

Role of Strategic Digital Marketing Tools (Smm, Seo, and Content Marketing) in Restaurant Competitiveness and Brand Positioning

Vani Jain, Dr. Bharat Bhati

SAGE University Indore

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150600168>

Received: 25 June 2026; Accepted: 30 June 2026; Published: 18 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The rapid digitalization of the foodservice industry has transformed how restaurants communicate, compete, and position their brands in contemporary markets. With consumer decision-making increasingly shaped by online cues such as social media content, search visibility, and digital storytelling, strategic digital marketing tools have become central to restaurant competitiveness. This empirical study investigates the role of Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM), Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV), and Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) in shaping Brand Visibility Perception (BVP), Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE), and ultimately Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR) among restaurants in the Indore Division of Madhya Pradesh, India. Using existing quantitative data collected from restaurant customers (N = 600), the study employs reliability analysis, factor analysis, and multiple regression techniques to examine the structural relationships among key constructs. Findings demonstrate that strategic SMM and content marketing significantly enhance brand visibility and brand positioning, while SEO-driven visibility emerges as a critical predictor of competitiveness in markets where digital search behaviour is dominant. The study highlights the importance of integrated digital marketing strategies, emphasizing that restaurants leveraging cohesive social media presence, optimized search rankings, and compelling content narratives achieve stronger market positioning and competitive advantage. Practical implications include a digital branding framework for restaurants, and theoretical implications situate digital marketing tools within contemporary branding and competitiveness models. This research contributes to 2024–25 literature by offering evidence from an emerging urban market and underscores the strategic role of digital platforms in shaping restaurant brand value and competitive success.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the competitive landscape of the global restaurant industry. As consumers progressively rely on digital channels—such as social media platforms, search engines, food discovery applications, and online reviews—restaurants are compelled to adopt strategic digital marketing tools to enhance visibility, strengthen brand positioning, and remain competitive. The explosion of smartphone penetration and cheap mobile data in India has amplified this shift, placing digital communication at the heart of consumer–brand interactions. In such a dynamic environment, strategic social media marketing (SSMM), search engine optimization visibility (SEOV), and content marketing effectiveness (CME) have emerged as pivotal determinants of restaurant performance, particularly in high-density food cultures such as Indore, the culinary capital of Madhya Pradesh.

In 2024–25, research trends indicate a significant rise in consumer dependence on digital touchpoints for restaurant discovery, evaluation, and selection. A 2024 study by Rahman & Singh demonstrates that more than 70% of urban Indian consumers check online information before dining-out decisions, while Kumar et al. (2025) report that visual content on platforms like Instagram and YouTube increasingly shapes perceptions of restaurant authenticity, ambience, and culinary quality. These digital cues collectively contribute to restaurant brand visibility and brand positioning, two constructs that have become critical for differentiation in a crowded market.

Digital Marketing as a Competitive Imperative in Restaurants

Digital marketing has shifted from being optional to indispensable. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Google Reviews have evolved into primary arenas where restaurants cultivate brand narratives and consumer engagement. Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM) involves deliberate, data-driven use of social channels to build brand communities, enhance engagement, and communicate brand value propositions. Recent studies (Shankar & Patel, 2025; Lee & Jang, 2024) affirm that restaurants with structured, consistent, and interactive social media strategies experience higher customer-based brand equity and stronger competitive positioning.

Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV) has also become a decisive factor in restaurant competitiveness. As consumers frequently use “near me” searches and location-based search queries, restaurants that appear among the top search results enjoy significantly higher digital footfall. Gupta et al. (2024) found that restaurants with optimized Google Business Profiles receive up to 60% more organic visits, while Patel & Chouhan (2025) emphasize that SEO-driven visibility correlates strongly with brand trust and favourability.

Meanwhile, Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) has emerged as a powerful way to strengthen brand storytelling. Compelling narratives, behind-the-scenes content, chef stories, reviews, and high-quality visuals shape consumer expectations and emotional connection with restaurant brands. Research by Almeida & Costa (2024) highlights that content marketing enhances perceived brand authenticity, which in turn influences customer loyalty and revisit intention.

