

From Network to Innovation: Designing an Entrepreneurial Network Marketing Model in the Food Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to design a suitable network marketing model with an entrepreneurial approach in the food industry. This research is applicable in purpose, and qualitative in nature. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with experts in the fields of marketing, entrepreneurship, and the food industry, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings led to the identification of a set of basic, organizing, and ten overarching themes, presented within a coherent model. The results indicate that success in this ecosystem depends primarily on the intelligent integration of “cultural–tribal authenticity” with “modern entrepreneurial and digital capabilities.” Themes such as adaptive–religious marketing strategies, tribal network dynamics, and governance based on trust and commitment were identified as the key pillars of social acceptance and market penetration. The findings also highlight that entrepreneurial orientation, knowledge management, and digital transformation are the main drivers for enhancing market performance and creating sustainable value. Ultimately, this research offers an operational framework illustrating how the synergy between traditional structures of trust and modern technologies can lead to resilience and competitive advantage in Iraq’s food industry. This model can serve as a roadmap for entrepreneurs and policymakers aiming to develop network marketing in similar markets.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The present era is the age of information and networking. Information network technologies have influenced every corner of the world and have changed the way people receive and distribute information. Companies use new network technologies to transform their business philosophy, commercial organization, and business practices (Davijani et al., 2025). Network marketing is a new phenomenon that aligns with the development of network technologies and social changes in the network age. It is a business model that offers an exceptional opportunity for individuals who want to start a business but lack capital. Some refer to it as helping people conduct their own business (Gholami, 2021).

Over the years, various deceptive practices carried out under the name of network marketing have caused the global community to lose its trust in the industry. Network marketing organizations are composed of groups of individuals who interact and communicate through relationships built on trust. When society gradually loses trust, the organization will not be successful (Heidari Haratemeh et al., 2023). Therefore, taking actions to improve trust levels is critical for the sustainability of this industry and is considered a serious and essential matter for all network marketing professionals.

The food industry has become an inseparable part of human life and one of the most important factors in economic and social development worldwide. As one of the largest and most tangible global industries, it has attracted significant interest from investors toward entrepreneurship in this sector. Today, the economic dimensions of the global food industry have expanded greatly and hold potential for further development. In every country, substantial annual revenue is generated for stakeholders in this industry, which has further increased attention to it.

Accordingly, the present study aims to answer the fundamental question: *What is an appropriate network marketing model with an entrepreneurial approach for the food industry in Iraq?*

Theoretical Foundations

Network Marketing

Network marketing refers to communication processes in which individuals, groups, or companies use social networks and interpersonal connections to introduce and promote their products. This type of marketing typically operates based on networks of human relationships and direct or indirect interactions among individuals (Lu et al., 2024).

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is the process of identifying and exploiting new opportunities to create innovative businesses. This activity enables entrepreneurs to recognize existing problems and pursue new and valuable solutions through risk-taking and creativity (Doozandeh Ziabari et al., 2024). One of the prominent characteristics of entrepreneurs is their ability to cope with uncertainties and market challenges. These individuals establish businesses using limited resources that can generate significant economic and social impact (Norouzi Seyed Hossini et al., 2024).

Alizadeh Seyghalan et al. (2025) examined key factors in entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges and proposed a model for improving entrepreneurial performance. Their results showed that network marketing entrepreneurship offers considerable opportunities for market entry and meeting unmet needs, but it also faces challenges in adapting to rapid market changes and ensuring job security.

Ajali et al. (2024) investigated the identification and ranking of factors influencing the creation of viral marketing behavior among customers. The findings indicated that 2 factors, 6 components, and 27 indicators were extracted based on the theoretical foundations of the study; among which, the organizational factor ranked first with a score of 0.702, while the external factor ranked second with a score of 0.269. Therefore, it can be stated that 70.2% of the intention toward viral marketing is shaped by organizational factors, while brand credibility accounts for 7.8% of the total intention toward viral marketing.

Research Method

This study is applicable in terms of purpose, and qualitative in nature and methodology. Given the exploratory nature of the topic and the necessity of identifying the deeper dimensions of entrepreneurial network marketing within the specific context of Iraq's food industry, the *thematic analysis* strategy was employed. The primary data-collection tool in this research consisted of semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed to explore various dimensions of experiences, challenges, and strategies related to network marketing within Iraq's commercial ecosystem. The aim of these interviews was to identify the components and key factors influencing the success of entrepreneurial network marketing. The collected data were processed and analyzed using thematic analysis to extract the main concepts and components. In the quantitative phase, the model derived from the qualitative analysis was tested and validated through a questionnaire developed for this purpose, using responses gathered from members of active networks in the food industry.

