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Identification and Prioritization of the Dimensions and Components of Digital Marketing Adoption in Knowledge-Based Companies

Elaheh Soltani[1], **Saeed Massoodipoor**[2]

1- Master of Business Administration (MBA), Major in Marketing, Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, University of Qom, Qom, Iran.
2- Assistant Professor of the Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, University of Qom, Qom, Iran.

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to identify and prioritize the challenges of implementing digital marketing in knowledge-based companies located in Qom and Markazi provinces. The research follows a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative data were collected through a literature review and interviews with fourteen managers of knowledge-based companies, selected via snowball sampling until the stage of theoretical saturation. These data were analyzed by the thematic analysis method to identify and categorize the issues. For qualitative data organization, coding, and analysis, MAXQDA 2020 software was employed. Initially, 42 issues were identified and classified into six general categories: cognitive and behavioral issues of managers, financial and funding issues, content-related issues, human resource issues, marketing-oriented issues, and issues related to changes in social platforms and networks. In the second stage, the issues were screened by the Fuzzy Delphi technique in Excel. The screening resulted in 22 final factors, which were then prioritized by the MARCOS technique. The prioritization results indicate that "weakness in retaining expert and specialized human resources" and "lack of marketing research tailored to the digital environment" held the highest priority.

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Corresponding Author: Saeed Massoodipoor | **Email:** s.masoodipoor12@gmail.com

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The market is a dynamic, living, and evolving phenomenon (Azizi et al., 2020, p. 4). As the science of responding to human needs within a turbulent market environment, this academic discipline must maintain flexibility and alignment with environmental changes to address corporate requirements. One of the most significant transformations is the remarkable progress and expansion of cyberspace. Given the substantial growth of information and communications technology, which has influenced all aspects of social life and induced extensive changes in various work methods, it can be stated that digital communication tools have encompassed nearly all facets of modern human life (Iran Aghideh, 2021, p. 121; Farzinmehr et al., 2025, p. 102). The widespread use of the Internet and digital tools presents a unique commercial opportunity for managers. The integration of social life with the digital sphere has led to the emergence of a new concept termed digital marketing (Iran Aghideh, 2021, p. 121). As a branch of marketing management and advertising, digital marketing encompasses all tools and activities related to the supply and promotion of products across digital platforms (Gholipour et al., 2016, p. 8; Mohseni et al., 2023, p. 229). This form of marketing refers to the utilization of the Internet and digital technologies such as computers, websites, mobile devices, applications, and email (Ayush et al., 2020, p. 225). Digital marketing, as a new paradigm, has revolutionized the marketing system and marketing knowledge. Given that it is conducted within the context of the Internet and through its associated techniques, it can be considered the most effective way to introduce products and improve the performance of knowledge-based companies. Consequently, the introduction and marketing of products via digital marketing are decoupled from their place of production; customers can be found from any point in Iran or even the world, and they, in turn, can establish connections with various manufacturers (Shirdel et al., 2022, p. 3). On the other hand, knowledge-based businesses are on the rise and are considered vital to the economy; the knowledge-based economy accounts for a large share of the economy in many developed countries (Hayes, 2021). Therefore, knowledge-based companies can be viewed as the core and driving force of the knowledge-based economy. These companies, which often seek to generate wealth through high technologies, are critical drivers of growth. These firms, like any other, require marketing functions, and specifically, the position of digital marketing is vital and essential in advancing their objectives. Digital marketing can bring numerous benefits to knowledge-based companies that produce and provide high-value-added goods and services based on knowledge and technology (Center for the Growth of Knowledge-Based Companies and Institutions, 2024). Thus, the implementation of digital marketing in knowledge-based companies can significantly contribute to their progress. However, the use of digital marketing in these companies faces challenges and problems that have not been adequately addressed in previous research. Given the necessity of market development and increasing sales for knowledge-based companies, it is imperative to conduct precise and effective research to achieve these goals; identifying these challenges will pave the way for their resolution. Therefore, the present study seeks to address the issue of identifying the obstacles and problems hindering the use and implementation of digital marketing in knowledge-based companies. The research question is: What are the challenges and issues of implementing digital marketing in knowledge-based companies, and which of these hold higher priority?

