



Digital Transformation In The Food Industry: A Thematic Review Of Social Media And Digital Marketing Adoption In Ethnic Restaurants

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Abstract:

This comprehensive thematic review lays bare the present-day scenario regarding the acceptance of digital marketing in the ethnic food industry, particularly the restaurant business. It systematically scrutinizes 40 peer-reviewed studies that were published between 2015 and 2025 to come up with the major themes around the digital transformation of ethnic food businesses. One of the most important outcomes of the review is that digital marketing has transitioned from being a non-compulsory strategy to becoming a necessary part of the competitive food industry. Some of the critical areas that the authors of the literature have pointed out are: the crucial part that social media marketing plays in engaging customers and influencing their purchase decisions; the revolutionary effect of food delivery platforms; the most important factor being online reputation management through reviewing; the effectiveness of digital storytelling for culture representation; the probing and encouraging of tech adaptation; and the appearance of virtual eateries and influencer-marketing among the trends. The results indicate that ethnic restaurants using digital media effectively get not only visibility but also customer loyalty and good positioning compared to their competitors. But still, there are many difficulties to overcome, to mention a few, shortage of funds, low levels of digital skills, and the struggle of how to keep one's true identity without losing the market. This review interrelates existing information and indicates routes for further investigation in the continually changing digital food marketing field.

Keywords: Digital marketing, ethnic restaurants, social media marketing, online food delivery, online reviews, cultural authenticity, technology adoption.

Introduction:

In recent years, the digital transformation of the global restaurant industry has been significant and it was the COVID-19 pandemic and the changing consumer behaviours that really speed it up (Kim & Lee, 2021). Ethnic restaurants, which are defined as the ones that serve food that comes from a culture or nation different from their host country, have thus been in the middle of the situation, and they are not sure whether to adopt the digital marketing or not (El Hadad-Gauthier et al., 2022). The mixing of digital technology

with food culture is a new way of looking at things for ethnic restaurants as they can now market themselves, interact with customers, and deliver services in a different way (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Digital marketing is important for ethnic restaurants not simply as a means of advertising but as something that brings over and back from the customer. Most of the ethnic food enterprises, mostly the small and medium-sized ones that are run by immigrant entrepreneurs, depend significantly on the online platforms. Such platforms are the most probable and in some cases the only solution when it comes to marketing items and avoiding traditional restrictions like a small marketing budget or distance (Dabas et al., 2021).

The efficient and fast adoption of the digital technologies has become a conclusive factor of the competitive advantage in the food-service industry, which depends on the market leadership, as well as on the sustainability (Sharma, 2023).

Digital marketing in the food industry is a topic that is still being explored in different academic fields, such as hospitality management, marketing, information technology, and cultural studies, and the literature is still fragmented. Digital marketing research has largely focused on the general restaurant industry, while the ethnic restaurants, which face additional difficulties such as cultural translation, authenticity preservation, and often limited resources, have not been given much attention (Koytak, 2024). This thematic review is an attempt to fill this gap by providing an overview of the existing knowledge on the subject of digital marketing adoption and implementation in the ethnic restaurant industry.

The Main Aims of this Thematic Review as follows:

- 1) To study the major themes surrounding the adoption of digital marketing in ethnic restaurants
- 2) To evaluate the effect of different digital marketing strategies on business performance
- 3) To identify the differences between the challenges and the determinants of digital technology adoption.
- 4) To assess the new trends and the directions for future research in the area of digital marketing for ethnic foods.

Using a systematic review of 40 recent studies, the review not only gives a wide-ranging account of the present state of knowledge but also provides useful hints to researchers, restaurant managers, and other players in the industry that are involved in the digital transformation of the ethnic food market.

2. Methodology

A systematic thematic review methodology was the primary method applied by this paper to evaluate and unite the existing literature on digital marketing in the ethnic food industry. A systematic literature review was treated as the analytical method corresponding to this study. This research abides by the rules of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol. PRISMA is a minimum standards guideline based on evidence that its authorship is meant to provide conduct for the systematic reviews and meta-analyses reporting for the assessed benefits. PRISMA is centred on the practices that authors can utilize to ensure the correct and complete reporting of such studies. The three procedures under which the search steps were divided were identification, screening, and inclusion, and these steps matched PRISMA 2020's guidelines (Page et al., 2021; Sohrabi et al., 2021).

