

Digital Marketing Strategies And Their Impact On Customer Loyalty In The Chinese Catering Industry

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Abstract: The catering industry is undergoing a remarkable transformation driven by digital advancements and evolving consumer behaviors, with increasing reliance on digital platforms for restaurant discovery and interaction. The objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of digital marketing techniques and customer digital behavior on customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Chinese catering industry. The study employs the Technology Acceptance Model (TCM) as its theoretical base and uses a structured questionnaire to collect data from 280 catering enterprises in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangxi and Guangdong. The research findings are 1) Digital marketing adoption is widespread in the Chinese catering industry, with 85% using digital marketing and 91.07% maintaining a social media presence. 2) Effective digital marketing strategies ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$) and understanding customer digital behavior ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) significantly enhance customer satisfaction, which in turn strongly drives customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$). 3) Direct effects digital marketing and customer behavior to loyalty were also significant ($\beta=0.25$, $p<0.001$ and $\beta=0.20$, $p<0.05$). 4) Customer satisfaction plays a mediating role, with indirect effects from Digital Marketing Techniques and Customer Digital Behavior on loyalty. These results emphasize the importance of a comprehensive, strategic approach to digital marketing in the catering sector.

Keywords: Chinese catering industry, Customer digital behavior, Digital marketing techniques, Customer satisfaction, Customer loyalty

INTRODUCTION

The catering industry is undergoing a remarkable transformation, driven largely by digital advancements and the evolving behaviors of consumers. Today, consumers increasingly depend on digital platforms such as mobile apps, social media, and online review sites to discover and interact with restaurants, creating new challenges and opportunities for catering businesses (Statista, 2025). These technological shifts demand that restaurants embrace digital marketing strategies to remain competitive. The rapid proliferation of online food ordering and delivery services, particularly in China, has made digital engagement a necessity for success. As such, understanding how digital marketing influences consumer behavior and restaurant performance is paramount for companies aiming to maintain customer loyalty and differentiate themselves in an increasingly saturated market. This research seeks to explore how digital marketing techniques and customer digital behavior impact customer satisfaction and loyalty within the Chinese catering industry. This study is anchored in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which explains how individuals come to accept and use technology. According to TAM, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are central factors that influence technology adoption (Davis, 1989). In the context of the catering industry, digital marketing techniques such as social media engagement, search engine optimization, and online advertisements serve as tools to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty (Susanti, 2021; Shetty, 2022; Mohammed, 2024). By merging the TAM, the study explored how use of digital marketing affect satisfaction and loyalty. Digital marketing is defined as the use of electronic platforms and internet-based tools to engage customers, promote services, and enhance customer experience (Verma & Vemuri, 2022; Wan, 2023). This research extends the applicability of TAM to understand digital interactions within the hospitality sector, particularly catering businesses. The primary objective of this study is to evaluate how digital marketing techniques and customer digital behavior influence customer satisfaction and loyalty within the Chinese catering industry.

Specifically, the study aims to identify effective digital marketing strategies that address evolving customer needs, such as personalized services and seamless online experiences. Additionally, the study examines customer digital behavior, examining how online interactions—such as social media engagement and mobile app usage—affect customer satisfaction and, in turn, customer loyalty. The research conducted through a survey of 280 catering enterprises across major cities in China, representing various types of restaurants, including quick-service, full-service, and fine dining establishments. A quantitative approach is employed to test the relationships between digital marketing techniques, customer digital behavior, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Data collected from March 2024 to August 2024, ensuring a thorough analysis of the impact of digital marketing in the catering sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), originally proposed by Davis (1989), that explains how and why users come to accept and use new technology, serving as the primary theoretical foundation for understanding consumer adoption of digital marketing technologies in the Chinese catering industry. This model has become one of the most widely recognized theoretical frameworks for defining the determinants behind user acceptance and adoption of new technologies.

