

Beyond Trial And Error: Hybrid Strategies And Practical Learning In The Digital Marketing Adoption By Culinary Entrepreneurs In Makassar

Original Article

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how culinary micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar, Indonesia, learn, adopt, and integrate digital marketing strategies into their business operations. Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework combining the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Entrepreneurial Learning theory, the study examines three distinct business segments: traditional food stalls (warung), home-based MSMEs, and small cafes. Using purposive sampling with 15–20 informants, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participatory observation, and then analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that digital adoption is not a linear, rational decision but rather a dynamic journey driven by survival needs, pragmatic learning, and informal social networks. Key themes include experience-based digital learning, resource constraints, platform algorithm dependence, informal knowledge-sharing networks, and the emergence of hybrid marketing strategies. The study concludes with managerial implications offering practical, actionable guidance directly applicable to culinary business owners navigating the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, MSMEs, Culinary Businesses, Technology Acceptance Model, Entrepreneurial Learning, Hybrid Strategy, Makassar.

1. Introduction

The culinary ecosystem in Indonesia, particularly in urban centers such as Makassar, is undergoing a significant transformation driven by the rapid shift in consumer behavior toward digital channels. This phenomenon is propelled by Indonesia's explosive digital economic growth, which has positioned the country as one of the largest and fastest-growing digital markets in Southeast Asia (World Bank, 2021). As internet penetration and internet-based services continue to expand, business operators, particularly culinary micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), face new challenges and opportunities to survive and compete (Hermawan et al., 2019). These changes fundamentally alter how culinary businesses interact with customers, conduct promotions, and manage daily operations.

Social media platforms and online food delivery applications have become indispensable marketing tools, replacing or at least complementing traditional models such as word-of-mouth marketing (Setiawan et al., 2025). In Makassar, this dynamic is particularly pronounced. Legendary culinary heritage, such as Coto Makassar and es pisang ijo, has



successfully leveraged digital platforms to achieve national and even international recognition (Hasan, 2024). The viral spread of culinary content on TikTok, often initiated by brief videos shared by visitors, has demonstrated the power of social media in creating so-called 'viral culinary phenomena' capable of dramatically increasing foot traffic and sales (Ramadhan & Pratiwi, 2025).

Nevertheless, the capacity to replicate such digital success is not evenly distributed across all culinary business types. The differences between established traditional food stalls, newly founded home-based MSMEs, and lifestyle-oriented small cafes create a complex and diverse spectrum of technology adoption. These entrepreneurs must adapt their digital marketing strategies to remain relevant, yet the adaptation process is influenced by various internal and external factors, including digital literacy, access to capital, and human resource limitations (Santoso & Wijaya, 2023).

This study aims to explore the process of digital marketing strategy adaptation among local culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar, focusing on how three business segments, traditional food stalls, home-based MSMEs, and small cafes, navigate digital challenges and opportunities. The study employs a qualitative approach to understand not only what these entrepreneurs do, but why and how they do it. Central to this research is the integration of two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Entrepreneurial Learning theory. This integration enables a more nuanced analysis of the technology adoption process, which is often nonlinear and driven by day-to-day operational needs and spontaneous problem-solving rather than purely by perceived utility (Davis, 1989; Politis, 2005).

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in synthesizing TAM, which focuses on psychological variables of technology acceptance such as perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, with Entrepreneurial Learning theory, which emphasizes pragmatic learning through direct experience, experimentation, and observation (Davis, 1989; Cope, 2005). Practically, the study's findings are translated into explicit managerial implications directed at business owners themselves, offering concrete guidance for strengthening digital capacity, building resilience against platform fluctuations, leveraging informal networks effectively, and developing hybrid marketing models that combine the strengths of both digital and physical worlds.

2. Literature Review

To comprehensively understand the process of digital marketing strategy adoption by culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar, a conceptual framework capable of capturing the complexity of this phenomenon is essential. This framework must explain both psychological aspects of individual motivation and perception as well as practical aspects, including the learning and adaptation process. Accordingly, this study integrates two powerful theories: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Entrepreneurial Learning theory.

2.1. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model, developed by Davis (1989), is one of the most widely employed frameworks for predicting and explaining technology adoption by users. At its core, TAM posits that a user's intention to adopt a technology system is influenced by two principal variables: Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). Perceived Usefulness refers to the degree to which a user believes that using a particular system will enhance their performance, whether in work or daily life. Perceived Ease of Use refers to the degree to which a user believes that using the system will be free from effort (Davis, 1989).