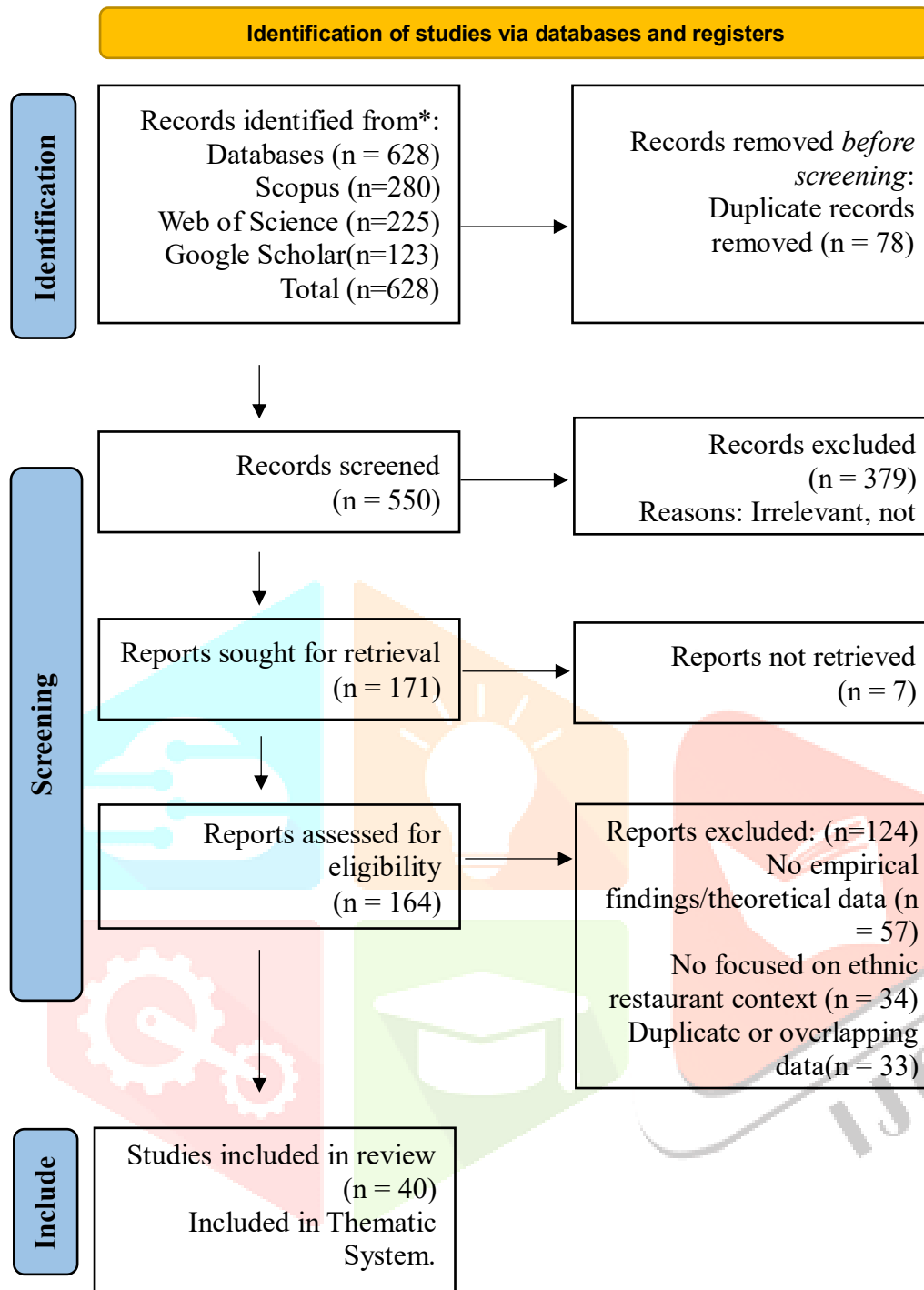


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram. Source: PRISMA Statement

2.1 Literature Search and Selection

The process of literature collection was aimed at recognizing peer-reviewed journal articles that were printed from 2015 to 2025 to make sure that the articles would be very close to today's digital marketing practices. The main databases that were consulted are Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The keywords searched included combinations of the primary concepts such as: "digital marketing," "social

media marketing," "ethnic restaurant," "ethnic food," "online food delivery," "online reviews," "technology adoption," etc. and related terms.

