From Digital Footprints to Gastro-Trends: A Social Media-Based Qualitative Analysis of Mardin's Tourist Attraction Strategies

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Abstract
This study examines the social media usage and digital footprint creation processes of gastronomy businesses in Mardin, investigating the impact of these strategies on their tourist attraction potential. Data obtained through semi-structured interviews indicate that participants actively use social media but lack professional digital marketing infrastructure. Furthermore, it was determined that local cultural values and storytelling are prominent in content creation. The findings reveal that social media plays a significant role as both a promotional and brand-building tool in the context of gastronomy tourism. The study demonstrates that digitalization processes in Mardin uniquely contribute to tourism marketing by integrating with local identity. Finally, recommendations such as digital training programs, public-supported consulting, and multilingual content production are presented.

1. Introduction

In the global tourism industry, the ways destinations gain competitive advantage are increasingly diversifying, and the influence of digital platforms is growing daily. Gastronomy tourism, in particular, holds the potential to attract visitors through unique culinary experiences that reflect a destination's cultural identity. In this context, destinations' digital footprints—that is, the intensity, interaction, and perception of their online presence—directly influence potential tourists' decision-making mechanisms (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Okumus et al., 2018). In recent years, gastronomy tourism has not only offered culinary experiences but also served multifaceted objectives such as preserving cultural heritage, promoting sustainable development, supporting rural economies, and destination branding (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). In a city like Mardin, which stands out with its cultural richness, how this multi-layered structure is represented through digital platforms has become critical for the success of tourist attraction strategies. Especially platforms like Instagram, TripAdvisor, and YouTube host both personal and mass narratives of gastronomy experiences.

The focus of this study is how Mardin's gastronomic richness is represented through social media, the impact of this representation on visitors' perceptions and motivations, and how it transforms the destination's capacity to attract tourists through digital strategies. Digital content has evolved from merely being an information tool to becoming a perception-generator, guide, and even an experience simulator (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The reflections of this transformation in cities with rich cultural fabrics like Mardin are addressed in a limited number of studies in the literature.

The study employs a qualitative approach, relying on semi-structured interviews conducted with tourists interested in gastronomy tourism, local business owners, social media content creators, and local administrators. The aim is to analyze the role of content shared on digital platforms in creating tourist perception through participant experiences. Thus, the goal is to contribute to sustainable tourism strategies within the axis of both digital culture and local gastronomic heritage. In this context, the main research questions of the study are determined as follows:

- How are Mardin's gastronomic values represented on social media?
- How do these digital representations affect tourists' travel motivations and decisions?
- How are local actors integrated into digital gastronomy strategies?
- The findings obtained within the framework of these questions aim to contribute to theoretical literature and develop concrete suggestions for Mardin's tourism strategies.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Digital Footprint and Digitalization in Tourism

A digital footprint is defined as the sum of all traces and interactions individuals or institutions leave in the digital environment (Gloor et al., 2020). In the tourism sector, the digital footprint is shaped by destinations' online presence, social media posts, reviews, and user-generated content (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This digital visibility plays a critical role in potential tourists' destination preferences, as online content is considered a reliable source of information influencing travel decisions (Fotis et al., 2012). In recent years, with accelerating digitalization, tourism destinations aim to enhance their brand image and attractiveness through social media platforms and digital marketing strategies (Hays et al., 2013). In this regard, the digital footprint has become an important element not only for attracting visitors but also for the sustainability and competitiveness of the destination (Li et al, 2020).

2.2 Gastronomy Tourism and Destination Branding

Gastronomy tourism is a specialized type of tourism shaped by tourists' desire to experience local food culture during their travels (Long, 2004). This field involves not only food and beverage consumption but also cultural identity, local production, and the promotion of traditional methods (Ellis et al., 2018). Gastronomic experiences highlight the uniqueness of destinations, provide a competitive advantage, and increase tourists' loyalty to the destination (Okumus et al., 2013). In the branding process, gastronomy is a critical element that strengthens the destination's image and enables tourists to form an emotional connection (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). In cities with cultural diversity like Mardin, gastronomy is seen as an integral part of destination branding (Müller & Charters, 2009). Furthermore, gastronomic tourism directly contributes to the local economy by supporting sustainable development (Hall & Gössling, 2016).

2.3 Social Media and the Digitalization of Tourist Experience

Social media platforms play a central role in sharing, interpreting, and reshaping tourist experiences (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and TripAdvisor allow tourists to publish their experiences visually and textually (Li et al., 2020). This user-generated content influences the perceptions of other potential tourists, becoming a determining factor in destination choices (Leung et al., 2013). This impact of social

media in tourism has led destinations to reshape their digital marketing strategies and establish more interactive communication with target audiences (Mariani et al., 2016). Digital content not only promotes the destination but also creates a social culture and enables the mass reproduction of gastronomic experiences (Sigala, 2018).