In the context of culinary entrepreneurs, PU can be interpreted as the belief that using social media or food delivery applications will increase sales, expand market reach, or improve operational efficiency (Al-Emran et al., 2021). PEOU concerns how easily these entrepreneurs can learn and operate such platforms, from creating accounts to posting content or managing orders (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008). Prior studies have successfully applied TAM to explain the adoption of e-commerce (Hermawan et al., 2019), digital payment systems (Situmorang & Panggabean, 2023), QRIS (QR code payments) (Nugroho et al., 2025), and emerging features on platforms such as TikTok Shop (Ayu & Wida, 2022).

2.2. Entrepreneurial Learning Theory

While TAM provides a robust foundation for understanding the initial willingness to adopt technology, it has limitations in explaining complex learning and adaptation processes, particularly in the entrepreneurial context where resources are often scarce, and the business environment is highly uncertain. This is where Entrepreneurial Learning theory becomes highly relevant. This theory emphasizes that entrepreneurial learning is a continuous, iterative, and action-driven process (Cope, 2005). Entrepreneurs do not always learn through formal curricula or structured theory; instead, they learn through direct experience by experimenting, testing hypotheses (validated learning), and reflecting on outcomes (Politis, 2005). This process is often undertaken independently (learning by doing) and through observation of fellow entrepreneurs (Neck & Greene, 2011).

The theory recognizes the importance of informal learning, where knowledge is acquired through social networks, mentorship, and peer-to-peer communities (Cope & Watts, 2000). In the context of digital marketing, a traditional food stall owner may never attend a digital marketing course but learns how to create engaging Instagram posts through trial and error, observing others' posts, and seeking input from digitally literate neighbors.

2.3. Integrated Framework

The integration of these two theories creates a highly powerful framework for this study. TAM answers the question of 'why' entrepreneurs want to try technology through PU and PEOU, while Entrepreneurial Learning answers 'how' they actually learn and use it effectively. A traditional food stall in Makassar may initially adopt GoFood because of high perceived usefulness ('This can help me sell when customers don't want to come to my place'). However, this adoption then triggers an entrepreneurial learning process they begin learning

independently, perhaps by emulating a neighboring stall's posts, about how to take appetizing food photos or how to respond to customer comments. Through cycles of trial and error, the entrepreneur evolves from merely a delivery service user into an active digital marketer.

Table 1 presents a synthesis of the two frameworks and their specific relevance to this study.

Theory	Key Variables	Primary Focus	Relevance to This Study
Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)	Perceived Usefulness (PU), Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)	Psychological motivation to adopt new technology	Explains 'why' business owners decide to try digital platforms (e.g., to increase sales or operational efficiency)
Entrepreneurial Learning	Action-based learning, hypothesis validation, reflection, observation, and experimentation	Pragmatic and informal learning processes under uncertainty	Explains 'how' business owners actually learn and implement digital marketing strategies in practice
TAM & Entrepreneurial Learning Integration	Gap between intention (TAM) and action (Entrepreneurial Learning); role of limited resources and social networks	Digital adoption is a combination of rational motivation and empirical learning	Provides an in-depth analysis of digital adoption dynamics among MSMEs, where both dimensions mutually influence each other

3. Methods

To answer the complex research questions regarding digital marketing strategy adaptation, a qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate. This approach allows the researcher to gain deep, contextual, and nuanced understandings from the perspectives of the entrepreneurs themselves. This study is designed as an empirical qualitative study aimed at exploring the experiences, motivations, strategies, and challenges encountered by culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar.

3.1. Research Setting and Participants

The research population comprises culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar City, South Sulawesi. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure informants possess characteristics that are relevant and information-rich with respect to the research topic (Creswell, 2014). The target was 15 to 20 informants representing three distinct business segments: traditional food stalls, home-based MSMEs, and small cafes. Ensuring diversity within this sample is critical to enable rich comparisons across segments and to identify both shared patterns and differences in the digital adoption process.

Participant profiles were documented to map their backgrounds, including business type, location, years of operation, and level of digital technology adoption achieved. Example informant profiles (pseudonyms) include 'Pak Paidi's Fried Noodle Stall' (traditional stall), 'Bunda Sari's Dimsum MSME' (home-based), and 'The Corner Coffee Cafe' (small cafe). These diverse profiles allowed for nuanced cross-segment analysis.

3.2. Data Collection

The primary data collection technique was semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews served as the principal tool for exploring key themes, including experience-based digital learning, resource constraints, platform algorithm dependence, informal knowledge-sharing networks, hybrid marketing strategies, and customer interaction patterns. Questions were designed as open-ended to afford informants freedom in expressing their experiences and perspectives while ensuring comprehensive topical coverage. Examples of opening questions include: 'Tell me how you first started using Instagram for your business?' and 'What is the biggest challenge you face when using the GoFood application?'

