

The Key Role of Menu Innovation: Optimizing Digital Marketing Performance in The Culinary Industry of South Tangerang, Banten Province

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Abstract.

Research Purpose this study seeks to thoroughly examine the implementation strategies behind Menu Innovation, outline approaches for Enhancing Digital Marketing Performance, and identify the essential role Menu Innovation plays in supporting such optimization within the culinary sector of South Tangerang (Tangsel), Banten Province. A Descriptive Qualitative method was applied, focusing on culinary SMEs operating in Tangsel. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with business owners and marketing personnel, complemented by non-participant observation of digital content. Research Findings the qualitative results indicate that Menu Innovation is a central driver in improving digital performance. Its influence emerges through two primary mechanisms:

(1) Menu Innovation is intentionally crafted as a visual asset that encourages the creation of User-Generated Content (UGC). Such content effectively boosts social-media engagement rates and organic visibility.

(2) Menu Innovation offers an authentic storyline that strengthens digital storytelling efforts, enabling narrative transportation, which in turn has been shown to increase digital conversion rates (from viewers to online orders).

Keywords: *Menu Innovation; Digital Marketing Performance; Optimization; User-Generated Content (UGC); Descriptive Qualitative and South Tangerang Banten Province.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Menu innovation is commonly discussed in broad terms—often framed within general product or service innovativeness—without specifying whether the innovation directly relates to menu items or to other components within food and beverage (F&B) operations. Likewise, digital marketing optimization is frequently assessed through overall indicators such as marketing performance, sales outcomes, or engagement levels, without clarifying which elements contribute most directly to these improvements. Menu innovation is commonly discussed in broad terms—often framed within general product or service innovativeness—without specifying whether the innovation directly relates to menu items or to other components within food and beverage (F&B) operations. Likewise, digital marketing optimization is frequently assessed through overall indicators such as marketing performance, sales outcomes, or engagement levels, without clarifying which elements contribute most directly to these improvements. In restaurant and hospitality research, the menu is increasingly understood as more than a simple list of food and beverage choices. It serves multiple functions: a marketing instrument, a tool for profit control, a crucial aspect of the customer experience, and a platform for product innovation in F&B services. A conceptual paper published in 2024 highlighted this perspective by stating that “a menu is not only a list of food and beverage offerings but also an essential marketing component that shapes the customer’s initial impression of the business.”

Since the early 2010s, a substantial body of research has concentrated on menu engineering—the systematic evaluation of each menu item based on popularity and profitability—as a strategic approach for managing menus in highly competitive markets. For instance, Mifli et al. (2015), in their Malaysian study *Managing Menu Innovation in a Saturated Market*, found that when market saturation occurs,

innovation orientation and the menu development process become vital for sustaining business performance. More recent scholarship has broadened its scope to include themes such as customer experience, consumption patterns, digital transformation in F&B settings (e.g., digital menus and self-service ordering technologies), and various dimensions of service innovation within hospitality. A 2023 bibliometric analysis titled *Customer Experience in Culinary Business* identified five dominant research clusters: emotional engagement, consumption behavior, service quality, digital technologies, and technological service innovation such as robotics. Overall, the academic literature on menu innovation remains far less extensive than studies focusing on general product or service innovation in hospitality industries. Existing work is predominantly characterized by quantitative survey methods or qualitative case studies centered on restaurants and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

II. METHODS

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, which is intended to capture and interpret social and human phenomena from the viewpoints of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach is appropriate for the study because it aims to investigate the Key Role of Menu Innovation—a strategic and context-dependent issue that requires deep managerial insight and interpretation.

Research Location and Subjects

The study was conducted in South Tangerang City (Tangsel), Banten Province. This site was chosen for two primary reasons:

1. Contextual Fit: Tangsel represents a highly competitive culinary landscape with widespread utilization of digital technologies.
2. Data Accessibility: The area hosts numerous culinary enterprises that actively innovate and maintain a strong digital footprint.

Research Subjects (Informants)

Informants were selected based on their ability to provide rich and relevant information on innovation practices and digital marketing strategies.

1. General Criteria:

a. Culinary businesses operating within South Tangerang.

a. Businesses with documented evidence of ongoing Menu Innovation and active digital engagement.