2.4 The Role of Digital Footprint in Gastronomy Tourism

Gastronomy tourism reaches wider audiences through social media and develops in direct connection with destinations' digital footprints (Okumus et al., 2018). Food photos, videos, and reviews shared on digital platforms increase the appeal of gastronomic experiences and trigger visitor interest (Kim et al., 2015). At this point, the digital footprint plays a key role in promoting gastronomy tourism and shaping tourists' motivations (Li et al., 2020). Especially on visually-oriented platforms like Instagram, the aesthetic presentation of local dishes and cultural features of the destination positively contributes to tourists' travel decisions (Choe, 2021). Furthermore, local actors' social media use supports the strengthening of gastronomic identity in the digital environment and the development of sustainable tourism policies (Bujdosó, 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The aim is to deeply understand the experiences and opinions of local actors operating in the gastronomy tourism sector in Mardin regarding their digital footprint and social media strategies. A qualitative approach was preferred for its ability to reveal social and cultural dynamics by examining participants' perspectives in detail (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Participants

The research participants consisted of 15 local stakeholders actively involved in digital platforms and operating in the gastronomy tourism sector in Mardin. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method, including restaurant owners, tour guides, local tourism office employees, and members of non-governmental organizations operating in the gastronomy field (Patton, 2015).

3.3 Data Collection Process

Data were collected between March and May 2024 through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or via online platforms (Zoom, Skype, etc.), with the voluntary consent of the participants. Interviews lasted an average of 45-60 minutes, and audio recordings were taken with participants' permission. The interview guide included thematic areas such as social media use, digital marketing strategies, digital footprint perception, tourist attraction methods, and challenges encountered, and was developed through a pilot application.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed into verbal data and evaluated using content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During data analysis, texts were carefully read, coded, and emerging themes were systematically categorized. The researcher endeavored to ensure objectivity by being aware of their own biases during the analysis process. Participants in the study took part completely voluntarily, and the purpose and scope of the study were explained

in detail to them. Participants' personal identification information was kept confidential, and anonymity was ensured in the research.

4. Findings

In this research, qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 15 gastronomy businesses operating in Mardin were evaluated using thematic analysis. The obtained data are presented under five main themes, encompassing participant profiles, social media usage habits, digital strategies, challenges encountered, and the contributions of social media to businesses.

4.1 Participant Profile and Social Media Usage

Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 45, and their experience in the gastronomy sector ranged from 3 to 20 years. All participants actively use social media, with the vast majority having 5 years or more of experience. However, it was determined that only five participants had received digital marketing or social media training. This situation indicates that participants' digital knowledge largely developed through experience. The Instagram follower counts of the participants ranged from 1,200 to 6,500.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Digital Participation Status of Participants

Participant Code	Age	Experience (Years)	Social Media Usage (Years)	Digital Training Received?	Follower Count (Instagram)
P1	36	12	5	Yes	4200
P2	29	5	3	No	1800
P3	41	15	7	Yes	6500
P4	33	7	4	No	2300
P5	38	10	6	No	3100
P6	45	20	8	No	3600
P7	31	6	5	No	2900
P8	27	3	2	No	1200
P9	34	9	6	Yes	3400
P10	40	13	5	No	2700
P11	35	11	7	Yes	4900
P12	37	14	6	Yes	5200
P13	30	5	4	No	2000
P14	42	17	8	No	3800
P15	28	4	3	No	1600

Table 1 provides a holistic overview of participants' basic demographic characteristics and digital participation status. This finding indicates that businesses achieve growth in their digital presence through organic means and highlights a lack of professional support.

4.2 Social Media Usage Habits

The research determined that all participants are active on at least one social media platform, with Instagram being the most preferred. It was stated that "story" and "reels" formats are particularly favored due to their visual richness and algorithmic reach advantages. Participants indicated that they prioritize food visuals, venue promotions, menu innovations, and customer reviews in their content production.

