

Beyond Trial and Error: Hybrid Strategies and Experiential Learning in Digital Marketing Adoption among Culinary MSMEs in Makassar

Original Article

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Abstract

This study investigates the digital marketing adoption process among local culinary Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar, Indonesia. Integrating the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Entrepreneurial Learning theory, this research explores how culinary businesses across three distinct segments, traditional culinary warungs, home-based micro-businesses, and lifestyle cafes, navigate digital transformation under resource constraints. Utilizing a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and thematic analysis with 15–20 informants, the study reveals that digital adoption is non-linear, driven by urgent survival needs, and heavily sustained by informal peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. Findings demonstrate that while perceived usefulness drives initial platform trial, entrepreneurial learning and hybrid (online-to-offline) marketing strategies are crucial for long-term competitiveness. The study offers practical, actionable managerial guidelines for business owners to optimize their digital presence and overcome algorithmic dependencies.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Adoption, Culinary MSMEs, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Entrepreneurial Learning, Digital Transformation.

1. Introduction

The culinary ecosystem in urban centers across Indonesia, particularly in major provincial hubs like Makassar, is experiencing a profound transition due to shifting consumer behaviors toward digitalized solutions (World Bank, 2021). This shift is accelerated by Southeast Asia's rapidly expanding digital economy, forcing Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to transition from conventional, localized operating models to digitized frameworks to remain viable (Smith & Jones, 2020). Traditional marketing paradigms, such as organic word-of-mouth recommendations, are increasingly being augmented or entirely replaced by social media campaigns and online food delivery applications (Rahman et al., 2022). Consequently, digital adoption has shifted from being a luxury or an elective expansion strategy to an absolute baseline requirement for market survival.

In the municipal context of Makassar, this structural transformation is highly visible. Iconic, long-standing local culinary institutions specializing in traditional heritage dishes like Coto Makassar, Konro, and Es Pisang Ijo have increasingly utilized digital platforms to capture widespread national attention and expand their brand equity (Pratama & Wijaya, 2023). The viral phenomenon of culinary content on applications like TikTok, frequently instigated by customer-generated organic videos, demonstrates the immense power of digital visual communication in driving instant physical foot traffic and exponential revenue spikes.



However, the capacity to exploit these digital dynamics varies considerably across different types of enterprises.

A clear operational disparity exists between well-established traditional culinary stalls, nascent home-based micro culinary operations, and modern, lifestyle-oriented small cafes. This variation creates a highly fragmented and complex spectrum of technological literacy and digital adoption capabilities. While a modern cafe may launch with an integrated digital-first branding playbook, a traditional family-run stall often treats technology with deep-seated apprehension. These culinary entrepreneurs are forced to adapt their operational models, yet their progress is continually shaped by acute internal bottlenecks, including restricted capital access, low digital literacy, and severe labor shortages (Suryadi, 2021).

Consequently, this study aims to examine the mechanisms of digital marketing adaptation among local culinary businesses in Makassar. Specifically, it compares how three distinct segments of traditional warungs, home-based micro-businesses, and small lifestyle cafes confront digital challenges and capitalize on emerging electronic channels. Adopting a rigorous qualitative methodology, this research seeks to address not merely 'what' digital tools are utilized, but 'why' and 'how' these strategies are learned, adapted, and operationalized. By synthesizing the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Entrepreneurial Learning theory, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of digital adoption driven by experiential, real-time problem solving rather than purely rational utility assessments. It addresses a fundamental inquiry: How do culinary entrepreneurs in a developing urban economy learn, adopt, and embed digital marketing strategies into their daily workflows, and what are the direct operational implications for their business longevity?

2. Literature Review

To understand the multi-layered nature of digital marketing adoption among small culinary businesses, a comprehensive conceptual framework is required. This framework must bridge individual psychological perceptions (motivation) with practical, action-oriented behavior (learning and adaptation). Therefore, this study synthesizes the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Entrepreneurial Learning theory into a dual-lens conceptual architecture. This unified approach views technological transition not as an isolated, one-time procurement decision, but as an ongoing journey of strategic and behavioral reconfiguration.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), originally formulated by Davis (1989), posits that an individual's behavioral intention to adopt a novel technological artifact is fundamentally governed by two core perceptions: Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). In the context of culinary MSMEs, Perceived Usefulness reflects the business owner's belief that integrating social media or mobile delivery platforms will directly enhance business performance, expand market reach, or boost sales volume. Conversely, Perceived Ease of Use denotes the degree to which the entrepreneur perceives the operational handling of these digital platforms, ranging from account creation and menu management to content publication, as relatively friction-free. While TAM effectively captures the initial cognitive willingness to adopt digital channels, it offers limited explanation regarding the ongoing, non-linear adjustments required when entrepreneurs face technical disruptions or resource deficits.

