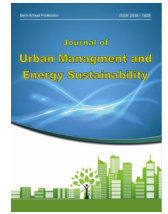


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CASE STUDY RESEARCH PAPER

Presenting an Electronic Marketing Model in the Tourism Industry of Iraq with an Emphasis on Digital Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Over recent decades, digital transformation has brought about fundamental changes in marketing practices and in the way, organizations interact with their customers. As one of the most important economic sectors, the tourism industry has been strongly affected by modern information and communication technologies, and the use of electronic marketing has become one of the key factors in the development and competitiveness of this industry. The present study aims to develop a model of electronic marketing for the tourism industry of Iraq, with an emphasis on digital transformation. The research is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of method, and it was conducted using the grounded-theory approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 experts in the fields of tourism, marketing, and information technology, and were analyzed following the Strauss and Corbin method in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The findings revealed that a variety of causal, contextual, and intervening factors influence the development of electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq, and that managerial and technological strategies can lead to outcomes such as improved interaction with tourists, increased competitiveness, and sustainable tourism development. Finally, a conceptual model of electronic marketing for the tourism industry of Iraq is presented that can serve as a guiding framework for policymakers and managers in this field.

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INTRODUCTION

Extensive developments in information and communication technology have brought about fundamental changes in the structure of markets and in the ways, organizations interact with their customers. In this context, electronic marketing is recognized as one of the most important competitive tools in the modern business environment. The expansion of the internet, social media, and digital technologies has enabled direct and rapid communication between organizations and customers and has transformed marketing processes (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). The tourism industry is among the sectors most affected by digital technologies. Today's tourists obtain the information they need before travelling through the internet and social networks, and make their decisions based on digital information (Leung, Bai, & Stahura, 2015). Under such conditions, tourism organizations and businesses have no choice but to draw on electronic-marketing tools in order to attract tourists and enhance their competitiveness (Sigala, 2018). Despite its considerable potential for religious, historical, and cultural tourism, Iraq still faces challenges in adopting digital technologies and electronic marketing in its tourism industry. Developing digital infrastructure and using modern marketing tools can play an important role in improving the country's tourism standing. Presenting an appropriate model of electronic marketing for the tourism industry of Iraq can therefore help improve the performance of this industry. In recent years, competition in the tourism industry has intensified, and countries are striving to use modern marketing tools to attract international tourists (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2021). Electronic marketing is recognized as one of the most important marketing strategies of the digital age and can play a significant role in introducing tourism destinations, attracting tourists, and creating a favorable experience for them (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). Despite the importance of electronic marketing, many tourism businesses in developing countries, including

Iraq, have not yet fully exploited the potential of digital technologies. Infrastructure limitations, a lack of specialized knowledge, weaknesses in digital strategies, and the absence of indigenous models are among the factors that have hindered the development of electronic marketing in this country (El-Gohary, 2012). In this regard, there is a felt need to identify the factors affecting the development of electronic marketing and to present a comprehensive model for its implementation in the tourism industry of Iraq. Drawing on the grounded-theory approach, the present study seeks to present a model of electronic marketing for the tourism industry of Iraq with an emphasis on digital transformation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In 2015, the terms "electronic marketing," "digital marketing," and "internet marketing" were searched in the dictionary of the American Marketing Association (AMA), and surprisingly no definition was found for these terms. Instead, the term "online marketing" existed, defined as "the internet- and e-mail-based aspects of a marketing campaign, which may include banner advertising, e-mail marketing, search-engine optimization, e-commerce, and other tools." Another related term was "direct digital marketing," defined as "a method of digital marketing that creates appropriate marketing communications and that a specific individual can access directly through an e-mail address, mobile phone number, or internet-browser cookies" (Shaltoni, 2016). In fact, electronic marketing which is the result of the emergence of electronic commerce can, by using e-commerce tools such as the internet, digital television, and mobile phones, deliver many benefits to companies.

Strauss and Frost define it as the use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, distribution, and pricing of ideas, goods, and services in order to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals (El-Gohary, 2012). Gilmore et al. (2007) also define electronic marketing as "the use of

the internet and related technologies, together with other marketing-communication tools, to carry out the traditional marketing activities and operations of finding customers, communicating with them, and delivering value to them.” In another definition, electronic marketing is the use of electronic channels of communication with the customer for disseminating marketing messages. In fact, electronic marketing is not a specific function concerned only with selling products and services; rather, it is a managerial process for administering the relationship established between the organization and the customer. The use of electronic-marketing methods enables communication between the organization and the customer by understanding customers’ needs or by linking them to the company’s products and services. Tourism is one of the most dynamic economic activities of the present era, playing an important role in sustainable local development. Through the simultaneous combination and use of internal and external resources, this industry brings about substantial social, economic, environmental, and cultural benefits (Awad, 2025). In many countries, tourism is regarded as the main driving force of a country’s economic advancement and growth; by providing a strategic opportunity, it diversifies the local economy, generates employment, creates income, and increases the value of resources entering the local environment.