Table 2. Social Media Platform Preferences and Content Strategies

Participant Code	Platforms	Usage Frequency	Content Type	Content Sharing Purpose
P1	IG, FB	Daily	Visual (food)	Attract customers, menu promotion
P2	IG	Weekly	Campaign announcement	Increase engagement
P3	IG, TW	Daily	Story, Reels	Daily menu, storytelling
P4	IG, FB	Weekly	Visual and video	Present venue atmosphere
P5	IG	Daily	Short videos	Build loyalty
P6	IG, YT	Weekly	Long-form video	Documentary-style promotion
P7	IG, FB	Daily	Story, Reels	Brand awareness
P8	IG	Weekly	Visual	Highlight product
P9	IG	Daily	Video content	Reach young audience
P10	IG, FB	Weekly	Customer reviews	Increase trust
P11	IG, TW	Daily	Instant sharing	Get feedback
P12	IG, YT	Daily	Video interview	Share stories
P13	IG	Daily	Visual, story	New product promotion
P14	IG, FB	Weekly	Venue photos	Attract tourists
P15	IG	Daily	Short videos, Reels	Increase reach

Table 2 elaborates on the social media content strategies of businesses. These data show that social media tools are used not only for promotion but also for building customer loyalty, increasing engagement, and strengthening brand identity.

4.3 Digital Footprint Creation Strategies

The vast majority of participants stated that they try to create a digital footprint through strategies such as visual sharing, storytelling, and event announcements. Some participants aimed to increase their reach by collaborating with local influencers, but stated that such collaborations are not always sustainable due to financial resource requirements.

Table 3. Digital Strategies Used

Strategy Type	Number of Participants Using	Example Application/Note
Visual Sharing	15	Every participant shares product photos or presentation visuals
Story/Live Broadcast	12	Instant in-venue videos or live kitchen demonstrations
Event Announcement	10	Local festivals, special menus, etc.
Influencer Collaboration	6	Advertising with local influencers (10k+ followers)
Hashtag Usage	9	Hashtags like #MardinDelicacies, #TasteOfMardin
Sharing Customer Reviews	7	Reflecting customer feedback on social media

As seen in Table 3, visual sharing has been adopted as a basic strategy by all participants. However, more sophisticated digital strategies (e.g., influencer marketing) are implemented by a limited number of businesses. This situation indicates that gastronomy businesses in Mardin largely use digital marketing tools at a traditional level.

4.4 Challenges Encountered in Digital Marketing

One of the important themes that emerged from the interviews was the difficulties encountered in digital marketing. A large portion of the participants stated that they could not produce social media content regularly and qualitatively due to time constraints and lack of technical knowledge. Budget constraints particularly stand out in professional visual and video production. Furthermore, some participants stated that foreign language deficiency poses a problem, especially when producing content for foreign tourists.

Table 4. Challenges Encountered in Digital Marketing

Challenge Type	Number of Participants	Typical Participant Quote
Lack of Time	11	"I forget to create content when it gets busy."– P3
Lack of Technical Knowledge	9	"I just learned how to make Reels, and I'm still struggling."– P2
Budget Constraints	8	"I don't have the budget for professional video shoots."– P5
Lack of Content Planning	7	"I don't know what to share and when."– P10
Language Barrier (Tourist Content)	5	"I'm afraid of making mistakes when writing in English."– P7

Table 4 allows for the systematization of qualitative data by matching these difficulties with participant numbers. This table clearly reveals the main obstacles preventing small-scale businesses from establishing a sustainable presence on social media.

4.5 Contribution of Social Media to Businesses

Most participants stated that social media activities directly affected tourist numbers and business revenues. In addition, it was observed that brand awareness increased through social media, customer interaction improved, and service quality was enhanced thanks to feedback received. It was particularly noted that participants who shared daily content had a greater impact on tourist traffic and customer loyalty.

Table 5. Participant Evaluations on Social Media Contribution

Participant Code	Tourist Increase	Revenue Increase	Brand Awareness	Customer Interaction	Improvement Based on Feedback
P1	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P2	✔	✔	✔		
P3	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P4	✔	✔	✔		
P5	✔	✔	✔		
P6	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P7	✔	✔	✔	✔	
P8	✔	✔	✔		
P9	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P10	✔	✔	✔		
P11	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P12	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P13	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
P14	✔	✔	✔		
P15	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

Table 5 presents the multifaceted contributions of social media usage to businesses in a holistic manner. These findings indicate that digital marketing strategies provide not only visibility but also economic and operational benefits.

5. Discussion And Commentary

This research deeply reveals how gastronomy businesses in Mardin create a digital footprint through their social media usage strategies and how this process contributes to tourist attraction strategies. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms have become an indispensable tool in gastronomy-based destination marketing.

In this context, the obtained results largely align with existing literature, while also offering unique contributions specifically for Mardin, a city that preserves its traditional structure.

Firstly, participants' social media usage habits are consistent with the digital consumer culture defined by Kozinets (2010) and Tuten and Solomon (2018). The intense preference for Instagram indicates that the power of visual communication is also decisive in local gastronomy marketing. However, the fact that only a few participants have received professional digital training reveals the problem of digital knowledge deficiency in the sector. This situation can be linked to the digital information asymmetry emphasized by Gretzel and Jamal (2009).

