availability. All interviews were

recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data analysis.

2.3   Data analysis

Following grounded theory procedures, data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing emerging insights to inform subsequent interviews. The process began with open coding, where the transcribed data were broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. This initial coding phase helped to identify preliminary categories and themes related to the intervention factors in digital marketing strategies.

As the analysis progressed, axial coding was employed to relate categories to subcategories, specifying the properties and dimensions of each. This facilitated the development of a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between different factors influencing digital marketing strategies in startups.

Finally, selective coding was used to integrate and refine the categories, developing a core category that represents the central phenomenon of the study. Through this iterative process, a grounded theory was developed, offering a detailed conceptual framework that explains the intervening factors in digital marketing strategies within the startup sector, grounded in the empirical data collected from experts in the field.

3   Findings and Results

To determine the research method, the research onion model provided by Saunders et al. (2003) was used. In this study, from various universities such as Allameh Tabataba'i University (1 person), Tehran University (1 person), Tarbiat Modares University (1 person), Shahid Beheshti University (2 people), and University of Science and Research (1

person) in the academic section, and from diverse companies such as Snapp (2 people), Tapsi (1 person), Digikala (2 people), Netbarg (1 person), and Takhfifan (1 person) in the executive section, were selected as the statistical population for conducting interviews. All these individuals possessed at least a Master's degree. A very important point in these companies is that due to the nature of their activities, there is a wide range of activities, thus reducing the likelihood of inviting someone for an interview who would impose their sectional viewpoint on the interview space and provide information from their perspective. For this reason, the researcher has tried to select his research samples in the following sections to obtain different opinions and viewpoints of academic experts and executive managers. The individuals interviewed are categorized into three groups:

1. International: Individuals who are in contact with international organizations regarding digital marketing strategies;
2. Academic: Individuals who have conducted university studies on digital marketing strategies;
3. Companies: Individuals who are active in startups;

In terms of the demographic ratio of experts, executive experts with 46% have the highest ratio among other groups. Following them, academic experts with 38%, and finally, 16% of the experts are those who are internationally related to the research topic.

Moreover, most of the experts held a doctoral degree. This ratio is 69% compared to 31% for Master's degrees. Most of the experts were also male, with a percentage of 77%, and the ratio of women among the interviewees was 23%.

To clarify the method of extracting open codes from key statements, extracting axial codes from open codes, and ultimately achieving selective codes based on axial codes, the results of open coding are as described in the Table 1.

Table 1

Open Codes, Indicators, and Frequencies

Row	Open Code	Indicator	Frequency
1	Process Complexity	Cc126, Cc127, Cc128, Gc143, Kc124, Lc75	6
2	Market Entry Feasibility	Cc79, Cc80, Cc81, Ec13, Ec135, Fc170, Ic140, Jc115, Mc83	9
3	Digital Synergy	Cc86, Dc127, Ec136, Ec137, Ec138, Ec139, Gc149, Gc150, Jc120, Jc121, Kc131, Kc132, Lc82, Lc83, Mc87, Mc88	16
4	Cultural Synergy	Cc87, Cc88, Bc124, Bc125, Fc169, Jc122, Jc123, Kc133, Kc134, Mc89	10
5	Social Synergy	Cc140, Cc141, Cc142, Fc174, Fc175, Gc151, Gc152, Ic147, Ic148, Mc90	10
6	Encouraging Purchase Decision	Bc129, Cc143, Cc144, Cc145, Gc156, Gc157, Jc126, Kc135, Kc136, Mc93	10
7	Customer Awareness	Cc91, Cc92, Ec141, Ec142, Gc158, Jc127, Jc128, Jc129, Kc137, Kc138, Lc87, Lc88, Lc89	13
8	Culture of Sharing	Bc130, Cc149, Cc150, Fc176, Fc177, Ic153, Ic154, Ic155, Kc139, Kc140, Kc141, Mc94	12