The phenomenon of digital transformation has been conceptualized as the use of new digital technologies to bring about major business improvements, including enhancing experiences, streamlining operations, or creating new business models (Warner & Wäger, 2019). These new digital technologies include social media, mobile devices, cloud analytics, and the Internet of Things. Many of these technologies have been used extensively across a wide range of sectors, such as the market of manufacturing companies. The term “transformation” denotes the comprehensiveness of the measures that must be taken when existing organizations are

confronted with new and evolving technologies. It has been clearly stated, however, that even if an organization transforms successfully, the need for transformation does not diminish. In recent years, the topic of digital transformation and electronic marketing has attracted the attention of researchers in various service fields, including the tourism industry. These studies show that the use of digital technologies can improve customer relationships, increase organizational competitiveness, and develop tourism markets.

Tarute et al. (2018), in a study, examined the factors affecting the realization of digital transformation. The results showed that factors such as information-technology infrastructure, managerial support, organizational culture, and employees’ digital skills play an important role in the success of the digital-transformation process. The study also states that, in order to make effective use of digital opportunities, organizations must formulate specific strategies for managing this transformation. Shafiei and Hajipour (2021), in a study, examined the concept and dimensions of the tourism industry. The results of their study showed that tourism is a set of travel-related activities and services that includes transportation, accommodation, tourist attractions, and support services. They also emphasize that developing tourism requires the proper management of resources and the improvement of the quality of services provided to tourists. Tiknam and Ahmadi (2021), in a study on the principles of tourism development, state that planning in this industry must be carried out in such a way that, while creating economic value, natural features and cultural heritage are also preserved. The results of their study showed that attention to environmental and cultural sustainability is one of the important factors in the success of tourism destinations. Ebrahimi (2017), in a study, examined the process of extracting conceptual models using the grounded-theory approach. The results of the study showed that, in this method, data are analyzed through the stages of open, axial, and selective coding, and ultimately the final con-

ceptual model takes shape. This approach can be used to identify influential factors and to design theoretical models in various fields, including management and marketing.

Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in nature. To carry out this research, a grounded-theory approach based on the Strauss and Corbin method was used. The statistical population of the study comprised experts and specialists in the fields of tourism, marketing, and information technology in Iraq. Sampling was carried out purposively, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 20 specialists in this field. After the data were collected, they were analyzed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the open-coding stage, the initial concepts were extracted from the data. In the axial-coding stage, similar concepts were categorized under the main categories. Finally, in the selective-coding stage, the relationships among the categories were identified and the final model of the study was formed. To increase the validity of the findings, the criteria of Guba and Lincoln—namely

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After transcribing the text of the interviews, the stage of line-by-line analysis and coding began. At this stage, a large number of codes were extracted from the interview texts. However, through re-examination and re-review of the data, new codes were identified and, ultimately, the final codes were extracted. The concepts extracted from the interviews were categorized according to their relationship with similar topics, and the titles the researcher had chosen for them were determined specifically so as to have the greatest relevance and consistency with the available data. In addition, discovering and describing the categories and drawing up the open-coding table were among the other actions carried out by the researcher at this stage. In this section, an effort was made to extract from the interviews the key points and the items on which the interviewees placed particular emphasis. An example of the open coding obtained from the interviews is presented in Table 1. (Tab. 1)

Table 1: An example of open coding from an interview

Interviewee code	Interview text	Open codes
P5	“In Iraq's tourism industry, unfortunately, the use of electronic marketing has not yet become widespread among the actors of this industry. Although digital tools can help attract more foreign tourists, many tourism actors have not yet made use of these tools. One of the reasons for this problem is the absence of appropriate digital infrastructure in the country. While neighboring countries have made remarkable progress in this area, Iraq is still unable to provide these services to tourists. On the other hand, training staff and managers in the use of these digital tools—especially in online marketing—seems essential. We must accept that, without proper training, these transformations in Iraq's tourism industry may fail.”	The need for widespread use of electronic marketing in Iraq's tourism industry; the role of digital infrastructure in attracting tourists; the need to improve digital infrastructure in Iraq; the need to train staff and managers in using digital tools; the importance of online marketing in the tourism industry; the challenges of progress in using new technologies

A set of open codes was extracted and arranged so that the process of answering the research

questions, identifying the axial and selective codes, and advancing the stages of data analysis

using grounded theory could begin. Considering the first stage of coding that is, the open coding of the interviews conducted with the key informants a total of 218 open codes were identified; after removing duplicate codes, 133 open codes were ultimately extracted and were evaluated for further analysis.