Participatory observation was also conducted. The researcher spent time at the business locations of selected informants to directly observe how digital marketing strategies were implemented in practice, including how owners managed social media responses, handled delivery application notifications, or interacted with customers who visited after seeing online promotions. Observational data were invaluable for comparing interview narratives with field realities and for identifying nonverbal practices or unarticulated processes that informants themselves may not have been consciously aware of.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted inductively using thematic analysis. The process involved multiple stages: (1) repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes to develop holistic understanding; (2) initial coding, labeling relevant phrases and sentences; (3) grouping codes into broader thematic candidates; (4) reflecting and validating themes against raw data to ensure each theme was supported by strong, consistent evidence from multiple informants; and (5) continuing until data saturation was reached.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of findings, triangulation techniques were actively employed. Source triangulation involved comparing data from interviews, observations, and secondary sources such as media articles and the businesses' social media posts. Method triangulation compared findings from in-depth interviews with participatory observation data. Member checking was also performed, whereby the researcher presented preliminary findings to a subset of informants to verify the accuracy of interpretations and confirm that they authentically represented participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Results and Discussion

The primary findings of this study reveal that the process of digital marketing strategy adoption among culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar is not a linear, rationally driven process but rather a dynamic journey shaped by survival imperatives, pragmatic learning, and informal social networks. The integration of TAM and Entrepreneurial Learning successfully captured this complexity, demonstrating how initial technology perceptions interact closely with self-directed learning practices and informal collaboration. Findings are explored through five key themes.

4.1. Experience-Based Digital Learning and Resource Constraints

Among the most dominant findings is that virtually all entrepreneurs adopted digital technology through entrepreneurial learning 'on the go,' without access to formal training they could afford or access (Santoso & Wijaya, 2023). One traditional food stall owner, 'Pak Paidi's Fried Noodle Stall,' recounted how he first used GoFood not because he understood digital marketing concepts, but because sales had dropped dramatically and he was desperately searching for new ways to survive. His account reflects adoption driven by urgent perceived

usefulness (TAM), with the technology initially adopted as an emergency solution. This adoption subsequently triggered a sequence of pragmatic learning: observing orders, reading customer feedback through the app, and gradually understanding that regularly updating menu photos was essential to maintaining appeal.

Resource constraints, particularly capital and time, constituted the primary barrier framing the entire learning process (Setiawan et al., 2025). One home-based MSME owner, 'Bunda Sari,' explained that she could not afford expensive training packages and instead learned from TikTok tutorials such as 'How to make promotional posters using free Canva' and 'How to take great food photos without an expensive camera.' Her process relied heavily on trial and error, with every mistake serving as a lesson (validated learning) (Cope, 2005).

Paradoxically, these constraints also generated innovation. The use of free online design tools such as Canva became a widespread trend, with abundant tutorials available on platforms like TikTok for creating professional-looking banners and promotional posters (Nurhayati et al., 2025). This demonstrates how entrepreneurs creatively leveraged minimal resources to meet their marketing needs.

4.2. Platform Algorithm Dependence and Strategy Evolution

Findings reveal that digital marketing success is heavily dependent on organic reach determined by the algorithms of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Putri & Sulistyowati, 2025). Entrepreneurs feel 'trapped in a social media snare,' where they must continually adapt to changes beyond their control to remain visible. The owner of 'The Corner' cafe articulated this frustration, explaining that strategies effective one week, such as using particular filters or posting formats, could suddenly lose traction as the algorithm shifted, creating a significant and unpredictable business risk. A minor algorithmic adjustment on Facebook or Instagram could erase an entire audience painstakingly built over weeks or months, a structural vulnerability absent from offline business models.

To mitigate this dependence, more experienced entrepreneurs began developing hybrid strategies rather than relying exclusively on external platforms. One of the most common approaches was optimizing Google Business Profile pages with updated hours, photos, and menus, ensuring discoverability via Google Search and Maps regardless of social media trends. Another strategy involved building personal customer databases commonly through WhatsApp groups or simple spreadsheets to send targeted promotions and maintain relationships with loyal customers (Cahyani et al., 2024). This represents a more advanced form of entrepreneurial learning: recognizing the importance of owning 'personal digital assets' not subject to platform control.

4.3. Informal Knowledge-Sharing Networks as Alternative 'Business Schools.'

In the absence of access to formal training, informal networks functioned as vital alternative 'business schools' (Cope & Watts, 2000). These networks formed organically, both within local communities and through online groups. Entrepreneurs shared tips and tricks, corrected each other's approaches, and served as mutual sources of inspiration. An MSME snack food owner, 'Jajan Enak Via,' shared her experience in a WhatsApp group for MSME operators in South Makassar, describing how observing peers' increasingly creative content consistently re-motivated her own content creation efforts.