In the context of the Chinese catering industry and digital marketing strategies, TAM serves as a critical lens to analyze consumer adoption of digital tools and platforms (Wilson, Keni, & Tan, 2021; Xu, Qian, & Zhang, 2021). Studies adapting TAM to food delivery and catering-related digital services highlight the model's utility in explaining how perceived usefulness and ease of use influence customer satisfaction and continued usage intentions, which are key drivers of customer loyalty. For example, research on food delivery apps in Vietnam has extended TAM by integrating additional factors like information quality and promotion, emphasizing their impact on user satisfaction and positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which are essential for loyalty in the catering sector (Hai, 2024). Previous researchers investigated the factors influencing customers' intentions to use mobile applications for restaurant ordering, finding that perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and perceived enjoyment significantly predicted adoption, a finding that resonates with the research of Gunden et al. (2020) on mobile payment technologies. These findings suggest that mobile apps can be an effective channel for restaurants to engage with customers and facilitate orders, provided that the apps are well-designed and meet customer expectations for convenience and functionality. The integration of mobile payment systems, as studied by Kim et al. (2020), has also been found to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty in quick-service restaurants. This highlights the importance of embracing mobile technologies as an integral part of a restaurant's digital strategy. The work of Zhang et al. (2019), although focused on online car-hailing services, provides a methodological reference for evaluating customer satisfaction in the digital service context, which is relevant to the catering industry's shift towards online platforms.

HYPOTHESIS STUDY

According to a report by China Daily (2021), digital transformation in the catering industry including online ordering platforms, AI-powered services, and data-driven customer engagement—has enabled enterprises to better capture consumer demand and respond quickly to customer needs, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction (Zheng, 2021). From a TAM perspective, these technologies improve perceived usefulness (e.g., convenience of online ordering) and ease of use (e.g., intuitive app interfaces), which are key drivers of customer satisfaction with digital tools. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: Digital marketing techniques have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction in Chinese catering enterprises.

The rapid growth of food delivery services, which accounted for 21% of global food service spending in 2024, highlights the importance of digital engagement in shaping customer experiences (Statista, 202; Ibrahim et al., 2025). TAM suggests that when customers perceive digital interactions as useful (e.g., personalized recommendations) and easy to adopt (e.g., seamless payment systems), their satisfaction increases, reinforcing repeat usage and loyalty.

Thus, catering enterprises that effectively leverage digital touchpoints are more likely to improve customer satisfaction and foster loyalty.

H2: Customer digital behavior has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction in Chinese catering enterprises.

Research by Deng and Wiriyakitjar (2021) about factors affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty in Chinese restaurants in Bangkok's Chinatown found that customer satisfaction has a positive relationship with customer loyalty. Their study highlights that improving customer satisfaction through service quality and meeting customer expectations strengthens loyalty, which is crucial for sustaining competitive advantage in the catering industry. Research by Zhong and Moon (2020) investigated the key drivers of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and happiness in fast-food restaurants in China. Their study found that perceived price, service quality, food quality, and physical environment quality all positively influence customer satisfaction. Among these factors, service quality, price, and waiting time emerged as the most significant predictors of customer satisfaction, while food quality and physical environment were less influential due to standardization across outlets. Notably, TAM's perceived usefulness aligns with service quality (e.g., efficiency gains from digital tools), while ease of use reduces perceived effort (e.g., shorter wait times via app pre-ordering), both of which enhance satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3: Customer satisfaction has a significant positive effect on customer loyalty in Chinese catering enterprises.

H3a: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between digital marketing techniques and customer loyalty in Chinese catering enterprises.

H3b: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between customer digital behavior and customer loyalty in Chinese catering enterprises.

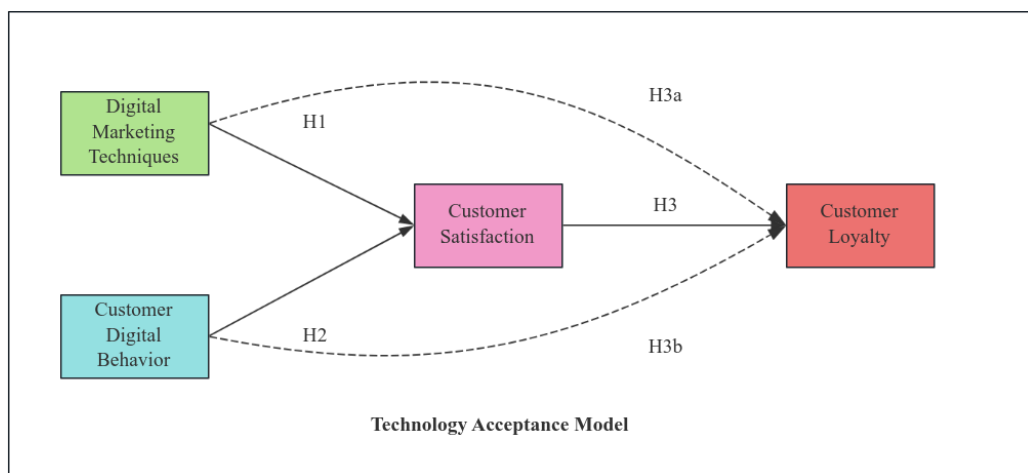


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional survey to investigate the relationships between digital marketing techniques, customer digital behavior, customer satisfaction, and loyalty.