Axial and Selective Coding

Axial coding is the second stage of data coding.

At this stage, the researcher places the codes derived from open coding into shared classes, and similar phenomena are categorized. At this stage, after integrating and classifying the codes created within each of the categories of axial codes, the selective codes which are, in fact, the causal, contextual, and intervening factors, the strategies, and the consequences were formed. (Tab. 2)

Table 2: Causal factors influencing electronic marketing in Iraq's tourism industry with an emphasis on digital transformation

Selective code	Axial codes	Open codes
Causal conditions	Use of digital marketing	The need to use electronic marketing
		The need for widespread use of digital marketing
		The need for digital advertising in the tourism industry
		Attention to online marketing strategies
		The need to employ modern technologies
		Using digital tools to attract tourists
	Infrastructural and technical challenges	Limitations in using new technologies in tourism
		Inability to leverage digital transformation
		The need to improve communication technologies
		Security problems in digital systems
		Problems accessing the internet and online software
		Lack of a suitable platform for online advertising
	Training and empowerment	Insufficient training in digital marketing
		The need to train staff and managers in using digital tools
		Weak technical competencies among staff
		The need for training programs to empower staff
	Financial and investment issues	Lack of awareness among staff and managers about new technologies
		Lack of investment in modern technologies
		Shortage of financial resources for developing digital marketing
		Financial problems in adopting new technologies
		Budget constraints in advancing digital projects
		The need for more investment in digital transformation in the tourism industry
	Management and coordination in digital transformation	Weak management of online platforms
		Problems coordinating between the public and private sectors
		Lack of coordination between marketing strategies and digital transformation
		Poor management of digital-transformation projects
		Managerial challenges in adopting digital changes
		Lack of proper planning for implementing modern technologies

	Digital transformation and cultural change	Lack of awareness of the effects of digital transformation
		Resistance to digital change
		The gap between the tourism industry and digital technology
		Non-acceptance of digital culture among managers and staff
		Inability to adapt to new digital trends
		Lack of a proper understanding of the importance of digital transformation in the tourism industry

After identifying the causal factors, the contextual factors which provide the necessary conditions for the phenomenon to occur were examined. By categorizing the related open codes and combining them, these factors were arranged under axial and selective headings and were de-

termined in answer to the following question: What contextual factors affect the implementation of electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq, and what role does digital transformation play in these factors? (Tab. 3)

Table 3: Contextual factors influencing electronic marketing in Iraq's tourism industry with an emphasis on digital transformation

Selective code	Axial codes	Open codes
Contextual conditions	Digital infrastructure	Lack of adequate digital infrastructure
		Problems accessing the internet in various regions of Iraq
		Insufficient development of communication networks
		Limited access to modern information-technology systems
		Weak online support systems for tourism
		The need to improve internet services in the tourism industry
	Laws and regulations	Absence of supportive laws for digital marketing
		Lack of a legal framework for protecting digital data
		Legal problems regarding online transactions in tourism
		Lack of awareness of the benefits of digital laws in the tourism industry
		Absence of a suitable legal system for online commerce
	Governmental policies	Inappropriate government policies for supporting digital transformation
		Lack of coordination between the public and private sectors in digital transformation
		Absence of strategic planning for digital transformation at the national level
		Insufficient financial support for digital projects in the tourism sector
		Limited international cooperation in digital tourism
		Lack of a long-term strategic vision for digital tourism
	Market changes	Rapid changes in customers' tastes and needs
		The need for a better understanding of tourists' digital behavior
		Economic fluctuations and their effect on consumer behavior
		The rapid growth of mobile and new-technology use in tourism
	Cultural attitudes	Cultural concerns about adopting digital technology
		Resistance to cultural change among the public

		Lack of cultural education for accepting digital transformation
		Limited use of different languages on digital platforms
		Hesitation in adopting digital technology in the tourism industry