Secondly, the prominence of storytelling and cultural values in content production aligns with Mardin's unique ethnic structure and historical texture. This validates the impact of "local narratives," defined by Richards (2015) as one of the cornerstones of gastronomic destination branding. A significant portion of participants were observed to introduce their menus not just as food, but through a "story." This approach contributes to creating a tourist profile that forms an emotional connection with the destination.

However, the difficulties encountered in digital marketing processes limit the competitiveness of small and medium-sized businesses. Especially time constraints, lack of professional equipment, and foreign language barriers make the sustainability of content production difficult. This situation is consistent with Sigala's (2012) findings that social media management is directly related to corporate capacity. In particular, inadequacies in content production for international markets limit Mardin's global digital visibility.

Furthermore, digital footprint creation strategies are mostly based on individual experiences and trial-and-error methods. While a significant portion of participants desired to strategically use influencer collaborations, they refrained from this method due to financial limitations. As stated by Hudson and Thal (2013), this situation necessitates that effective digital marketing campaigns are not only creative but also financially sustainable.

When examining the contributions of social media to businesses, significant benefits were observed in terms of customer interaction, visibility, brand perception, and tourist attraction potential. This parallels the studies by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) that reveal the impact of digital platforms on tourist behavior. Our research shows that social media is used not only for promotion but also as a tool for feedback and service improvement.

All these findings indicate that cities like Mardin, rich in gastronomy but limited in digital capacity, can position themselves in the global market through social media strategies. However, the sustainability of this potential depends on both increasing digital literacy and public institutions developing digital support mechanisms for the sector. Especially, local governments and development agencies providing digital training and infrastructure support to these businesses will directly contribute to strengthening city branding.

In conclusion, this research is an important study that qualitatively deepens the impact of social media on gastronomic destinations and offers practically applicable recommendations. The Mardin example demonstrates that digital transformation is possible not only in metropolitan centers but also in regions with traditional urban fabric.

6. Conclusion And Recommendations

This study examined the impact of digitalization on gastronomy-based destination marketing, using the Mardin example through social media analysis and semi-structured interviews. The primary aim of the research was to understand the digital footprint creation processes of gastronomy businesses operating in Mardin, their social media usage strategies, and the contributions of these strategies to their tourist attraction potential. The findings

showed that social media plays a strategic role not only as a promotional tool but also in customer relationship management, brand value creation, and guiding tourist experiences. The vast majority of participant businesses intensely use visually-oriented platforms like Instagram , and they gravitate towards interaction-based content types such as storytelling, visual sharing, and customer reviews. However, most of these strategic orientations remain at an intuitive level, and systematic and sustainable digital marketing approaches cannot be developed due to a lack of professional knowledge and infrastructure.

One of the most important contributions of the study is to demonstrate how digitalization localizes and differentiates itself in a city like Mardin, which preserves its traditional fabric but has high tourism potential. In this context, the digital footprint creation process can be evaluated not only as an effort to adapt to global trends but also as a reconstruction of local identity in the digital environment. Participants' emphasis on cultural heritage and authentic values in their content strategies revealed a strong connection between gastronomy tourism and digital narratives.

Recommendations

1. **Professional digital training and capacity building programs should be organized.** The lack of digital knowledge among gastronomy businesses in Mardin prevents the efficient use of social media strategies. Training programs on digital marketing, content creation, and visual communication should be established in cooperation with local municipalities, development agencies, and universities.

2. **Public-supported social media consulting centers can be established.** Small and medium-sized gastronomy businesses struggle to create a sustainable digital presence through individual efforts. Therefore, social media support units that will operate within local governments or tourism promotion offices can be implemented.

3. **Collaborations with local influencers should be increased.** In the research, most participants stated that influencer collaborations are effective, but they could not use this method due to cost reasons. Low-budget promotional campaigns supporting local micro-influencers specifically for Mardin can contribute to both businesses and the digital promotion of the city.

4. **Multilingual content production should be encouraged.** Multilingual content production is necessary for foreign tourists to obtain information about Mardin through social media. In this scope, menu promotions, short videos, and cultural information prepared in various languages, especially English and Arabic, should be shared.

5. **Suggestion for Future Studies: Increase data type and diversity.** This study was conducted within a qualitative framework based on semi-structured interviews. In future research, more holistic results can be achieved by analyzing digital content obtained from social media platforms (e.g., hashtag analysis, content visualization, reach metrics, etc.). Additionally, multi-actor structures that include the tourist perspective can be suggested.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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