Research Design

The questionnaire developed for this study is designed to systematically capture data on digital marketing strategies, customer digital behavior, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in the catering industry. It is structured into three main sections, with each section targeting specific research variables. The questionnaire utilizes a 5-point Likert scale to measure the level of agreement

with various statements.

The responses from the questionnaire are measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where the participants rate their level of agreement with each statement. The scale is as follows: 5 refer to Strongly Agree ; 4 refer to Agree; 3refer to Neutral; 2 refer to Disagree and 1refer to Strongly Disagree. The mean scores for each item and construct will be calculated to interpret the data. The interpretation of the mean scores follows these ranges: 4.50 to 5.00 refer to Highest level of agreement; 3.50 to 4.49 refer to High level of agreement; 2.50 to 3.49 refer to Moderate level of agreement; 1.50 to 2.49 refer to Low level of agreement; and 1.00 to 1.49 refer to Lowest level of agreement.

Pilot Study

Before proceeding with the full-scale data collection, a pilot study was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments. The pilot study involved administering a structured questionnaire to a sample of 30 catering enterprises, which were selected to mirror the characteristics of the target population. The aim was to assess the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items.

Validity was evaluated through the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index, with feedback from three experts in marketing, statistics, and the catering industry. Items that scored above a threshold of 0.6 on the IOC index were retained for the final questionnaire. Additionally, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures the internal consistency of the items within each scale, with the alpha value is 0.70 or higher that is considered acceptable. Based on the pilot study results, necessary revisions were made to improve the clarity and reliability of the instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection were conducted from March to August 2024, using a combination of personal visits and postal mail to distribute the questionnaire to the 280 selected catering enterprises in two provinces Guangxi, Guangdong and two municipalities Beijing, and Shanghai in China by stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different types of catering establishments.. The response rate were optimized through follow-up calls and reminder mailings to ensure a comprehensive dataset.

Once the data collection is complete, quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 to compute descriptive statistics and test the hypothesized relationships. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were used to validate the measurement model, and structural equation modeling (SEM) by AMOS assessed the relationships between the variables.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured. The data collected were stored securely and used solely for the purpose of this research.

RESEARCH RESULT

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Key Digital Marketing Adoption and Engagement

Variable	Category	Count (n=280)	Percentage (%)
Use Digital Marketing	Yes	238	85
	No	42	15
Social Media Presence	Yes	255	91.07
	No	25	8.93
Use Online Delivery	Yes	221	78.93
	No	59	21.07
Collects Customer Data	Yes	188	67.14
	No	92	32.86

Uses Data Analytics	Yes	158	56.43
	No	122	43.57

Table 1 provides direct evidence of the prevalence of digital marketing techniques and customer data practices within 280 samples, which are foundational to "Digital Marketing Techniques" and implicitly "Customer Digital Behavior" constructs.

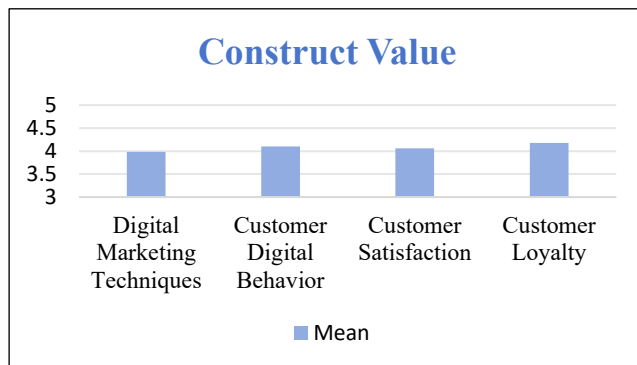


Figure 2: Mean Scores of the Four Constructs

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
Digital Marketing Techniques	3.985	0.904
Customer Digital Behavior	4.104	0.851
Customer Satisfaction	4.057	0.931
Customer Loyalty	4.177	0.815

Table 2 directly provides an overview of the central tendency and dispersion for each of the main constructs. High mean scores for these constructs, such as Digital Marketing Techniques (mean=3.985, S.D.=0.904), Customer Digital Behavior (mean=4.104, S.D.=0.851), Customer Satisfaction (mean=4.057, S.D.=0.931), and Customer Loyalty (mean=4.177, S.D.=0.815), indicate a generally positive perception regarding digital marketing efforts, customer digital engagement, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in the surveyed catering enterprises.