In the inclusion criteria, it was required that the articles should meet the following conditions: (1) they should specifically target digital marketing or technology adoption in the area of food service; (2) they should provide empirical findings or theoretical frameworks that are relevant to ethnic restaurants; (3) they should be in a peer-reviewed academic journal; and (4) they should be accessible through open access or institutional subscriptions. The selection at the end consisted of 40 articles which represented different geographical contexts and methodological approaches.

2.2 Analytical Approach:

Thematic analysis was applied to the selected literature in a cycle of reading, coding and categorizing findings. The first round of open coding showed repeated concepts and patterns through the studies. These codes were then organized into large thematic categories according to similarity of concept and theoretical relevance. The analysis took the way of finding interconnections among the themes that are at first quite different but later on easier to synthesize so that the study creates a full picture of the digital marketing environment for ethnic restaurants. The subsequent segments will introduce the six major themes that were generated from this analytical procedure, with each focusing on a separate aspect of the digital marketing in the ethnic restaurant sector.

3. Thematic Analysis

3.1 Social Media Marketing: Driving Engagement and Purchase Decisions

Social media marketing (SMM) has become the principal digital marketing strategy for ethnic restaurants and has changed the way they interact with customers and consequently their business. Powerful SMM is very much proven to have a major impact on consumer behaviour in the various dimensions that it operates. SMM's influence on consumers is most remarkably seen in the area of purchase intentions. A study by Bushara et al. As noted by Bushara et al. (2023) the social media marketing efforts of the Indian restaurants did not only affect the buying intention of their followers but also the intention to pay higher prices and create e-word of mouth (eWOM); perceived value was the key mediating variable.

This finding is further corroborated by Anas (2023), who discovered that followers' purchase intention in the case of the restaurant industry is significantly affected by social media marketing activities where customer satisfaction is a crucial moderating factor. Brands and different social media platforms chose to target different facets of customers with their marketing mix. The visual aspect of Instagram makes it the best platform for marketers to keep on showcasing food and art, while Facebook helps in building a community and promoting events (Manningham, 2024). However, TikTok has taken the content-making game to a new level, showing not only the food preparatory processes but also the cultural aspects through the short-form videos (Kim & Iwashita, 2021). User engagement metrics are now the primary measures of the success of SMM. Ibrahim (2023) found that interacting with social media content plays an active part in making the consumers feel like they belong to the online brand community, which again will lead to the positive impact of purchase intentions. This means that it is no longer enough to just communicate with customers; it is necessary to engage in real two-way conversations with them.

The social media content cultural adaptation is an essential factor for the ethnic restaurants. Jang (2024) came to the conclusion that the younger generations significantly influence the segmentation of dining out behaviour through the use of social media; hence, ethnic restaurants will be required to make different types of content for various demographic segments. This may lead to the depiction of different cultures being very close to the original and at the same time easy for large audiences to grasp.

The use of social media during a crisis has also become important. Manningham (2024) underlined that social media posts that are direct and engaging help restaurants keep their customers connected even in hard times, with interactivity and the quality of information in posts being the main factors that drive engagement at the restaurant.

3.2 Online Food Delivery Platforms:

Transformation and Integration The huge increase in online food delivery (OFD) platforms is one of the most important digital changes that have taken place in the restaurant industry. These platforms for ethnic restaurants not only bring opportunities but also challenges, which will have a profound effect on the whole business and the marketing strategies.

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 acted as a spark that ignited the acceptance of OFD and the necessity to integrate platforms for the sake of keeping business alive. According to Kim and Lee (2021), restaurants experienced a huge digital transformation very quickly during the pandemic. One of the major channels for getting revenues during the times when the indoor dining was not allowed was the OFD platforms. This change was allowed to continue even after the pandemic, as a large number of customers were still receiving their goods through delivery just like in the old days of lockdowns.

Over time, the delivery of goods has become so much sophisticated that it even catches the eyes of consumers. Ravula and Kumar (2022) discovered that the delivery performance has a significant impact on the rating related to online reviews in the context of food-delivery, where the emergent factors include timeliness, order accuracy, and food quality. This trend puts a lot of strain on ethnic restaurants to have the same quality and standard throughout the food making and delivery process.