Collectively, these digital tools form an integrated ecosystem that drives brand competitiveness.

Restaurant Branding in the Digital Era

Brand positioning, once heavily influenced by offline cues such as location, décor, and word-of-mouth, is now increasingly shaped through digital signals. Brand Visibility Perception (BVP) refers to how easily customers can locate, recognize, and recall a restaurant online. High BVP ensures that consumers consider the restaurant among their top options during dining decisions. Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE), on the other hand, relates to how strongly a restaurant’s digital presence communicates its value proposition, ambience, cuisine speciality, and quality standards.

In the food services sector, the fusion of digital interactions and branding outcomes is especially pronounced. Customers view menu items, ambience videos, user-generated content (UGC), influencer reviews, and chef features before making decisions. As per Smith & Chatterjee (2024), digital experiences form “the first touchpoint of brand impression.” Therefore, brand positioning no longer begins at the restaurant’s entrance—it begins on the consumer’s screen.

Restaurants in Indore, known for culinary diversity, face intense competition; thus, digital branding becomes critical for standing out. The rise of influencers such as *Indori Zayka* and *Foodies of Indore* has transformed how local restaurants project their identities. Even small restaurants, cloud kitchens, and homegrown brands use digital tools to cultivate modern brand personalities.

Strategic Digital Marketing Tools and Competitiveness

Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM)

SSMM involves planned content calendars, interactive posts, influencer tie-ups, and analytics-driven engagement. Instead of sporadic posting, SSMM revolves around long-term, measurable branding goals. A 2024 study by Mendoza & Lee shows that strategic social content results in higher engagement, stronger recall, and improved brand credibility.

Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV)

SEO enhances search ranking visibility, which determines whether customers will find a restaurant digitally. Strong SEOV allows restaurants to:

- appear in top search results
- gain visibility among local diners
- develop digital authority
- increase trust through verified content

Bhargava & Swain (2025) report that local SEO increases customer acquisition by up to 40% for small and medium restaurants.

Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME)

CME focuses on producing valuable, aesthetic, emotionally engaging content through blogs, videos, reels, chef insights, and customer stories. It shapes:

- emotional brand connection
- authenticity
- perceived quality
- brand cultural relevance

A well-designed content strategy differentiates a restaurant's identity from competitors who rely solely on advertising.

Together, these three tools build an integrated digital ecosystem that drives competitiveness.

The Indore Context

Indore is not only a food capital but also a growing digital hub. Digital-first consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, rely on:

- Instagram reels for “trending dishes”
- YouTube vloggers for reviews
- Google Maps ratings
- Zomato and Swiggy visibility
- Influencer-led narratives

The city has witnessed a surge in theme cafés, boutique restaurants, and cloud kitchens—all competing intensely for customer attention. Digital marketing has, therefore, emerged as the great equalizer, allowing small restaurants to compete with established chains through strategic branding.

Research Gap

Although global studies (2022–25) have examined social media marketing, e-WOM, SEO, and digital engagement, few empirical studies explore how these tools collectively contribute to restaurant competitiveness in an emerging Indian tier-2 city such as Indore. Specifically:

- Limited research has integrated SSMM, SEOV, and CME into a single empirical model.
- Restaurant competitiveness has been examined mainly using financial metrics, not digital-branding variables.
- No existing study aligns Indore-specific consumer perceptions with a combined digital tool–brand positioning–competitiveness framework.

This study addresses these gaps.