4.2 Inferential Statistics

Table 3: CFA Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Acceptance Criteria	Interpretation
χ^2	250.5	-	-
df	120	-	-
χ^2/df	2.09	< 3	Acceptable
p-value	0.06	> 0.05	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.045	< 0.08	Good
CFI	0.96	> 0.90	Good
TLI	0.95	> 0.90	Good
SRMR	0.04	< 0.08	Good

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for the measurement model demonstrated a good fit to the data, as indicated by various fit indices. Specifically, the χ^2/df of 2.09 (below the 3.0 threshold), a p-value of 0.06 (above 0.05), an RMSEA of 0.045 (below 0.08), and CFI and TLI values of 0.96 and 0.95 respectively (both above 0.90), along with an SRMR of 0.04 (below 0.08), all fall within acceptable ranges, thereby confirming the validity and reliability of the latent constructs in the research framework.

Table 4: SEM Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Acceptance Criteria	Interpretation
χ^2	380.2	-	-
df	180	-	-
χ^2/df	2.11	< 3	Acceptable
p-value	0.07	> 0.05	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.048	< 0.08	Good
CFI	0.95	> 0.90	Good
TLI	0.94	> 0.90	Good
SRMR	0.045	< 0.08	Good

Table 4 shows the fit indices for the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis. The results indicate a good fit of the model, as the χ^2/df ratio is 2.11 (acceptable < 3), the p-value is 0.07 (acceptable > 0.05), and the RMSEA is 0.048 (good < 0.08). Additionally, the CFI and TLI values of 0.95 and 0.94, respectively, as well as the SRMR value of 0.045, all meet the recommended thresholds, confirming the robustness of the model.

Table 5: Direct Effects and Hypothesis Testing

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	p-value	Hypothesis Supported
Digital Marketing Techniques \rightarrow Customer Satisfaction	0.25	0.08	<0.001	Yes
Customer Digital Behavior \rightarrow Customer Satisfaction	0.22	0.07	<0.001	Yes
Customer Satisfaction \rightarrow Customer Loyalty	0.60	0.05	<0.001	Yes
Digital Marketing Techniques \rightarrow Customer Loyalty	0.25	0.03	<0.001	Yes
Customer Digital Behavior \rightarrow Customer Loyalty	0.20	0.03	<0.05	Yes

Table 5 presents the direct hypothesized relationships tested within the framework. The results indicate that Digital Marketing Techniques ($\beta=0.25$, $p<0.001$) and Customer Digital Behavior ($\beta=0.22$, $p<0.001$) both have significant positive direct effects on Customer Satisfaction. Furthermore, Customer Satisfaction strongly and positively influences Customer Loyalty ($\beta=0.60$, $p<0.001$). Importantly, the analysis also reveals significant direct effects from Digital Marketing Techniques on Customer Loyalty ($\beta=0.25$, $p<0.001$) and from Customer Digital Behavior on Customer Loyalty ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.05$), supporting these direct pathways in your model.

Table 6: Indirect Effects and Mediation Analysis

Indirect Path	Indirect Effect	Bootstrapped Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Hypothesis Supported (Mediation)
Digital Marketing Techniques \rightarrow Customer Satisfaction \rightarrow Customer Loyalty	0.15	0.04	[0.08, 0.22]	Yes
Customer Digital Behavior \rightarrow Customer Satisfaction \rightarrow Customer Loyalty	0.13	0.04	[0.07, 0.20]	Yes

Table 6 illustrates the indirect effects, assessing the mediating role of Customer Satisfaction. The results demonstrate significant mediation, with the indirect effect of Digital Marketing Techniques on Customer Loyalty through Customer Satisfaction being 0.15 (95% CI: [0.08, 0.22]). Similarly, the indirect effect of Customer Digital Behavior on Customer Loyalty through Customer