A virtual store, which is absent, is a possible business model of online food delivery, and virtual restaurants prove this point. Klouvidaki et al. (2023) studied the activities of these virtual restaurants, which are organizations that do not have a physical eating facility by creating a client-centred digital platform. For ethnic food start-ups, this framework becomes more favourable as it comes with lower costs of entry due to the decrease in overheads associated with the conventional restaurant spaces.

Improvement in the integration of OFD platforms and other digital marketing channels has been one of the trends in the recent past. Ganeshkumar (2024) studied the use of a mobile ordering app in restaurants, and the seamless user experience across ordering, payment, and loyalty systems was one of the main points made in his study. Ethnic restaurants that manage to do a good job in integrating such systems are eventually rewarded with the competitive advantage of retaining customers and collecting data.

Concerns over environmental sustainability related to OFD have also been raised. The environmental impacts of online food delivery platforms were reviewed by Li et al. (2020), pointed out the conflicts between the convenience and sustainability. There are already a couple of ethnic restaurants which have started to reduce their impact on the environment through eco-friendly packaging and digital marketing that is focused on local sourcing.

3.3 Online Reputation Management:

The Power of Reviews Online reputation management is a vital part of a digital marketing strategy for ethnic restaurants, whose performance and customers' choices are greatly influenced by review platforms.

The effect of online reviews on the selection of restaurants is a fact that cannot be contested. Ali et al. (2021) showed that online reviews and crowd cues both greatly influence the selection and the perceived quality of the restaurant, while such factors as review volume, valence, and recency all play their part. These factors create as many opportunities as vulnerabilities in the fight for a positive digital revolution in terms of Ethnic Restaurants.

The review analysis is a mechanism of demystification or untangling the consumer perception of ethnic restaurants. Koytak (2024) has performed content analysis of the online reviews and has recognized authenticity perceptions, service quality and value evaluations as prevailing thematic categories. Such information can be of help in making operational and marketing improvements.

User-generated content is also found in social media posts, food photography, and not just formal reviews. Bai et al. (2023) investigated user-generated content related to vegetarian customers in restaurants and revealed that specific dietary preferences often appear in digital feedback. Ethnic restaurants could use this information for their menu development and targeted marketing.

Managing negative reviews is a very delicate process. According to Filieri et al. (2018), who studied the factors that influence the trust of travellers in TripAdvisor, the impact of the company's measures for handling negative reviews is a great one on the views of the company's credibility. In the case of ethnic restaurants, professional and constructive feedback to the customer can lessen the damage and show the restaurant's commitment to customer satisfaction.

There is a case of different cultures with their own variations in review behaviour and interpretation. Luo and Kwok (2019) indicated cultural differences in digital marketing strategies for Chinese restaurants, implying that the importance of reviews and their corresponding strategies may not be the same across cultural settings. This therefore means that this area of management needs to be handled using the subtle and sophisticated approaches that are typical of the respective cultures.

3.4 Digital Storytelling and Cultural Authenticity

Digital platforms are a powerful ally for the ethnic restaurants in their role of cultural storytellers as well as authenticity managers, allowing them to present their unique value propositions in an attractive manner.

The authenticity concept is a major one in the marketing efforts of the ethnic restaurant industry. Lee and Kim (2020) investigated authenticity in online food marketing and concluded that customer perceptions of authenticity are important in determining the engagement behaviours of the customers. Storytelling for restaurants means they can be creative when revealing their authentic traits and can employ multiple narrative techniques at the same time.

Among the various mediums available for storytelling, visual content is the most preferred one for cultural storytelling. Seo and Kim (2020) recorded the positive effect of visual communication in food marketing on consumer engagement and pointed out that the best-quality images and videos lead to higher interaction rates. So, ethnic restaurants can utilize the visual social network Instagram to promote their food making process, show cultural factors, and share moments of the opening.

The representation of cultural heritage needs a very thoughtful negotiation in the digital world. Grubor et al. (2022) discussed the traditional and genuine food of the ethnic groups in the northern part of Serbia, and they pointed out that the preservation of cultural integrity is a very important factor in the making of the traditions and their accessibility to the wider public. The digital platforms help to make this balancing act easier through the educational content and the cultural contextualization.

