The Impact of Internet Marketing on the Development of Social and Economic Interaction Between Governments

(Case Study: Internet Marketing by Iranian Private Companies in Iraq and Its Effect on Enhancing Social and Economic Interaction Between the Governments of Iran and Iraq)

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Abstract: In recent decades, internet marketing has emerged as one of the most important tools for the development of international business. The present study examines the role of internet marketing by Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market and its impact on fostering economic, social, and cultural interactions between the two countries. This qualitative study was conducted through 18 semi-structured interviews with managers and marketing experts from private companies active in the Iraqi market. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach and processed with MAXQDA software, resulting in the extraction of four main themes: strengthening inter-organizational trust and social capital, digital marketing as a tool of economic soft power, facilitating intercultural interactions, and creating informal channels of economic diplomacy. The findings indicated that internet marketing has not only enhanced export performance and expanded access to new markets but has also played a key role in strengthening trust between companies and customers, expanding cultural and social connections, and facilitating economic diplomacy. Furthermore, causal factors such as the growth of digital technologies, competitive pressures, and economic constraints; contextual conditions including inadequate infrastructure and cultural differences; and mediating factors such as digital skills and government regulations have influenced the success of this process. By offering strategies such as content localization, continuous engagement with customers, and leveraging shared cultural symbols, the study demonstrates how Iranian companies have been able to manage challenges and capitalize on digital marketing opportunities in the Iraqi market. The results of this research hold particular significance for policymakers and marketing managers and can serve as a practical guide for developing cross-border digital marketing strategies.

Keywords: Internet marketing, intercultural interactions, economic soft power, economic diplomacy, Iraqi market, digital marketing, Iranian private companies

1. Introduction

The accelerating integration of digital technologies into global commerce has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of international marketing, enabling firms to transcend geographic boundaries and engage directly with diverse consumer bases. Digital marketing, in particular, has emerged as both a strategic necessity and a powerful enabler for businesses seeking competitive positioning in foreign markets [1, 2]. Within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the rapid proliferation of internet access, mobile penetration, and social media adoption has created unprecedented opportunities for cross-border trade and cultural exchange [3]. This transformation is particularly evident in the Iran–Iraq economic corridor, where private sector companies have increasingly leveraged internet marketing not merely as a transactional mechanism, but as a vehicle for fostering long-term socio-economic and cultural linkages [4, 5].

The strategic importance of digital marketing in Middle Eastern contexts lies in its dual function: on one hand, it enables firms to efficiently promote products and services to a broader audience, and on the other, it serves as a medium for soft power projection and economic diplomacy [6, 7]. In this regard, Iran's private sector has found in the Iraqi market a fertile ground for both commercial expansion and the reinforcement of shared cultural heritage [8, 9]. Such cross-border marketing efforts have increasingly been conceptualized not only as drivers of export performance [10, 11] but also as contributors to the strengthening of intergovernmental relations through informal channels of engagement [12, 13].

The dynamics of Iran–Iraq trade are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and economic factors. Despite challenges stemming from sanctions, infrastructural deficiencies, and regulatory inconsistencies [14, 15], the demand for Iranian goods and services in Iraq has remained robust. Digital marketing platforms—ranging from localized websites to culturally adapted social media campaigns—have become instrumental in bridging linguistic, cultural, and informational divides [16, 17]. Such culturally sensitive strategies are essential for penetrating markets with strong socio-cultural identities, where consumer trust and brand loyalty are closely tied to perceived cultural affinity [5, 18].

Empirical research has demonstrated that internet marketing capabilities significantly enhance export performance by facilitating customer engagement, reducing information asymmetries, and enabling agile responses to market demands [19, 20]. This is particularly relevant in volatile regional markets, where traditional trade promotion channels may be constrained by political instability or logistical barriers [21]. The Iranian private sector's experience in Iraq illustrates the adaptive potential of digital marketing, as firms deploy localized content, integrate culturally resonant brand narratives, and establish responsive customer support systems in the Arabic language [22, 23].