9	Digital Acceptance Behavior of Customers	Cc93, Cc94, Cc95, Ec143, Ec144, Hc141, Hc142, Hc143, Hc144, Ic156, Ic157, Ic158, Ic159, Jc130, Jc131, Lc90, Lc91, Lc92	18
10	Reducing Acceptance Risk	Bc131, Bc132, Dc131, Dc132, Fc178, Fc179, Fc180, Ic160, Ic161	9
11	Ensuring Stability and Survival	Bc139, Bc140, Cc157, Cc158, Cc159, Hc154, Ic175, Ic176, Ic177, Jc141, Jc142, Jc143, Mc104	13
12	Full Exploitation of Human Capital Potential	Bc58, Bc59, Cc63, Dc70, Dc71, Gc84, Gc85, Gc86, Gc87, Kc59, Kc60, Kc61	12
13	Aligning Skills with Future Vision	Cc42, Cc43, Bc60, Cc64, Fc69, Fc70, Fc71, Ic77, Ic78, Ic79, Mc49	11
14	Adjusting Skills to Understand Changes	Bc61, Cc65, Dc72, Ec75, Ec76, Gc88, Gc89, Gc90, Jc59, Jc60, Jc61, Jc62	12
15	Redefining Roles	Bc62, Bc63, Dc73, Fc72, Fc73, Fc74, Hc75, Ic80, Ic81, Ic82, Lc34, Lc35, Lc36	13
16	Multidisciplinary Roles	Cc66, Cc67, Dc74, Fc75, Fc76, Fc77, Gc91, Gc92, Gc93, Kc62, Kc63, Kc64	12
17	Functional Training Suitable for Digital Space	Cc44, Cc45, Cc46, Cc47, Ec77, Ec78, Hc76, Hc77, Jc63, Jc64, Jc65, Lc37, Lc38	13
18	Filling the Talent Gap	Bc64, Bc65, Dc75, Fc78, Fc79, Fc80, Gc96, Gc97, Gc98, Ic83, Ic84, Ic85, Mc49, Mc50	14
19	Developing Technical and Analytical Skills	Cc68, Cc69, Dc76, Dc77, Fc81, Fc82, Gc94, Gc95, Hc78, Hc79, Hc80, Kc65, Kc66	13
20	Alignment with Dynamic and Turbulent Environment	Bc66, Cc70, Ec79, Ec80, Ec81, Gc99, Gc100, Gc101, Jc66, Jc67, Jc68, Lc39	12
21	Developing Integration Skills	Bc67, Bc68, Bc69, Dc78, Dc79, Gc102, Gc103, Gc104, Kc67, Kc68, Kc69	11
22	Continuous Interaction	Cc48, Cc49, Bc70, Bc71, Dc80, Dc81, Hc81, Hc82, Hc83, Hc84, Mc51, Mc52	12
23	Network Structure	Cc71, Cc72, Dc82, Ec82, Ec83, Hc88, Hc89, Hc90, Hc91, Lc40, Lc41, Mc53	12
24	Multiple Roles	Bc72, Bc73, Cc73, Dc83, Fc92, Fc93, Fc94, Jc69, Jc70, Jc71, Mc54	11
25	Adaptable and Flexible Teams	Cc74, Dc84, Dc85, Fc83, Fc84, Fc85, Ic86, Ic87, Ic88, Ic89, Kc70, Kc71, Kc72	13
26	Self-Adjusting Teams	Cc50, Cc51, Dc86, Dc87, Gc105,106, Hc85, Hc86, Hc87, Lc42, Lc43	10
27	Self-Controlling Teams	Bc74, Bc75, Cc75, Ec84, Ec85, Fc86, Fc87, Fc88, Kc73, Kc74, Kc75, Kc76	12
28	Teamwork	Cc76, Dc88, Dc89, Ec86, Ec87, Hc102, Hc103, Kc77, Kc78, Kc79, Kc80, Mc55	12
29	Team Building	Bc76, Bc77, Dc90, Dc91, Fc89, Fc90, Fc91, Jc72, Jc73, Jc74, Jc75, Jc76	12
30	Agile Structuring	Bc78, Bc79, Dc92, Dc93, Dc94, Ic90, Ic91, Ic92, Ic93, Lc44, Lc45, Lc46	12
Total			355

Subsequently, the results of axial coding are presented to clarify the intervening factors:

Table 2

The Results of Selective, Axial, and Open Codes

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Cultural	Organizational Culture	Cultural Synergy
		Culture of Sharing
		Digital Synergy
		Encouraging Purchase Decision
	Customer Culture	Social Synergy
		Customer Awareness
		Digital Acceptance Behavior of Customers
Structural	Systems and Processes	Process Complexity
		Alignment with Dynamic and Turbulent Environment
		Multiple Roles
	Team Building	Adaptable and Flexible Teams
		Self-Adjusting Teams
		Self-Controlling Teams
		Teamwork
		Team Building
		Agile Structuring
	Resources and Skills	Adjusting Skills for Understanding Changes