These networks distributed not only technical knowledge (how to use specific platform features) but also strategic and emotional knowledge. They became spaces for processing challenges such as online customer complaints or motivational slumps. Informal mentors and opinion leaders emerged within these networks, typically more senior, digitally proficient cafe

owners who served as primary references for others. However, these networks also carried limitations. The risk of inaccurate information spreading, or of trending strategies proving unsustainable, was real. The study found that network effectiveness depended on members' capacity to filter information and adapt it appropriately to their specific business contexts.

4.4. Hybrid Marketing Strategies as Competitive Advantage

The most promising finding is the emergence of hybrid marketing strategies reflecting a mature understanding of the modern marketing ecosystem. Successful entrepreneurs no longer view the digital and physical worlds as separate entities but as complementary domains. They use the digital world to drive awareness and traffic, while their physical premises serve as spaces for conversion and loyalty-building.

The owner of 'Croissant Geprek Viral,' for example, recognized that TikTok-generated popularity must be matched by an equally strong in-person experience. Customers arrived after watching videos and were greeted by consistent product quality, fast service, and 'Instagrammable' environments encouraging further sharing and creating a self-reinforcing promotional cycle.

Hybrid strategies also strengthened local identity and community connections. A traditional food stall operating since the 1990s used TikTok to attract younger generations while preserving its authentic 'warung' character, not aspiring to become a trendy cafe, but showcasing the uniqueness of its heritage. In doing so, it created competitive advantages rooted in local identity, amplified digitally. Inter-business collaboration also emerged as a key hybrid strategy component: several small restaurants in the same area cross-promoted each other on respective social media accounts, cultivating a solid local culinary cluster (Ramadhan & Pratiwi, 2025).

Collectively, these findings confirm the power of the integrated TAM and Entrepreneurial Learning framework. Digital adoption in Makassar originates with intentions driven by perceived usefulness (TAM), particularly among economically pressured segments. However, the success and evolution of strategies depend entirely on pragmatic, innovative, and socially networked entrepreneurial learning processes. Distinctions across business segments are clear: traditional food stalls tend to be reactive and survival-oriented; home-based MSMEs are proactive in exploring new trends; and small cafes frequently function as innovators using digital tools to build brand identity and community.

5. Conclusion

This study successfully illuminates the complex dynamics underlying digital marketing strategy adaptation by culinary entrepreneurs in Makassar. Through an integrated TAM and Entrepreneurial Learning framework, the findings demonstrate that digital adoption is not a single rational decision but a continuous journey driven by the interplay of perceived usefulness and intensive pragmatic learning. Key findings affirm that despite significant resource constraints, entrepreneurs across all three segments, traditional food stalls, home-based MSMEs, and small cafes, creatively leverage free or low-cost digital tools such as Canva and social media platforms to survive and grow.

The study's theoretical contributions lie in providing a richer, more nuanced framework for analyzing technology adoption among MSMEs in emerging market contexts, particularly in Indonesia. By centering self-directed learning practices and situational adaptation rather than focusing solely on psychological variables or external factors, this framework extends prior TAM-based studies. Practically, the study's primary contribution rests in its explicit managerial implications directed at business owners themselves, offering immediately applicable tools for strengthening digital resilience and business sustainability.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the qualitative approach with a limited sample (15–20 informants) means findings cannot be statistically transferred to broader populations; generalization should proceed cautiously and by contextual analogy. Second, focusing on three culinary business segments while enabling valuable comparisons does not capture the full spectrum of culinary enterprises in Makassar, such as mid-range family restaurants or local coffee shop chains. Third, the study does not measure the quantitative impact of digital marketing strategies; data on sales increases, advertising ROI, or customer base growth were not collected.

Based on these limitations, several future research directions are proposed. Larger-scale quantitative studies could measure statistical relationships between specific platform adoption and business performance metrics among culinary MSMEs in Makassar. Longitudinal research could track the evolution of digital marketing strategies of the same entrepreneurs over multiple years, providing insights into how strategies evolve with changing technology and market conditions. Cross-city comparative research contrasting Makassar with Surabaya or Bandung, for example, could identify patterns unique to specific geographic and cultural contexts. Finally, evaluative studies could test the effectiveness of training models designed based on this study's findings, comparing groups receiving entrepreneurial learning-based training (mentorship, experimentation) with those receiving traditional instruction (lecture-based, printed materials).

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