From a theoretical perspective, digital marketing in this context can be viewed through the lens of economic diplomacy, where non-state actors play a crucial role in advancing national economic interests abroad [12, 13]. Scholars have noted that the private sector's digital engagements can complement official diplomatic initiatives by building trust-based networks, facilitating people-to-people exchanges, and promoting mutual understanding [4, 7]. In line with Nye's conceptualization of soft power, these activities subtly shape perceptions and preferences in ways that are conducive to long-term strategic cooperation [6].

The methodological study of such phenomena requires approaches that capture the nuanced interplay between cultural adaptation, technological capability, and strategic intent. Qualitative case study designs, supported by thematic analysis, are well-suited for exploring the embeddedness of marketing strategies within specific socio-

political contexts [24-26]. Moreover, measuring thematic saturation is critical to ensuring the robustness of qualitative insights [27]. This methodological rigor is essential when examining markets like Iraq, where legal frameworks for e-commerce remain underdeveloped [15] and infrastructural constraints necessitate innovative strategic responses [21].

In terms of operational strategy, successful market penetration in Iraq has often involved combining digital marketing tools with relationship-based selling approaches rooted in local customs [16, 28]. Companies adept in social CRM—integrating social media technologies with customer relationship performance—are better positioned to cultivate loyalty and sustain competitive advantage [29, 30]. Additionally, the literature underscores the importance of content localization, where marketing messages are tailored not only linguistically but also culturally to resonate with target audiences [9, 18].

Despite the growing body of research on digital marketing and export performance, the specific role of Iranian private companies in leveraging these tools within the Iraq market remains underexplored [20, 31]. This gap is significant because the Iran–Iraq trade relationship is embedded in unique socio-political realities that differentiate it from other cross-border marketing contexts [8, 13]. Furthermore, the interplay between digital marketing strategies and broader economic diplomacy efforts offers fertile ground for advancing theoretical understandings of how private sector actors can influence bilateral relations [7, 12].

The present study addresses this gap by examining how Iranian private companies utilize internet marketing to enhance economic, social, and cultural interactions with Iraq.

2.   Methodology

This study is applied in terms of purpose, and qualitative in nature and method of data collection, following an exploratory case study approach. The qualitative approach was selected because the main objective was to gain a deep understanding of the processes, perceptions, and underlying meanings in the experiences of Iranian private sector actors in the Iraqi market—processes that cannot be easily measured through quantitative and variable-centered methods. The case study method also allows the researcher to analyze the phenomenon under investigation within its real-life context, taking into account environmental, cultural, and economic complexities.

The statistical population consisted of all Iranian private companies active in the export of goods and services to Iraq that use internet marketing tools (websites, social media, online advertising, email marketing, etc.) in their activities. Given the study's objective, purposive sampling was applied based on specific criteria to ensure that the selected participants would provide the richest information to address the research questions (Patton, 2015).

The inclusion criteria were:

1.   Official registration of the company in Iran or Iraq and at least three years of continuous activity in the Iraqi market.
2.   Active and documented use of internet marketing tools in the export process.
3.   Experience in direct interaction with Iraqi buyers, distributors, or economic institutions through digital channels.

In qualitative research, the goal of determining sample size is to reach theoretical saturation rather than statistical generalization. Based on the nature of the study and similar research, it was anticipated that interviews with approximately 12 to 15 senior marketing and market development managers or experts from eligible companies would lead to theoretical saturation. Data collection continued until new data no longer added any new themes to the analytical framework. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. According to

this table, in this study, the gender composition of the interviewees included 12 men (67%) and 6 women (33%), indicating an acceptable diversity in the participation of representatives from both genders. In terms of age group, the highest proportion belonged to the 35–44-year-old category (44%), reflecting high experience and competence in marketing. Moreover, 33% of the participants were aged 25–34 years, and 22% were 45 years and above, creating an appropriate age diversity. Regarding educational level, half of the participants held a bachelor's degree, 39% a master's degree, and 11% a doctorate. This diversity demonstrates a desirable academic level in the sample, contributing to the depth and credibility of the findings. Work experience was divided into three categories: about 44% had 11–20 years of experience, 39% had 5–10 years, and 17% had over 20 years. This distribution shows that the sample included individuals with varied and extensive work experiences, enriching the data analysis.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees (classified)