Specific Criteria (Key Informants):

Individuals in managerial or decision-making positions—such as business owners, marketing managers, or operations managers—who directly oversee Menu Innovation and Digital Marketing Strategy. The number of informants was determined using the principle of data saturation, meaning data collection ceased once no new meaningful information emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis Primary Data

Primary data were obtained through the following techniques:

1. **In-Depth Interviews:** Used to gather information about strategic approaches, motivations for innovation, obstacles in digital optimization, and interpretations of the strategic function of Menu Innovation.

2. **Observation:** Included visual observation of innovative menu items and review of the businesses' digital content.

Secondary Data

Additional supporting data were drawn from:

1. Internal business documents related to marketing and promotional activities.
2. Digital records such as social media posts, publicly accessible engagement statistics, or metrics provided by informants.

Relevant literature, including academic journals, books, and regulatory documents on MSMEs in Tangsel.

Analytical Approach

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered systematically to reach qualitative saturation.

In-Depth Interviews:

Interviews followed both structured and semi-structured formats (as outlined in Chapter I). Their purpose was to uncover underlying meanings and strategic considerations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Non-Participant Observation:

The researcher examined the operational environment and digital outputs without participating in business activities. Observation focused on:

Product Observation: Physical attributes of Menu Innovation items (design, plating, aesthetic qualities). Digital Observation: Content characteristics, posting patterns, captions, and user engagement on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Google Reviews.

Documentation:

Official documents, reports, and screenshots of digital analytics were collected to support and triangulate interview findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

Data Validity (Trustworthiness)

To ensure the rigor of the study, the researcher applied selected trustworthiness criteria:

1. **Transferability:** Ensured through detailed contextual descriptions (Thick Description) that enable readers to determine whether the findings may apply to other culinary contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2. **Confirmability:** Maintained by grounding the findings in actual data rather than researcher assumptions.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which integrates analysis with ongoing data collection:

1. **Data Collection:** Gathering relevant primary and secondary data.

2. **Data Reduction:** Filtering, focusing, simplifying, and coding raw data through transcription and preliminary coding. Data that did not align with the study's objective—understanding the Key Role of Menu Innovation—were omitted.

3. **Data Display:** Presenting organized data through matrices, charts, and narrative structures to illustrate relationships between Menu Innovation and Digital Marketing Optimization.

4. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Conclusions were iteratively developed, validated, and refined throughout the research process.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a descriptive qualitative interpretation of the findings, explaining how and why Menu Innovation becomes a central driver of digital marketing performance among culinary SMEs in South Tangerang.

1. Interpreting Menu Innovation Strategy as a Strategic Content Asset

a. Description of Findings

The results show that Menu Innovation within culinary SMEs in South Tangerang has shifted beyond flavor development. Visual appeal, aesthetic value, and the potential for compelling storytelling have become major considerations at the earliest stages of the R&D process. This subsection elaborates on the findings related to QP 1 (Menu Innovation Strategy) and reframes them as a form of digital content capability.

a. Qualitative Interpretation

This shift reflects a movement from product-centered innovation toward content-centered innovation. Decisions about new menu items are heavily shaped by the dynamics of social media algorithms, which reward novelty, uniqueness, and strong visual presence.

b. Relation to the Resource-Based View (RBV)

Distinctive menu creations function as internal resources that are difficult for competitors to replicate (Barney, 1991). In Tangsel's competitive culinary landscape—where price wars are common—the visual and narrative aspects of Menu Innovation become sources of sustained competitive advantage, helping SMEs stand apart from both small-scale rivals and major franchise chains.

2. Analyzing Digital Marketing Performance Optimization through Qualitative Indicators

This subsection discusses findings related to QP 2 (Digital Marketing Performance Optimization Strategy), emphasizing managerial interpretations of digital metrics.

a. Description of Findings

Informants view optimization not simply in terms of gaining followers, but as the ability to maintain strong engagement rates (interaction relative to reach) and achieve effective conversions to online orders.

b. Qualitative Interpretation

These insights suggest that SMEs in South Tangerang have shifted from relying on vanity metrics to using actionable metrics. High engagement is understood as evidence of content effectiveness and brand relevance—an idea consistent with Content Marketing Theory (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2023).

3. Unpacking the Key Role of Menu Innovation (Synthesis of Findings)

This section integrates findings presented in 4.2.3 to address the main research question Description of Findings

Menu items designed for strong visual appeal ("Instagrammable") serve as major triggers for using theoretical foundations.

a. Key Role 1: Menu Innovation as a Driver of Value Co-Creation (VCC)

User-Generated Content (UGC) (Findings 4.2.3 B).