Satisfaction is 0.13 (95% CI: [0.07, 0.20]). Since the 95% confidence intervals for both indirect paths do not include zero, these significant mediation effects indicate that Customer Satisfaction plays a crucial role in transmitting the influence of digital marketing efforts and customer digital behaviors to customer loyalty.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study significantly align with and extend existing literature, particularly concerning the impact of digital strategies on customer satisfaction and loyalty within the catering industry. The observed positive relationship between digital marketing techniques and customer satisfaction is consistent with prior research highlighting the influence of digital marketing tools on customer engagement and brand perception (Alam, 2023; Kalaiarasan & Seethal, 2024; P & Prabha, 2024; Singh et al., 2024). Similarly, the finding that understanding and responding to customer digital behavior positively impacts customer satisfaction corroborates studies on online consumer behavior (Halim et al., 2024; Kaila, 2020; Yadav et al., 2024), which stressed the necessity for catering businesses to use digital touchpoints to gain customer feedback.

A central finding, consistent with previous marketing literature, is the strong link between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Crucially, this study also confirmed the significant mediating role of customer satisfaction (Mokwuah et al., 2024; Nadya, 2020). This reveals that while digital marketing techniques and customer digital behavior both directly influence customer loyalty, a substantial portion of their impact is channeled indirectly through their ability to enhance customer satisfaction. This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to digital marketing in the catering industry, which emphasizes the interplay between digital tools, customer interactions, and the resulting customer experience to build a loyal customer base.

CONCLUSION

This study provides strong empirical support for the proposed relationships within the Chinese catering industry's digital landscape. The comprehensive analysis, starting with a sample of 280 enterprises, revealed that digital marketing adoption is widespread, with 85% utilizing digital marketing and 91.07% having a social media presence. Mean scores for key constructs indicated generally high perceptions across Digital Marketing Techniques (mean=3.985), Customer Digital Behavior (mean=4.104), Customer Satisfaction (mean=4.057), and Customer Loyalty (mean=4.177). The measurement and structural models demonstrated excellent fit to the data. This study provides strong empirical support for the proposed relationships within the Chinese catering industry's digital landscape. The comprehensive analysis, starting with a sample of 280 enterprises, revealed that digital marketing adoption is widespread, with 85% utilizing digital marketing and 91.07% having a social media presence. Mean scores for key constructs indicated generally high perceptions across Digital Marketing Techniques (mean=3.985), Customer Digital Behavior (mean=4.104), Customer Satisfaction (mean=4.057), and Customer Loyalty (mean=4.177). The measurement and structural models demonstrated excellent fit to the data (CFA/SEM: $\chi^2/df \approx 2.1$, RMSEA < 0.05, CFI \geq 0.95), confirming the reliability of measures and robustness of the framework.

The findings demonstrate that catering enterprises that effectively leverage digital marketing strategies ($\beta=0.25$, $p<0.001$) and understand and respond to customer digital behavior ($\beta=0.22$, $p<0.001$) are significantly more likely to achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction. Furthermore, customer satisfaction was found to be a critical and strong driver of customer loyalty ($\beta=0.60$, $p<0.001$), highlighting its importance as a central goal for catering businesses. Crucially, the study also confirmed significant direct effects from Digital Marketing Techniques on Customer Loyalty ($\beta=0.25$, $p<0.001$) and from Customer Digital Behavior on Customer Loyalty ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.05$).

The mediating role of customer satisfaction was also unequivocally supported. It serves as a key mechanism through which Digital Marketing Techniques (indirect effect=0.15, 95% CI=[0.08, 0.22]) and Customer Digital Behavior (indirect effect=0.13, 95% CI=[0.07, 0.20]) influence customer loyalty. The presence of both significant direct and indirect effects points to a pattern of partial mediation. These findings collectively underscore the importance of a holistic and integrated approach to digital marketing in the catering industry, one that encompasses not only the tools and technologies but also the strategic management of customer relationships and data.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Second, the sample, while representative of the Chinese catering industry, may not be generalizable to other countries or contexts. Third, the reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires may be subject to response bias. Future longitudinal studies are encouraged to examine causal relationships over time, while mixed-methods approaches incorporating objective behavioral data could mitigate self-reporting biases.

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