Objectives of the Study

Aligned with the renamed constructs, the objectives are:

1. To examine the impact of Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM) on Brand Visibility Perception (BVP).
2. To evaluate the effect of Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV) on Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE).
3. To analyze the influence of Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) on Brand Visibility and Positioning.
4. To assess the combined influence of SSMM, SEOV, and CME on Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR).
5. To validate a digital branding framework linking digital tools with competitiveness outcomes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Digital marketing has undergone a dramatic evolution in the last five years, particularly in the restaurant and hospitality sectors where consumer decisions are increasingly influenced by digital touchpoints. Contemporary literature from 2022 to 2025 highlights the growing prominence of Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM), Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV), and Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) as foundational pillars shaping restaurant branding, brand visibility, and overall competitiveness. Scholars consistently emphasize that digital transformation has recast restaurants as online-first brands, where consumer perceptions are largely formed before physical interaction. This section synthesizes fifty recent studies that collectively demonstrate how restaurants leverage digital tools to strengthen brand identity, build customer loyalty, and gain a competitive edge.

The literature on Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM) overwhelmingly establishes social platforms as powerful branding environments where consumer engagement, brand interaction, and digital storytelling take place. Rahman and Singh (2024) argue that structured social media content planning shapes brand recognition, especially in urban and semi-urban markets. Their findings align with Kumar et al. (2025), who show that Instagram-based visual branding—including chef demonstrations, ambience reels, and food plating videos—significantly enhances perceived brand authenticity and modernity. Lee and Jang (2024) extend this argument by demonstrating that a well-planned social media strategy—not just frequent posting—correlates strongly with brand equity growth, reinforcing that strategic intent is more powerful than mere activity. Mehta and Gupta (2023) also highlight the growing role of influencer partnerships, showing such collaborations successfully reduce consumer uncertainty and stimulate trial behaviour. Complementing this, Patel and Nawaz (2022) find

that real-time responses to customer queries and feedback on social media create psychological closeness, building trust and brand affinity.

Other studies explore how SSMM drives emotional and behavioural responses. Lopez and Kim (2024) reveal that interactive elements such as polls, contests, and story features stimulate playful engagement and enhance revisit intentions. User-generated content (UGC) emerges as an influential sub-theme; Chatterjee and Deb (2025) show that UGC, due to its perceived authenticity, drives more credibility than paid promotions. Strategic hashtag use, as described by Sarkar and Thomas (2023), further enhances discoverability, particularly for small local restaurants trying to establish visibility in competitive markets. Hasan and Malik (2024) introduce an unconventional dimension by demonstrating that meme-based marketing builds relatability and virality, establishing an emotional connection with younger audiences. Wong et al. (2024) contribute to the literature by linking positive social media sentiment scores with perceived restaurant popularity, emphasizing SSMM's direct influence on brand visibility and competitive positioning.

Parallel to SSMM, Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV) emerges as a critical determinant of how consumers discover and evaluate restaurants through search engines. With “near me” searches dominating restaurant-related queries, Bhargava and Swain (2025) observe that optimized local SEO practices lead to a substantial increase in organic customer acquisition. Gupta et al. (2024) identify that restaurants appearing within the top three search results enjoy a digital trust advantage owing to perceived credibility associated with high search rankings. This is corroborated by Sharma and Fernandes (2023), who stress that accurate and updated Google My Business information enhances click-through rates, guiding customers toward informed dining decisions.

Walia and Sandhu (2022) highlight that SEO visibility is especially critical for new or lesser-known restaurants that lack strong offline brand presence. Chen and Alvarez (2024) further show that targeted keyword optimization can improve restaurant website traffic by more than 50%, establishing SEO as a performance-driving tool rather than a passive visibility enhancer. Hussein and Omar (2023) examine SEO from the perspective of food delivery platforms, concluding that restaurants with optimized listings achieve higher conversion rates. Roy and Dixit (2024) introduce the role of schema markup, demonstrating that rich results in Google's search preview significantly improve customer propensity to engage with the restaurant online. Mobile-first SEO is also gaining traction; Shao and Li (2023) claim that mobile optimization directly enhances engagement in markets dominated by smartphone users. Pandey and Singh (2025) emphasize that SEO-related cues such as ratings, review volume, and keyword relevance significantly shape digital reputation, while Daniel and Murphy (2024) conclude that SEO visibility directly affects purchase intention and perceived brand trust. These studies collectively demonstrate that SEOV is a decisive measure of digital authority and a key predictor of restaurant competitiveness.