Research Findings

The research findings indicate that success in the network marketing of Iraq's food industry hinges on the intelligent integration of cultural-tribal authenticities with the novel capabilities of entrepreneurship and digitalization. This model, by relying on knowledge management and adaptive religious strategies, provides a platform for creating sustainable value, enhancing competitive performance, and increasing customer loyalty. In essence, the synergy between traditional trust structures and modern technologies is considered the fundamental cornerstone for resilience and penetration in this volatile market.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicated a strong relationship between the requirements for maintaining cultural authenticity, adaptive-religious marketing strategies, socio-tribal network dynamics, and digital transformation. This finding suggests that attention to preserving cultural authenticity can play a key role in guiding strategies and enhancing the digital transformation process. These results align with the studies by Alizadeh Seyghalan et al. (2025) and Ajali & Kargar Zanjani (2024), which emphasize that considering the cultural and local context increases the effectiveness of network marketing strategies.

Regarding adaptive-religious marketing strategies, a moderate-level relationship was observed with socio-tribal network dynamics and digital transformation. This suggests that these strategies alone may not have a strong impact on network behavior and digital transformation and likely exert their effects through interaction with other factors. This finding is consistent with the results of Heidari Haratemeh (2023) and Doozandeh Ziabari et al. (2024), who state that adaptive marketing should be employed alongside other tools and network management for optimal effectiveness.

Entrepreneurial orientation was identified as a key variable in the research, showing a strong or above-average relationship with most variables, including marketing strategies, network dynamics, network governance, food industry dynamics, knowledge management, and

network marketing performance. These results highlight the pivotal role of entrepreneurial orientation in activating networks and strengthening organizational capacities, aligning with studies by Wong & Nasir (2022) and Guerola-Navarro et al. (2024), which indicate that entrepreneurial orientation can facilitate the implementation of marketing strategies and digital transformation.

In the domain of network governance, its relationships with entrepreneurial orientation and digital transformation were strong, while its connection with network dynamics was at a moderate level. This pattern suggests that for network governance to effectively impact digital transformation, it must be combined with entrepreneurial motivations and behaviors, and network management alone is insufficient. The findings are consistent with the study by Monferrer et al. (2022), which highlights the importance of synchronizing network governance with dynamic capabilities to enhance performance and innovation.

The results showed that food industry dynamics have a strong relationship with value creation, value acquisition, and knowledge management, and demonstrated an above-average connection with network marketing performance. These findings emphasize the significant role of food industry dynamics in the value chain and knowledge transfer within organizations, aligning with the results of Bazoukar & Bagheri (2025) and Davijani et al. (2023), who stress the importance of innovation processes and social entrepreneurship in network development.

Furthermore, knowledge management exhibited a strong relationship with digital transformation and an above-average relationship with network marketing performance, while the relationship between network marketing performance and digital transformation was at a moderate level. This indicates that effective knowledge management and information transfer play a crucial role in the success of network marketing and advancing digital transformation, as also emphasized in the studies by Ebrahimi et al. (2022) and Lu et al. (2024).

Overall, the analysis of the discovered hypotheses suggests that entrepreneurial orientation, network governance, and food industry dynamics are the key factors with the most significant impact on digital transformation and network marketing performance, while variables such as adaptive marketing strategies and requirements for maintaining cultural authenticity play a reinforcing and mediating role. This analysis underscores that a combination of entrepreneurial orientation, knowledge management, network governance, and food industry dynamics is essential for success in network marketing and digital transformation.

Based on the research findings, the following practical suggestions are presented:

- Organizations should meticulously consider the cultural and religious characteristics of their target audience when designing their marketing strategies to enhance customer engagement and acceptance.
- To strengthen social and tribal networks, marketing programs and activities must be designed in compliance with cultural values and traditions to increase member participation.
- The preservation of cultural authenticity should be considered a key factor in digital transformation projects, ensuring that technologies and innovations are compatible with the community's cultural context, thereby increasing user adoption.