Theoretical Framework

Digital Marketing

Since the emergence of buying and selling in human relations, the concept of marketing has existed (Mohseni et al., 2023, p. 227). Having transitioned through eras such as hunting,

agriculture, and the first to third industrial revolutions, we are now witnessing the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This revolution is essentially considered a revolution in communications, linked to internet technologies that have transformed the world; thus, organizational agility in responding appropriately to changes can be regarded as the key to their success (Petrosian, 2023). Some believe that the emergence of digital marketing coincided with the advent of radio. In 1990, only a few individuals had access to the internet, a number that gradually increased until there were approximately 18 million internet users by 1995. In 1999, the Salesforce website introduced the first customer management system for storing user information, tracking their behavior on the site, and monitoring campaigns; this software is recognized as the core foundation for the formation of digital marketing (Mohseni et al., 2023, p. 228). In simple terms, digital marketing can be defined as the execution of marketing plans and strategies through the internet and other related digital platforms. In fact, it can be defined as a marketing approach that primarily relies on the internet to communicate with target audiences through various digital media channels and platforms. In digital marketing, marketers utilize the internet, mobile devices, email, social media, search engines, video streaming platforms, and other channels to reach customers. At the same time, some marketing experts argue that digital marketing should be viewed as an entirely different and new endeavor that requires novel and distinct methods for approaching, communicating with, and understanding customers. Since digital technology lies at the heart of all companies, digital marketing serves as an essential tool for brands and marketers ydigital marketing provides organizations with the opportunity and space to strive for success in utilizing local and domestic markets (Nejati, 2022, p. 25).

Research Methodology

The present study adopts an inductive approach and falls within the category of exploratory and applicable research. Its strategy is survey-based, and in terms of implementation, it was conducted by a mixed-methods design. Data collection instruments included documents and semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase, and a questionnaire in the quantitative phase. The theoretical population consisted of knowledge-based companies located in the Science and Technology Parks of Qom and Arak. Fifteen companies were selected as the sample for interviews, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Research Findings

The thematic analysis method and MAXQDA 2020 software were employed for data analysis. The findings revealed 150 initial codes which, through consolidation, resulted in 42 basic themes. these were categorized into six organizing themes: cognitive and behavioral issues of managers, financial and funding issues, content-related issues, human resource issues, marketing-oriented issues, and changes in social platforms and networks. In the second step, due to the high number of basic themes, the Fuzzy Delphi method was applied to screen the issues. A questionnaire containing 42 issues was sent to 10 experts; ultimately, 22 issues with a defuzzified value greater than 0.5 were selected as the final challenges. For the final ranking, the MARCOS method was utilized.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify and prioritize the dimensions and components of implementing digital marketing in knowledge-based companies. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous studies of Shiri & Moradnejadi (2024); Gholipour et al. (2016); Papi et al. (2022); and Farast (2020). Based on the prioritization results, factors such as weakness in retaining expert and specialized human resources, lack of marketing research aligned with the digital environment, the lack of up-to-date digital marketing

education in universities in line with the latest scientific and technological developments, and insufficient attention to the long-term outcomes of digital marketing were identified as the most significant issues. As noted by Shiri and Moradnejadi (2024), efficient human resources equipped with sufficient knowledge, who can address societal needs—including those of knowledge-based companies—through their expertise and contribute to national development, are of great importance. As long as there is no adequate and accurate understanding of the market and competitors, the application of marketing knowledge will face challenges. Excessive focus on innovation and product uniqueness (without attention to the needs of online customers), along with insufficient awareness of marketing and digital marketing and the failure to conduct marketing research appropriate to the digital environment, will collectively lead to difficult and costly outcomes for businesses. Based on the research findings, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

- Designing a comprehensive system for the retention and development of digital human capital
- Institutionalizing data-driven digital marketing research
- Redesigning the university education system with a skills-oriented approach
- Enhancing managers' strategic literacy regarding digital marketing
- Reforming organizational structures and consolidating the position of digital marketing
- Diversifying digital channels and managing platform-related risks
- Improving infrastructures related to trust, security, and digital financial transparency

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Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement
The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI Use Statement
The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation, writing, or editing of this manuscript.

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Ethics Approval
All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.