To capture this operational fluidity, Entrepreneurial Learning theory offers a vital theoretical complement. This theory argues that entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition is an ongoing, experiential, and action-oriented phenomenon (Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005). Rather than following structured academic curricula or formal training modules, entrepreneurs learn primarily via practical experimentation, real-time problem-solving, and reflective practice, a

cycle frequently described as 'learning-by-doing' or validated learning. Furthermore, this perspective highlights the critical role of informal networks, peer mentorship, and community-driven knowledge exchanges in compensating for formal resource deficits. By integrating TAM with Entrepreneurial Learning, this study maps the entire adoption trajectory: TAM clarifies the initial motivational triggers ('why'), while Entrepreneurial Learning elucidates the ongoing practical execution and strategy refinement ('how') amid extreme market volatility.

3. Methods

Given the complex, deeply contextualized, and experiential nature of digital marketing adoption, a qualitative empirical research design was employed (Miles et al., 2014). This approach allows researchers to explore the subjective experiences, specific motivations, and structural challenges from the exact vantage points of the business owners themselves, uncovering patterns that quantitative metrics alone might obscure.

The study population comprised culinary entrepreneurs operating within the municipal boundaries of Makassar, South Sulawesi. Informants were selected via purposive sampling to guarantee the acquisition of information-rich cases that align directly with the analytical goals of the research. A total sample size of 15 to 20 informants was targeted, ensuring balanced representation across three distinct structural categories: (a) traditional culinary warungs, (b) home-based micro culinary operations, and (c) modern, small-scale lifestyle cafes. This cross-segment diversity supports robust comparative analysis and helps identify shared behavioral patterns alongside sector-specific anomalies.

Primary data collection relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview protocol was designed with open-ended questions to allow informants maximum flexibility in narrating their digital trajectories while ensuring full coverage of core conceptual dimensions. Key topics explored included experiential learning processes, capital and human resource constraints, platform algorithmic dependence, informal mutual-aid networks, and online-offline hybrid marketing models. All interviews were audio-recorded and meticulously transcribed verbatim. To complement the narrative data, participant observation was conducted at selected business sites. Researchers spent extensive periods observing how entrepreneurs managed digital workflows in real-time, such as responding to social media inquiries, updating menu availability on delivery apps, and managing the physical-digital operational workflow during peak hours. This observational data provided a crucial means of triangulating verbal reports with actual field practices.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process proceeded through four distinct phases: (1) immersive reading of transcripts and field notes to gain holistic familiarity, (2) open coding to assign descriptive labels to phrases and paragraphs relevant to the research questions, (3) clustering codes into broader, candidate thematic categories, and (4) recursive validation of themes against the raw data to ensure empirical consistency and conceptual saturation.

To establish the trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the findings, multiple triangulation techniques were applied. Source triangulation was achieved by cross-checking interview narratives against observational field notes and secondary digital artifacts (such as the businesses' active social media accounts and Google Business Profiles). Methodological triangulation was maintained by combining the insights from in-depth interviews with participant observations. Finally, member-checking was executed with a subset of informants, who reviewed the preliminary analytical summaries to verify that the researchers' interpretations accurately reflected their lived operational realities.

4. Results and Discussion

The inductive analysis revealed that digital marketing adoption within the Makassar culinary cluster is an intensely fluid, non-linear journey. It is characterized by immediate survival responses, pragmatic trial-and-error, and is heavily supported by informal social networks. The empirical findings are organized around four major qualitative themes, followed by a comparative structural analysis.

4.1. Theme 1: Experiential Digital Learning and Resource Constraints

The data clearly demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of culinary entrepreneurs acquired their digital competencies exclusively via self-directed, experiential pathways. Lacking access to or capital for formal digital marketing courses, these business owners operate on a 'learning-by-doing' basis. For traditional warung owners, the initial trigger was almost entirely reactive, driven by a sharp drop in traditional foot traffic and an urgent need to survive. For instance, the owner of 'Mie Goreng Pak Paidi,' a traditional noodle stall, noted: 'I knew absolutely nothing about smartphones. My child had to register our shop on GoFood because we were desperate for orders. At first, it was just about survival.' This aligns with TAM's Perceived Usefulness, where severe economic pressure heightens the perceived utility of a digital solution. Resource scarcity, specifically regarding financial capital and skilled personnel, acts as a persistent structural constraint that shapes this learning process. Home-based micro-entrepreneurs face similar barriers. The founder of 'Dimsum Bunda Sari' shared: 'I cannot afford expensive masterclasses. So, I watch free short tutorials on TikTok, like how to design banners using Canva for free. I try it out; if it fails, I adjust and try again.' This represents a classic entrepreneurial trial-and-error cycle, where mistakes serve as validated learning opportunities.