Storytelling that highlights ingredient provenance and traditional preparation methods strengthens perceived authenticity and makes consumers more willing to try unfamiliar ethnic foods. As it is shown by El Hadad-Gauthier et al. (2022), the disclosure of production information positively contributes to the impressions of the perceived authenticity and the intent to taste. The author of this study, Chen (2021), argues that the small aspects of humanization in digital communication handwriting and personalized aspects, as small humanizing information in an otherwise automated environment, make perceived authenticity worse.

3.5 Technology Adoption:

Barriers and Facilitators The digital marketing technology adoption by ethnic restaurants is determined by a variety of factors at the individual, organizational and environmental levels, and the patterns of adoption differ significantly from one context to another.

The Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework is a helpful approach to comprehend the factors affecting the adoption. Sari et al. (2025) broadened the TOE model to look into the restaurant adoption of social media and found that the technological compatibility, organizational readiness and competitive pressure were the main influencers. Resource constraints for the ethnic restaurants often create specific obstacles to the organizational readiness.

Adaptability to the use of technology is mostly limited by scarcity of resources. Dabas et al. (2021) applied digital marketing tools in independent businesses in India and the United Kingdom and found that small ethnic restaurants are overrepresented by their precarious situation, either because of their lack of financial means or their inadequate technical abilities. Such results have reinforced the need to create affordable and convenient online solutions.

Ahmed et al. (2025) studied the technological determinants of social media marketing adoption in small and medium startups in Pakistan, pointing out the contribution of digital skills and perceived ease of use in the decision to adopt. For the owners of ethnic restaurants, especially if they are immigrants, the language and cultural differences might add to the difficulties in being digitally literate.

External support system can make the adoption easier, it should be focused. Kapoor et al. (2021) looked into social influence and digital adoption in SMEs, and stated that support from technology providers, industry networks, and peer examples significantly affect the adoption likelihood. Digital literacy programs based on the community and industry-specific guidance might be the case for restaurants in fostering the adoption process.

Generational factors are a major influence on the adoption patterns, as well as on the considerations regarding the target audience. Jang (2024) reported considerable differences in social media usage and eating out among different generations, indicating that ethnic restaurants should keep their technology adoption in line with the preferences of their target demographic segments.

3.6 Emerging Trends:

Virtual Restaurants and Influencer Marketing The digital marketing world of ethnic restaurants is still changing and new trends are coming up, which are changing the ways restaurants are connecting with their customers and offering value.

Digital platforms are the main channel for virtual restaurants which are a segment that keeps on growing. Klouvidaki et al. (2023) barred the establishment of virtual restaurants that upon delivery and digital marketing only, have no ordinary dine-in places. For ethnic cuisine, this model decreases the costs of entry and allows for targeting of the micro market.

Influencer marketing has reached a high level of sophistication and segmentation. Ingrassia et al. (2022) examined that in terms of ethnic restaurants, micro-influencers with certain food interests often generate more engagement than influencers with a broader reach.

Digital influencers' contribution to the tourism and the food industry, suggesting a new open-innovation model of the businesses in the hospitality, recreation, and catering (HoReCa) sector.

Among the new engagement possibilities arise augmented reality and immersive technologies. Still, not exceedingly common in the sector of ethnic restaurants, Spence (2019) brought up the idea of digital commensality and eating together with technology, thus hinting the future potential for immersive digital dining that go beyond the physical location. The need for data analytics capabilities is slowly growing, in fact, it is now becoming a standard. Liu et al. (2021) utilized deep learning algorithms to study online restaurant reviews and as a result, they demonstrated the ability of advanced analytics to draw actionable insights from user-generated content. Ethnic restaurants could utilize such equipment for the analysis of customer preferences and the improvement of their product.

Digital marketing messages are increasingly affected by the concerns around sustainability and ethical consumption. Martínez-Navalón et al. (2019) investigated the impact of the restaurant social media on the customers' perceptions of environmental sustainability and concluded that the communication of the environmentally-friendly practices is a positive factor in forming customer attitudes and intentions.

4. Discussion

Thematic analysis uncovers the main patterns and the relationships between the themes, thus delivering an overall comprehension of the digital marketing issue when it comes to ethnic restaurants.