Characteristic	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	67
	Female	6	33
Age group	25–34 years	6	33
	35–44 years	8	44
	45+ years	4	22
Education level	Bachelor's	9	50
	Master's	7	39
	Doctorate	2	11
Work experience	5–10 years	7	39
	11–20 years	8	44
	20+ years	3	17

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended and exploratory questions in areas such as: methods of using internet marketing, its impact on business and non-business relations with Iraq, perceptions of the influence of these relations on intergovernmental interactions, and existing challenges and opportunities. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online (depending on geographical constraints) and were recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis based on the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally reporting. To enhance the validity of the analysis, double coding was applied (two researchers independently coded the data), and peer debriefing was used.

To ensure the credibility of the data, member checking and comparison of findings with secondary sources were employed. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the research context and sample characteristics. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through full documentation of the data collection and analysis process and maintaining an audit trail.

3.   Findings and Results

In this study, although the initial sample size was estimated at 12 to 15 interviews, in order to ensure theoretical saturation and full coverage of the subject dimensions, the number of interviews was increased to 18. Data were collected through 18 semi-structured interviews with managers and marketing experts from Iranian private companies active in the Iraqi market. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, producing a total of 274 pages of transcribed text. Data analysis was conducted based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, and

MAXQDA 2022 software was used for coding and organizing the themes. In the coding process, 43 initial codes were first extracted, which—after merging and refinement—were reduced to 12 sub-themes and ultimately 4 main themes (Table 1).

Theme 1: Strengthening Inter-Organizational Trust and Social Capital

The findings showed that internet marketing plays an important role in creating and strengthening trust between Iranian companies and Iraqi business partners. The use of up-to-date content, transparency in providing price and quality information, and prompt responses to inquiries were identified as key trust-building factors. One participant stated:

"When the Iraqi customer sees that we not only have a website in Arabic but also an online support service that responds in the local dialect, they no longer worry about buying from Iran."

This finding aligns with the concept of "digital social capital" in the international marketing literature (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), which emphasizes the importance of trust-based relationships in facilitating cross-border exchanges.

Theme 2: Digital Marketing as an Instrument of Economic Soft Power

Private companies have used internet marketing not only to sell products but also to promote Iranian values, culture, and lifestyle in the Iraqi market. Sharing cultural content, introducing brand history, and emphasizing "Made in Iran" quality as a competitive advantage are examples of this approach. A marketing manager noted:

"When we use shared cultural music or images from both countries in our advertisements, customers feel a greater sense of closeness, and their loyalty increases."

This finding is consistent with Nye's (2011) soft power theory, which stresses the role of indirect tools such as culture and communication in expanding a country's influence.

Theme 3: Facilitating Intercultural and Social Interactions

Internet marketing has provided a platform for direct interaction between citizens and businesses in Iran and Iraq that goes beyond purely commercial relationships. Using social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram for conversations, responding to everyday questions, and even exchanging cultural experiences has helped build sustainable social relationships. One expert said:

"Sometimes our customers message us just to ask about a Persian expression or to say hello; this means the relationship is no longer just about buying and selling."

These results are in line with the intercultural interaction literature (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001), which emphasizes the importance of informal communications in strengthening international cooperation.