1. Qualitative Interpretation

UGC reflects Value Co-Creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016): SMEs provide the physical product (operand resource), while customers enhance its marketing value by sharing posts, photos, and reviews. Menu Innovation's critical role lies in generating products that naturally prompt customer participation, thereby increasing organic reach and social visibility.

a. Key Role 2: Menu Innovation Enables Narrative Transportation

1. Description of Findings

Menus supported by stories—such as their cultural origins, rare ingredients, or fusion concepts—correlate with higher Digital Conversion Rates (Findings 4.2.3 C).

2. Qualitative Interpretation

Story-driven menu content induces Narrative Transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), drawing audiences into the storyline and transforming them from passive onlookers into motivated consumers. In this context, Menu Innovation provides the authentic narratives required in

a. Theoretical Contribution

This qualitative analysis demonstrates how Menu Innovation actively shapes digital marketing performance optimization. It complements existing quantitative research by explaining the managerial reasoning and strategic processes that underlie observed statistical correlations.

b. Practical Implications

Findings suggest that, within South Tangerang's culinary sector, investing in visually appealing and narrative-rich product innovations yields greater digital marketing impact compared to merely increasing spending on digital advertisements. Digital ecosystems to build trust, emotional engagement, and purchase intent.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that Menu Innovation serves as a central mechanism for enhancing the digital marketing performance of culinary SMEs in South Tangerang. This influence operates through several interconnected processes:

1. Menu Innovation as a Strategic Content Generator

The innovation process extends beyond culinary flavor development to include strong visual elements and narrative potential. Menus that are aesthetically striking and accompanied by unique backstories become high-value content assets capable of capturing attention across digital platforms. While visually appealing menus encourage users to share content, narrative elements—such as unusual ingredients or fusion concepts—help build emotional resonance with consumers.

2. Translation Into Digital Content Strategy

These aspects of Menu Innovation shape the businesses' digital marketing practices. Photos, short-form videos, storyline-based captions, and interactive social content are strategically deployed across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and brand websites. Through this approach, the menu becomes a consistent source of relevant, appealing, and platform-fit content.

3. Stimulating User Interaction and Engagement

Content derived from Menu Innovation significantly boosts user engagement. Such material triggers high levels of interaction and actively encourages the creation of User-Generated Content (UGC). Consumers respond by sharing their experiences, writing reviews, uploading photos, and recommending dishes through their personal networks, thus amplifying brand visibility organically.

4. Strengthening Digital Conversion (Online Orders)

As engagement accumulates and UGC circulates, digital conversion rates also rise. Story-driven menu content deepens emotional involvement, making consumers more likely to transition from passive viewers to actual buyers. Consequently, innovative content exerts a direct and measurable effect on online sales.

5. Digital Marketing Performance Optimization

Taken together, these mechanisms indicate that investing in visually dynamic and narrative-rich Menu Innovation promotes sustainable digital marketing optimization. Rather than relying solely on paid advertising, SMEs benefit from a strategy that naturally stimulates engagement, builds trust, and drives conversion. Because the resulting content and narratives are difficult to replicate, Menu Innovation provides a long-term competitive edge. Overall, Menu Innovation emerges as the core driver of the digital marketing ecosystem for culinary SMEs in South Tangerang. By combining strong visual aesthetics with authentic storytelling, menu items not only draw consumer attention but also cultivate a participatory digital environment in which customers co-create value. As a result, Menu Innovation acts as a mediating variable that links product creativity with improved digital marketing performance.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that Menu Innovation plays a crucial role in improving digital marketing performance within South Tangerang's culinary industry. The major conclusions are as follows:

1. Menu Innovation as a Visual Asset

Menu Innovation emphasizes not only flavor diversification but also visually compelling presentations. These visuals encourage consumers to produce UGC, which elevates engagement and increases organic reach on social media. Through this process, UGC becomes a cost-efficient promotional tool that expands visibility without relying heavily on paid advertising.

2. Menu Innovation as a Foundation for Digital Storytelling

Menu Innovation enables businesses to craft genuine and persuasive narratives. These stories enhance narrative transportation, foster emotional bonds with consumers, and positively influence digital conversion rates—transforming digital audiences into actual online purchasers.

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