	Redefining Roles
	Multidisciplinary Roles
	Functional Training Suitable for Digital Space
	Filling the Talent Gap
	Adapting Skills to Future Visions
	Developing Integration Skills
	Developing Technical and Analytical Skills
Agile Structure	Enabling Market Entry
	Full Exploitation of Human Capital Potential
	Reducing Adoption Risk
	Ensuring Stability and Survival
	Continuous Interaction
	Network Structure

4   Discussion and Conclusion

The findings highlight the intricate relationship between organizational culture, structural dynamics, and the adoption of digital marketing strategies within the context of management science. The concepts of process complexity, market entry feasibility, and various forms of synergy (digital, cultural, and social) underline the need for adaptive strategies that leverage both human capital and technological advancements. These results are aligned with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of aligning organizational structures and cultures with the rapidly evolving digital landscape (Bolat et al., 2021; Brecht et al., 2021; Koesharijadi et al., 2022; Mohammadi & Shafiee, 2021; Namaayande & Khamseh, 2019; Nurcahyo et al., 2018; Şahin & Siğri, 2022; Teixeira et al., 2018; Trad & Dabbagh, 2020). The emphasis on skill adaptation, role redefinition, and the development of technical and analytical capabilities further supports the argument for agile and flexible organizational practices to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by digital transformation (Goncalves & Bergquist, 2022). The discussion around teamwork, continuous interaction, and network structures reflects a broader consensus on the value of collaborative and integrative approaches to digital marketing strategy formulation (Mohammadi & Shafiee, 2021). This resonates with contemporary research advocating for a holistic and dynamic approach to managing digital transitions, suggesting that successful digital marketing strategies are contingent upon a firm's ability to foster an environment conducive to innovation, learning, and customer engagement.

For further explanation, it's evident that the synergy between cultural and structural elements within an organization significantly influences the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies (Koesharijadi et al., 2022;

Namaayande & Khamseh, 2019). This alignment is critical in ensuring that digital transformation initiatives are not only technologically sound but also culturally and structurally integrated, fostering an ecosystem that supports innovation and customer-centric approaches. The literature suggests that companies that effectively manage this alignment are better positioned to navigate the complexities of digital markets, achieve sustainable growth, and maintain competitive advantage (Bolat et al., 2021). This points out to the importance of strategic agility and the need for organizations to continuously adapt to the dynamic digital environment, emphasizing the role of human capital, collaborative practices, and organizational flexibility in achieving digital marketing success.

Moreover, it's crucial to recognize the role of digital and social synergies in enhancing customer engagement and loyalty in the digital era. These synergies enable organizations to leverage digital platforms for more personalized and interactive customer experiences, aligning with findings that suggest the increasing importance of customer-centric strategies in digital marketing success (Thomas et al., 2020). Additionally, the focus on reducing acceptance risk and ensuring organizational stability and survival highlights the strategic importance of risk management in digital transformations. Organizations that proactively address potential disruptions through agile structures and continuous adaptation are more likely to sustain their market position and navigate the uncertainties of digital markets effectively. Lastly, the emphasis on multidisciplinary roles and teamwork in the findings suggests a shift towards more collaborative and cross-functional team structures in managing digital initiatives (Pandey et al., 2020; Riyoko, 2023). This approach not only fosters innovation and creativity but also ensures that diverse skill sets are utilized effectively, aligning with the broader literature that underscores the value of diversity and

collaboration in driving digital transformation and organizational change.

5 Suggestions and Limitations

This study, focusing on digital marketing strategies in Iranian startups, is limited by its qualitative approach and the selection of participants. While grounded theory methodology offers deep insights, the findings are inherently subjective, influenced by the perspectives of the 12 experts interviewed. The research's context-specific nature means its applicability might be limited outside the Iranian startup ecosystem. Additionally, the evolving digital marketing landscape may outpace the study's conclusions, necessitating ongoing research to remain relevant.

Future research should expand on this study's findings by incorporating quantitative methods to validate the identified factors affecting digital marketing strategies across a broader spectrum of startups, both within and outside Iran. Investigating the long-term impact of these strategies on startup success and scalability could offer valuable insights. Additionally, exploring the role of emerging technologies and platforms in digital marketing strategies could provide a forward-looking perspective on the field.

For practitioners, this study underscores the importance of aligning digital marketing strategies with organizational culture and structure. Startups should focus on developing agile, flexible marketing practices that can adapt to the dynamic digital environment. Emphasizing skill adaptation, role redefinition, and continuous learning will be key. Moreover, fostering a collaborative, innovative culture that leverages digital and social synergies can enhance customer engagement and contribute to sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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