Theme 4: Creating Informal Channels for Economic Diplomacy

The findings indicate that the online activities of Iranian private companies have created informal yet effective channels for promoting economic and even political interactions between Iran and Iraq. Ongoing communication with distributors and major customers has facilitated negotiations and contracts that, under normal circumstances and through official governmental channels, would have been time-consuming and costly. One participant pointed out:

"We became a bridge; when there's a customs issue, the customer directly asks us to coordinate with the Iranian side. Sometimes we even do things that embassies usually handle."

This finding is in agreement with recent studies on the link between the private sector and economic diplomacy.

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, and Sample Codes

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Example Code	Observations (n)
Strengthening trust and social capital	Information transparency, local language support, quick response	"Reply in less than one hour"	15
Economic soft power	Use of shared cultural symbols, Iranian brand storytelling	"Advertising with shared music"	12
Intercultural interactions	Informal communication, exchange of daily experiences	"Asking about a Persian expression"	14
Informal economic diplomacy channels	Solving customs problems, trade coordination	"Following up export license"	10

After identifying and categorizing the main themes related to the internet marketing of Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market, this section proceeds with a deeper analysis of the factors influencing the formation and development of this phenomenon. This analysis aims to better understand the reasons and mechanisms behind the occurrence of digital marketing in the specific regional and cultural context and, through the grounded theory framework, explains the causal factors, contextual conditions, intervening factors, core category, strategies, and related consequences. Examining these factors provides a scientific basis for a more precise understanding of the complex and multidimensional mechanisms of internet marketing and contributes to the development of the study's conceptual model.

Causal Factors

Causal factors are identified as the main drivers and reasons for the emergence of the studied phenomenon. In this study, which examines the internet marketing of Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market and its impact on social and economic interactions between the two countries, causal factors include a set of internal and external conditions that have led companies toward the extensive use of internet marketing.

Contextual Conditions

Contextual conditions refer to the set of environmental factors and characteristics that provide the setting in which the internet marketing of Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market takes shape and develops. These conditions not only affect the performance and execution of digital marketing but also create limitations and opportunities for companies, influencing the entire process of social and economic interactions between the two countries.

Intervening Factors

Intervening factors are conditions and variables that facilitate, restrict, or modify the process by which causal factors influence the core phenomenon (internet marketing of Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market). These factors mediate the way digital marketing operates and its impact on economic and social interactions.

Core Category

The core category in any research is the central element around which all components of the study are organized, serving as the focal point for analysis and explanation. In this study, "internet marketing of Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market" is the core category because this phenomenon, not only as a marketing tool but also as a complex and multidimensional process, plays a central role in developing and deepening economic, social, and cultural interactions between the two countries.

Strategies

Strategies refer to the set of actions, decisions, and methods employed by Iranian private companies to effectively leverage internet marketing in the Iraqi market. These strategies play an important role in overcoming

environmental challenges, enhancing business performance, and fostering economic and social interactions between Iran and Iraq.