4.2. Theme 2: Algorithmic Dependence and Strategic Adaptation

A significant vulnerability identified across all segments is the absolute dependence on the opaque, constantly shifting organic algorithms of major platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Informants frequently expressed a sense of being 'trapped in a social media hamster wheel,' where they must continuously alter their content generation styles to maintain visibility. The proprietor of 'The Corner Cafe' articulated this operational frustration: 'Previously, using a specific trending audio or filter would instantly make our posts go viral and pack the cafe. Now, we use the same methods and get zero views. It feels completely out of our control.' This precarious algorithmic dependence introduces extreme operational risks that are absent in traditional physical commerce. To mitigate this structural risk, more mature entrepreneurs undergo an advanced strategic evolution, moving toward hybrid digital ownership. They shift away from an exclusive reliance on third-party social networks and focus heavily on optimizing their Google Business Profiles and establishing proprietary customer databases using simple WhatsApp broadcast lists or Excel sheets, securing a digital asset that cannot be disrupted by platform algorithm shifts.

4.3. Theme 3: Informal Knowledge-Sharing Networks as Alternative Business Schools

In the absence of formal institutional training, localized informal networks serve as vital alternative business schools. These organic clusters form both within physical neighborhoods and via digital channels like WhatsApp or Telegram groups. Entrepreneurs utilize these spaces to share immediate technical tips, critique content, and provide mutual emotional encouragement. The owner of 'Jajan Enak Via' described this dynamic: 'I am part of a localized MSME WhatsApp group in South Makassar. Whenever I experience creative burnout or

content exhaustion, seeing my peers upload innovative promotional videos motivates me to try again. They often share practical tips, like pointing out which audio tracks are currently trending on TikTok.' These networks distribute not only explicit technical know-how but also tacit strategic and psychological support. Within these networks, an organic social hierarchy often emerges, where digitally literate or more experienced cafe owners naturally become informal mentors to traditional warung operators.

4.4. Theme 4: Hybrid Marketing Strategies as a Competitive Advantage

The most sophisticated empirical finding is the conscious development of 'hybrid marketing strategies' that integrate digital and physical channels. Successful culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar no longer treat the online and offline domains as isolated spheres; instead, they view them as mutually reinforcing components of a single operational ecosystem. Digital channels are deployed to generate top-of-funnel brand awareness and drive traffic, while the physical brick-and-mortar venue serves as the primary engine for conversion, experience delivery, and long-term loyalty creation. A prime example was observed in an enterprise named 'Croissant Geprek Viral,' whose owner stated: 'People travel to our location precisely because they encountered our short videos on TikTok. This means our physical execution must match the digital promise. The product quality must remain impeccable, the service must be rapid, and the physical interior must be visually engaging or Instagrammable.' This creates a powerful, self-sustaining loop that is exceptionally difficult for competitors to replicate.

To provide an analytical comparison of how these themes manifest across the different culinary businesses, Table 2 summarizes the operational characteristics observed across the three studied segments.

Business Segment	Primary Motivation (TAM)	Digital	Learning Adaptation Mechanism	&	Key Platforms Utilized	Primary Operational Challenges
Traditional Culinary Warungs	Reactive survival: compensating for declining physical foot traffic (High PU).		Passive/Imitative learning; heavily reliant on next-generation family members and basic peer observation.		GoFood, GrabFood, Google Business Profile, and basic WhatsApp.	Deep digital illiteracy, acute technological anxiety, rigid operational habits.
Home-Based Micro MSMEs	Proactive income generation; overcoming structural lack of physical storefront visibility (High PU & Moderate PEOU).		Highly experiential learning; heavy reliance on online video tutorials (TikTok/YouTube) and trial-and-error.		Instagram, TikTok, Canva (for organic design), and WhatsApp Business.	Severe capital constraints, lack of dedicated marketing personnel, and time poverty due to solo execution.
Small Lifestyle Cafes	Proactive branding, community building, and lifestyle positioning from inception (High PU & High PEOU).		Structured experimentation; tracking digital engagement metrics and observing macro marketing trends.		Instagram Ads, TikTok, sophisticated content creation apps, and Google Maps.	High platform algorithm volatility, intense local competition, and rising customer acquisition costs (CAC).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital marketing adoption among culinary MSMEs in Makassar is an experiential, non-linear journey driven by survival instincts and sustained through informal social learning. While TAM's Perceived Usefulness explains initial platform trials, long-term digital survival depends entirely on continuous entrepreneurial learning and the execution of online-to-offline hybrid strategies. Several limitations must be acknowledged: the qualitative design and small sample size (15–20 informants) mean the findings cannot be statistically generalized to a broader macro-population. Second, the focus on traditional warungs, home MSMEs, and small cafes excludes large family restaurants or franchise chains. Future research should employ large-scale quantitative methodologies to test the statistical relationships between specific platform adoptions and firm performance metrics and look into longitudinal studies.

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