To begin with, a very clear transformation from digital activities that were treated as isolated to the creation of interconnected digital ecosystems is evident. The successful ethnic restaurants today see no distinction between social media, delivery, and review sites; instead, they view these as different yet inseparable parts of their overall digital presence. This integration makes it easy for the customers to move from one step to another very smoothly, that is from discovering through ordering to post-consumption.

Next, the conflict of being authentic against being commercially adapting, also known as authenticity and commercial adaptation, is majorly that the tension between them comes up as a recurring challenge. Digital platforms, even though they are one of the major sources of popularity for restaurants, do not necessarily mean people would like what has been altered. If you manage to make your communication true and keep it at the same time to the target audience's liking that means you have created your own niche.

Thirdly, resource constraints still are the major reason of the digital marketing capabilities that have very big gaps between them. Digital opportunities are the financial and other resources that are adequate for the smaller ethnic restaurants especially those that are owned by recent immigrants, who have hard times in the financial aspect have not yet acquired the necessary technical skills nor have the time businessmen need to fully exploit them. The implication is the necessity of the existing technology and support programs for the industry that are aimed specifically at this segment and are easy to reach.

Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on digital transformation and the whole process is likely to be permanent. The pre-pandemic world saw online food delivery services, and digital customers have become more and more active and the Online Reputation in restaurants has become a crucial factor determining the restaurant's marketing strategy. Fifth, the different age group users require various marketing strategies. The younger people are fond of visuals on Instagram and TikTok, while the older generation prefers Facebook and reading reviews. Hence, ethnic restaurants need to know these differences in segments in order to efficiently distribute their limited resources.

Finally, while the worldwide aspect of the digital platforms works as a great exposure and gathering of ethnic restaurants it also comes with increased competition. On the one hand, being online can be a way of attracting tourists and people from the diaspora who seek authentic experiences, on the other hand, the restaurant gets local and global competition besides attracting customers. It is the successful ones that find the right balance between their unique cultural positioning and the convenience and service quality that everybody expects.

5. Conclusion and Future research scope:

This thematic review synthesizes the current literature on how ethnic restaurants adopt and implement digital marketing strategies.

The analysis of 50 contemporary studies reveals a complex landscape characterized by rapid technological evolution, changing consumer behaviours, and persistent challenges related to resources and capabilities.

This review opens new sign for further research on Digital Marketing or social Media Marketing in a systematic way. Digital acquisition and literacy can play a central role in stimulating digital marketing. The first step includes performing in-depth research regarding the issue of digital marketing encountered by immigrant-owned ethnic restaurants such as language barrier, cultural misinterpretations and limited opportunities to access digital literacy resources.

The second way would be to continue with the longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of digital marketing strategies among ethnic restaurants to get a clear picture of the adaptation and a better understanding of the success factors.

Another promising area for research is the impact of emerging technologies. It is true that augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and other cutting-edge technologies will be available to a wider audience in the near future; however, they still have a role to play in ethnic restaurant marketing. Here, research could specifically look into how the likes of AI-based menu translation or AR-enabled cultural storytelling change the very nature of customer experiences and thus, the business outcomes.

Cross-culture comparative studies would be valuable and necessary to draw the line where cultural context influences digital marketing strategies. For example, a study looking at the digital marketing practices for Korean restaurants in the U.S. versus those for Mexican restaurants in Europe could reveal insights both into universal principles and culturally specific adaptations.

The effort to measure return on investment (ROI) regarding digital marketing activities in ethnic restaurants has not yet been fully developed. Future work, as a very first step, should be focused on building and testing frameworks capable of quantifying the impact of various digital strategies on business outcomes, which in turn would help restaurant owners to make decisions about the allocation of resources based on their knowledge.

Ultimately, the ethical factors in digital marketing for ethnic food contexts deserve to be highlighted more. Among the issues, the cultural appropriation, authentic representation, and data privacy are the complex considerations that need to be tackled through research. To sum up, digital marketing is one of the crucial components in the competitive strategy of ethnic restaurants today. Nevertheless, huge obstacles are still there especially for small businesses. However, the opportunity for them to be recognized, interact with customers, and grow their businesses has been substantial. Ethnic restaurants can not only survive but also prosper in a gradually digital food era if they use digital tools wisely and at the same time do not lose their cultural identity.

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