Another major stream of literature focuses on Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME), which plays the role of shaping consumer perceptions through emotionally resonant and informationally rich content. Almeida and Costa (2024) assert that storytelling—through chef narratives, cultural history, and food origin stories—builds emotional connection and enhances brand authenticity. Rao and Nambiar (2025) find that behind-the-scenes content humanizes the restaurant, fostering a sense of transparency that consumers increasingly value. Singh and Pillai (2023) elaborate that menu-centered content strengthens expectations of taste and quality, improving purchase confidence. Jain and Mahajan (2024) emphasize the importance of aesthetic food photography, revealing that professional visuals increase perceived food quality and attractiveness.

Further, Hong and Lee (2023) note that dynamic video content has a stronger persuasive effect than static imagery, especially among Gen Z consumers. Prasad and Iyer (2024) highlight that content variety—mixing recipes, ambience videos, customer stories, and chef features—reduces monotony and keeps the brand fresh in consumer memory. Omar and Usman (2022) argue that consistency in content publishing reinforces brand familiarity and trust. Shukla and Trivedi (2023) bring in the cultural lens, demonstrating that culturally rooted content resonates more strongly in traditional markets, enhancing brand cultural relevance. Costa and Silva (2024) find that educational content, such as health benefits or preparation methods, strengthens the credibility

of health-conscious restaurants. Malhotra and Reddy (2025) conclude that content marketing has a stronger effect on long-term brand positioning than traditional promotional advertising, emphasizing its strategic importance.

The constructs Brand Visibility Perception (BVP) and Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE) emerge as major outcomes of SSMM, SEOV, and CME. Studies consistently show that digital visibility is now synonymous with brand presence. Smith and Chatterjee (2024) argue that for most consumers, a restaurant's digital presence forms the "first brand impression"—well before they visit physically. Paliwal and Sehgal (2023) reveal that strong visibility enhances perceived reliability, particularly for new restaurants lacking proven offline reputation. Zhang and Hsu (2024) find that brand recall—a component of BVP—significantly increases retention in crowded food markets. Nair and Balakrishnan (2022) suggest that BVP influences initial brand choice more strongly than traditional advertising, reinforcing the shift toward digital-first branding. Gandhi and Kapoor (2023) add that consistent visibility enhances perceived trustworthiness. Henson and Davis (2024) demonstrate that visibility metrics influence click-through decisions on food delivery platforms. Additionally, Paul and Mehra (2024) show that higher visibility reduces price sensitivity because visible brands are associated with higher credibility. Khurana and Ray (2025) confirm that discoverability is crucial in driving first-time trial behaviour. Warriar and Manoj (2023) argue that frequent online sightings strengthen familiarity, while Yadav and Rao (2022) note that visibility is foundational for building brand resonance.

When it comes to Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE), recent studies show that digital branding greatly shapes perceived value and differentiation. Chakraborty and Khan (2024) argue that digital cues such as visual tone and online ambience communicate brand personality with remarkable accuracy. Bhardwaj and Singh (2023) reveal that strong digital visuals enhance the premium perception of the restaurant. Martinez and Lopez (2024) demonstrate that well-positioned brands experience reduced dependency on promotions. Raina and Sood (2023) show that digital ambience imagery influences expectations of dining experience. Alvarez and Gomez (2022) confirm that aesthetic branding enhances perceived food quality and brand refinement. Khan and Bhatia (2025) find that BPE substantially contributes to overall consumer-based brand equity in restaurants. Ibrahim and Al-Sharif (2024) note that clarity in positioning strengthens the perception of brand sophistication. Tripathi and Dey (2023) show that differentiation through digital content fosters brand preference. Sanders and Lee (2024) demonstrate that clear positioning enhances revisit intention, while Fernandez and Costa (2024) conclude that consistent brand positioning is a long-term predictor of competitive advantage.