Consequences

Consequences include the direct and indirect results and effects of the internet marketing of Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market, which are manifested in various economic, social, and political dimensions. These consequences reflect the successes or challenges of the digital marketing process and its impacts on developing interactions between the two countries.
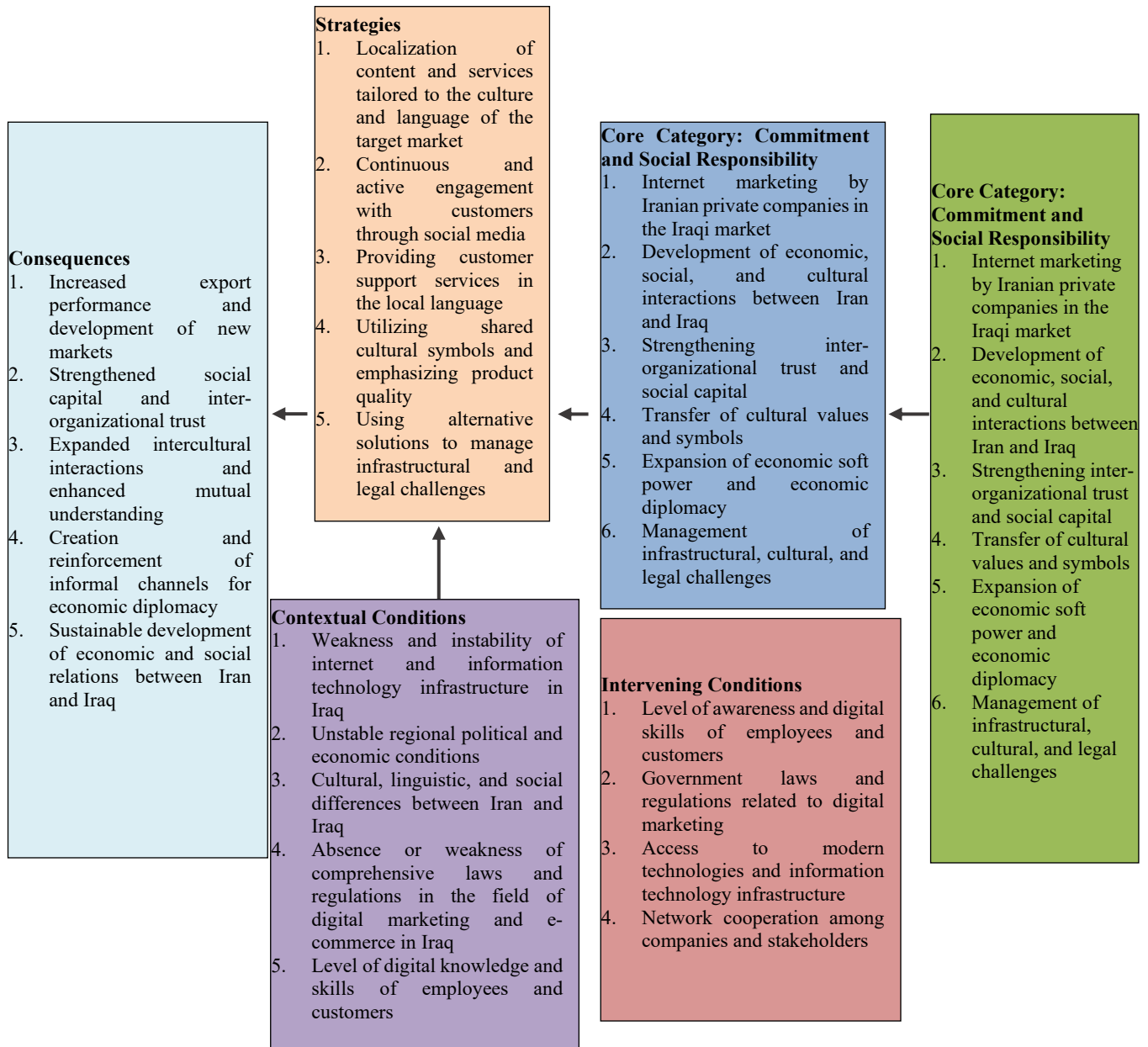
Strategies
1. Localization of content and services tailored to the culture and language of the target market
2. Continuous and active engagement with customers through social media
3. Providing customer support services in the local language
4. Utilizing shared cultural symbols and emphasizing product quality
5. Using alternative solutions to manage infrastructural and legal challenges

Core Category: Commitment and Social Responsibility
1. Internet marketing by Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market
2. Development of economic, social, and cultural interactions between Iran and Iraq
3. Strengthening inter-organizational trust and social capital
4. Transfer of cultural values and symbols
5. Expansion of economic soft power and economic diplomacy
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Consequences
1. Increased export performance and development of new markets
2. Strengthened social capital and inter-organizational trust
3. Expanded intercultural interactions and enhanced mutual understanding
4. Creation and reinforcement of informal channels for economic diplomacy
5. Sustainable development of economic and social relations between Iran and Iraq