In grounded-theory research, intervening factors are those that play a facilitating or constraining role with respect to the strategies. These factors can assist by facilitating and accelerating the implementation of the strategies, or, as obstacles, can cause delays in them. In this section, in or-

der to answer the following question, the intervening factors were identified and determined through axial coding: What intervening factors affect the development of electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq, and how does digital transformation affect them? (Tab. 4)

Table 4: Intervening factors influencing electronic marketing in Iraq's tourism industry with an emphasis on digital transformation

Selective code	Axial codes	Open codes
Intervening conditions	Technical limitations	Technical limitations in developing digital systems
		Weakness in updating digital systems
		Shortage of intelligent systems for marketing
		Problems in developing online platforms
	Culture and attitudes	The influence of traditional culture on adopting new technologies
		Resistance to cultural change in using digital tools
		Doubt about the capabilities of digital technology in the tourism industry
		Cultural concerns about changes in the tourism industry
		Cultural unpreparedness for using new technologies
	Laws and regulations	Restrictive laws on the use of online data
		Absence of legal frameworks for digital advertising
		Absence of laws protecting customers in the online environment
		Problems using personal data in online marketing
	Economic limitations	Economic constraints on adopting digital transformation
		Financial problems in investing in digital projects
		Insufficient budget for developing digital infrastructure
		Dependence on government funding to implement digital technology
	Human resources	Limited availability of skilled human resources for digital transformation
		Shortage of specialists in the field of digital marketing
		Lack of awareness of training needs in the field of digital technology
		Absence of a skilled workforce to manage online platforms
	Strategic planning	Lack of adequate planning for digital adoption
		Absence of precise policies aligned with digital transformation
		Weak coordination among the various sectors of the tourism industry for technology adoption
		Absence of a long-term strategy for digital marketing

In this section, in answer to the question below, and after coding the concepts and categories, the strategies were determined and specified: What strategies can be adopted for success in

implementing electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq, and what is the role of digital transformation in these strategies? (Tab. 5)

Table 5: Strategies influencing electronic marketing in Iraq's tourism industry with an emphasis on digital transformation

Selective code	Axial codes	Open codes
Strategies	Development of digital platforms	Developing digital platforms to attract tourists
		Using digital customer-relationship-management (CRM) systems
		Creating interactive, user-friendly websites to present tourism services
		Creating mobile applications to facilitate the booking and purchasing process
	Data analytics for marketing	Using Big Data to analyze tourists' needs
		Analyzing customers' online behavior and using it to target advertising
		Developing marketing-personalization tools based on customer data
		Using predictive analytics to simulate customer behavior
	Improving user experience	Improving online payment processes for easier purchasing
		Using secure, fast payment gateways for customers
		Optimizing the customer experience through websites and mobile applications
	Digital content marketing	Creating video content and advertisements to attract audiences
		Producing educational and informational content on Iraqi tourism
		Using social media to increase engagement with customers
		Targeted advertising on social networks and digital advertising
		Developing online advertising campaigns to attract target markets
	Digital branding	Enhancing brand awareness through online marketing
		Strengthening brand identity through a continuous online presence
	Innovation in digital marketing	Using modern technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to showcase tourism destinations
		Creating new digital experiences for tourists using VR and AR
		Leveraging novel marketing techniques to compete with other tourism destinations
	Data management	Creating online databases to manage tourist information
		Using online data to improve marketing strategies
		Using cloud technologies for storing and accessing information

The following question was then addressed: What consequences and effects arise from implementing electronic marketing in the tourism

industry of Iraq, and how does digital transformation affect these consequences? (Tab. 6 and Fig. 1)

Table 6: Consequences of electronic marketing in Iraq's tourism industry with an emphasis on digital transformation

Selective code	Axial codes	Open codes
Consequences	Increased number of tourists	Increased attraction of foreign tourists
		Improvement of the online booking process
		Reduction of the time required for purchasing and booking
		Increased visits to tourism websites
		Creation of new markets for the tourism industry
		Growth of revenues generated by the tourism industry
	Greater competitiveness	Increased competition in the tourism market
		Competition with other digital tourism destinations
		Expansion of the reach of tourism brands
		Improvement of Iraq's tourism-brand image in the global market
	Development of digital technology	Increased digital capabilities in the tourism industry
		Enhancement of staff capabilities in using digital tools
	Improved customer experience	Improvement of the customer experience through online platforms
		Easier access to tourism information and online services
		Increased customer satisfaction with online services
	Cost reduction	Reduction of advertising and marketing costs
		Saving marketing costs by using digital tools
		Reduction of the costs of traditional advertising
	Improved data analysis	Better access to customer data for more precise targeting
		Access to more accurate, up-to-date information on tourists' needs
		Better use of customer data to improve services
	Sustainable relationships with customers	Building long-term relationships with customers through online platforms
		Strengthening relationships between customers and tourism brands
		Attracting loyal customers through an improved digital experience