Contextual Conditions
1. Weakness and instability of internet and information technology infrastructure in Iraq
2. Unstable regional political and economic conditions
3. Cultural, linguistic, and social differences between Iran and Iraq
4. Absence or weakness of comprehensive laws and regulations in the field of digital marketing and e-commerce in Iraq
5. Level of digital knowledge and skills of employees and customers

Intervening Conditions
1. Level of awareness and digital skills of employees and customers
2. Government laws and regulations related to digital marketing
3. Access to modern technologies and information technology infrastructure
4. Network cooperation among companies and stakeholders

Figure 1. Research Model through Thematic Method

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that internet marketing by Iranian private companies in the Iraqi market serves as a multifaceted mechanism that extends beyond mere commercial objectives, playing a central role in building

inter-organizational trust, transferring cultural values, fostering intercultural engagement, and facilitating informal channels of economic diplomacy. The thematic analysis, structured around the core category of "commitment and social responsibility," demonstrates that the strategic use of digital marketing platforms—through content localization, culturally adapted messaging, and responsive customer engagement—has enabled these firms to overcome infrastructural deficiencies, regulatory gaps, and cultural differences. These results are consistent with prior research that underscores the transformative potential of digital marketing in bridging cross-border divides and enhancing bilateral trade relations [1, 5, 9].

One of the most prominent themes identified—strengthening trust and inter-organizational social capital—highlights the capacity of internet marketing to create relationship-based value propositions in international markets. By delivering transparency in product information, providing support in the local Arabic language, and ensuring timely responses, Iranian firms have built a reputation for reliability and customer orientation. This aligns with the concept of "digital social capital" discussed in earlier work, which emphasizes that trust-based relationships facilitated through online interactions can significantly enhance the efficiency of cross-border transactions [18, 30]. Similar findings have been reported in studies on export performance in Southeast Asia, where digital responsiveness and relational communication positively correlated with sustained market presence [10, 11].

The second theme—digital marketing as an instrument of economic soft power—supports the theoretical proposition that marketing channels can be used strategically to project cultural identity and national brand equity. By embedding shared cultural symbols, music, and narratives into marketing content, companies have been able to evoke a sense of familiarity and emotional connection among Iraqi consumers. This reflects Nye's conceptualization of soft power, where cultural affinity and communication strategies play a decisive role in shaping preferences [6]. In the context of Iran's economic diplomacy objectives, such activities align with policy-level priorities to expand influence in regional markets through non-coercive means [4, 7]. Previous research in the MENA region has similarly found that culturally adapted marketing content improves consumer receptivity and loyalty [5, 16].

The facilitation of intercultural and social interactions emerged as a third significant theme, revealing that digital marketing platforms act as arenas for informal exchanges that transcend purely transactional relationships. Through ongoing conversations on social media, customers and companies exchange not only product-related information but also cultural insights, idiomatic expressions, and social gestures. This is in line with the intercultural communication frameworks proposed by Hofstede and Trompenaars, which stress the role of informal and culturally embedded interactions in sustaining long-term cooperation [16, 17]. Prior case studies have indicated that in markets with strong cultural norms, informal communication channels enhance the perceived authenticity and approachability of foreign brands [20, 28].

The final theme—creating informal channels for economic diplomacy—underscores the broader geopolitical significance of private sector engagement through digital means. The data show that sustained online interactions with Iraqi distributors and major clients have facilitated the resolution of logistical and regulatory issues that might otherwise require formal governmental intervention. This finding resonates with the growing body of literature on the intersection of private sector activity and economic diplomacy, which argues that business actors can function as unofficial envoys by facilitating trade flows and smoothing bilateral relations [8, 12, 13]. Comparable evidence from other regional trade relationships suggests that the role of private actors in digital trade ecosystems is becoming increasingly important in contexts where political or infrastructural constraints limit formal diplomatic action [14, 21].