Figure 1: The model of electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq with an emphasis on digital transformation

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

This study examined and analyzed electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq with an emphasis on digital transformation. The main objective of the research was to identify and analyze the factors affecting the successful implementation of digital marketing in this industry and to examine the role of digital transformation in improving processes and increasing the attraction of tourists. For this purpose, the grounded-theory method based on the Strauss and Corbin approach was used, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 specialists and practitioners in Iraq's tourism sector. The present study was conducted

with the aim of presenting a model of electronic marketing for the tourism industry of Iraq with an emphasis on digital transformation. The results obtained from the analysis of the qualitative data and the three-stage grounded-theory coding showed that the successful establishment of electronic marketing in this industry is affected by the systematic interaction among causal, contextual, and intervening factors, strategies, and consequences.

In the causal-factors section, the findings showed that developing information-technology infrastructure, training and empowering human resources, securing financial resources, and adopting modern digital-marketing approaches are the main prerequisites for digital transformation in the tourism industry of Iraq. These results are consistent with the studies of Han (2025) and Sharafuddin et al. (2024), which emphasize the role of digital infrastructure and technological skills in the success of digital marketing. However, the findings of this study show that, in the Iraqi context, in addition to technical challenges, cultural resistance and traditional attitudes toward technology also play a decisive role in slowing the pace of digital transformation an issue that was also noted in the study of Moghadasian (2024).

At the level of contextual factors, structural and institutional conditions—including the quality of internet infrastructure, government policies and regulations, economic stability, and the competitive market environment, shape the setting for implementing digital strategies. The results showed that weaknesses in integrated digital policymaking and the absence of coherent supportive frameworks are fundamental obstacles to developing electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq. This finding is consistent with the results of Suyunova et al. (2024), which highlight the role of supportive government policies in developing digital tourism. In the intervening-factors section, limited financial resources, a shortage of specialized human resources, legal deficiencies, and technical obstacles were iden-

tified as the most important implementation challenges. These results are aligned with the research of Syed, Bandara, and Eden (2023) on structural limitations in developing countries, as well as with the findings of Rupeika-Apoga and Petrovska (2022) on the shortage of digital expertise. Thus, even where basic infrastructure exists, the absence of human capital and an appropriate legal framework can reduce the effectiveness of digital strategies. At the level of strategies, developing digital tourism platforms, drawing on data analytics to target advertising, improving user experience, producing digital content, and strengthening online branding were extracted as the key strategies. These findings are consistent with the studies of Raji et al. (2024) and Chamboko-Mpotaringa and Tichaawa (2021), which highlight the role of user experience and digital platforms in increasing engagement and attracting tourists. In particular, the results showed that the systematic use of customer data can lead to the personalization of services and increased effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

Finally, the consequences of the successful implementation of electronic marketing include increased attraction of tourists, improved customer experience, reduced marketing costs, enhanced destination competitiveness, and a strengthened national tourism-brand image. These results are consistent with the studies of Awad and Alharthi (2025) and Mallick (2023), which point to the role of digital tools in optimizing advertising costs and increasing the attraction of tourists. In addition, developing digital marketing can strengthen Iraq's position in the competitive regional and international tourism market. Overall, the findings of the study show that achieving digital transformation in the tourism industry of Iraq requires a comprehensive, multi-level approach that simultaneously attends to strengthening technology infrastructure, developing human capital, reforming institutional frameworks, and promoting a culture of technology adoption. From a policy perspective, it is recommended that the Iraqi government, by

formulating a roadmap for digital transformation in tourism, supporting digital-tourism start-ups, and investing in digital-skills training, provide the ground for the sustainable development of this industry. From a managerial perspective, tourism enterprises should redesign their digital-marketing strategies by focusing on data analytics and customer experience.

In sum, the model presented in this study can provide a practical framework for planning and implementing electronic marketing in the tourism industry of Iraq and can prepare the ground for enhancing the competitiveness and sustainable development of this industry.

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