Beyond these thematic outcomes, the study's grounded theory model clarifies how causal conditions such as rapid digital technology adoption, competitive market pressures, and economic constraints act as drivers for the adoption of internet marketing strategies. These factors mirror global trends in which firms facing heightened market competition and external restrictions seek to leverage digital tools to maintain competitiveness [2, 19]. Contextual conditions in Iraq—such as inadequate ICT infrastructure, unstable political and economic environments, and underdeveloped digital commerce regulations—pose challenges but also create opportunities for firms able to innovate and adapt [3, 15]. Intervening conditions, including the digital literacy levels of both employees and customers, as well as supportive governmental regulations, further mediate the effectiveness of these marketing efforts [22, 23].

The strategies identified in this study—content localization, continuous customer engagement via social media, local language support, use of cultural symbols, and adaptive problem-solving—reflect best practices documented in prior research on international and B2B marketing [18, 28]. These approaches not only mitigate cultural and infrastructural barriers but also create durable relational bonds with target markets. The alignment between these strategies and improved export performance is consistent with findings from Iranian food exporters [20, 22] and SMEs in other emerging markets [10, 30].

In terms of consequences, the study's findings confirm that internet marketing contributes to tangible business outcomes such as increased export performance and market expansion, as well as intangible benefits like strengthened trust, enhanced intercultural understanding, and the creation of informal diplomatic channels. This supports the assertion by Trainor et al. that digital customer relationship capabilities have a measurable impact on long-term organizational performance [29]. Furthermore, these consequences align with broader strategic objectives of sustainable economic and social relations between Iran and Iraq [7, 8].

Overall, the results of this research reinforce the conceptualization of internet marketing as a hybrid instrument of commerce and diplomacy, particularly in politically and culturally complex markets. They substantiate earlier arguments that in regions like the MENA, digital marketing's impact extends well beyond traditional business metrics, influencing the socio-political architecture of bilateral relationships [5, 6, 13]. The integration of cultural sensitivity, technological adaptability, and strategic relationship management emerges as a decisive factor in achieving these multifaceted objectives.

While this study provides comprehensive insights into the role of internet marketing in enhancing Iran–Iraq economic and cultural relations, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on qualitative data collected from a purposive sample of 18 participants, which, although sufficient for thematic saturation, may limit the generalizability of the findings to all Iranian exporters. Second, the study focuses exclusively on the Iran–Iraq context, which has unique political, economic, and cultural characteristics that may not be applicable to other bilateral trade relationships. Third, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of respondent bias, as participants may emphasize positive outcomes or underreport challenges. Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital marketing technologies means that the findings reflect a specific temporal context and may require ongoing validation as platforms, consumer behaviors, and regulatory environments change.

Future research should consider expanding the scope of inquiry to include comparative studies across multiple regional markets to identify whether the observed mechanisms are unique to the Iran–Iraq context or represent broader patterns in cross-border digital marketing. Quantitative approaches could complement qualitative insights by measuring the statistical relationship between specific digital marketing capabilities and export performance

indicators. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to track how internet marketing strategies and their outcomes evolve over time in response to technological advancements, regulatory changes, and shifting geopolitical conditions. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of Iraqi consumers and business partners directly could provide a more balanced understanding of how digital marketing initiatives are perceived and reciprocated in the target market.

For practitioners, the study's findings underscore the importance of integrating cultural intelligence into digital marketing strategies. Companies aiming to enter or expand within the Iraqi market should prioritize content localization, proactive social media engagement, and culturally resonant branding to build trust and loyalty. Investing in digital literacy training for both employees and customers can further enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives. Moreover, establishing partnerships with local distributors and influencers can extend reach while providing valuable on-the-ground insights into consumer preferences and market dynamics. Finally, firms should recognize the dual commercial and diplomatic potential of their marketing activities, positioning themselves not only as suppliers but also as cultural and economic ambassadors in their target markets.

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