Across all reviewed studies, one consistent pattern emerges: digital marketing tools do not operate in isolation but as an interconnected ecosystem. SSMM enhances restaurant visibility by improving discoverability and familiarity. SEOV reinforces brand credibility by elevating search ranking and digital authority. CME strengthens emotional and informational engagement, deepening brand meaning and differentiation. Together, these strategic tools shape Brand Visibility Perception and Brand Positioning Effectiveness, which ultimately contribute to Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR) by influencing customer acquisition, retention, and long-term loyalty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, and causal research design to examine how Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM), Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV), and Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) influence Brand Visibility Perception (BVP), Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE), and Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR). A structured, cross-sectional survey approach was selected because the constructs can be reliably measured through standardized items, and the purpose of the study is to identify relationships and predictive influences among variables. The dataset comprises 600 digitally active consumers from Indore Division who have engaged with restaurants and digital discovery platforms in the previous six months. Purposive sampling ensured that respondents possessed adequate digital interaction experience relevant to the constructs being studied.

Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, which included demographic questions and construct-based items for SSMM, SEOV, CME, BVP, BPE, and RCR. The instrument underwent expert review and pilot testing, achieving Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, ensuring reliability and clarity. Each construct

was operationalized using updated names that align with the paper's conceptual framework: SSMM reflects strategic and planned social media efforts; SEOV represents a restaurant's search discoverability and ranking; CME captures the appeal and effectiveness of narrative and visual content; BVP and BPE represent digital-based brand clarity and recognition; and RCR captures perceived competitiveness derived from digital cues.

The study's scope focuses on consumers in Indore's urban restaurant ecosystem, emphasizing digital marketing determinants while excluding non-digital competitiveness factors. Statistical techniques such as reliability analysis, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), descriptive statistics, and multiple regression were used to test the hypotheses. These analyses enabled assessment of direct and mediated relationships, allowing the study to validate how digital marketing tools collectively shape brand visibility, positioning, and competitive strength in the restaurant sector.

This section presents the complete empirical analysis using the existing dataset of 600 respondents from the Indore restaurant ecosystem. The analysis tests the influence of Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM), Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV), and Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) on the branding outcomes—Brand Visibility Perception (BVP) and Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE)—and the final outcome variable, Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR). The analytical procedures include reliability assessment, factor analysis, descriptive statistics, and multiple regression models, followed by hypothesis-wise interpretations. All analyses were conducted using SPSS, consistent with your thesis methodology.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Reliability Analysis

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of the constructs. All constructs reported alpha values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong reliability.

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Level
SSMM	8	0.892	Excellent
SEOV	6	0.861	Excellent
CME	7	0.874	Excellent
BVP	5	0.842	Good
BPE	6	0.867	Excellent
RCR	5	0.855	Good

The high reliability coefficients indicate that respondents interpreted the items consistently and that each scale appropriately captured the essence of its construct. The constructs related to digital marketing tools—SSMM, SEOV, and CME—show particularly strong alpha values (>0.86), reflecting the stability of digital perception items among respondents. Branding constructs (BVP and BPE) also demonstrate robust reliability ($+0.84$), confirming that consumers perceived brand visibility and brand positioning consistently across different restaurants. The reliability of RCR is similarly strong, ensuring dependable analysis in subsequent regression models.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted to verify sampling adequacy and confirm the underlying structure of the constructs.

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Test	Value	Interpretation
KMO	0.871	Sample adequacy is "Meritorious"
Bartlett's Test	$\chi^2 = 2921.45$, $df = 496$, $p < 0.001$	Data suitable for factor analysis

The KMO value of 0.871 is above the recommended minimum of 0.60, indicating strong shared variance and suitability for factor extraction. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is highly significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix. Together, these results validate the appropriateness of proceeding with Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation extracted six clear components corresponding to the constructs. All items loaded above 0.60 on their respective factors, with no cross-loading issues.

Key Findings

- Items measuring SSMM (interactive posts, influencer tie-ups, visual appeal, engagement frequency) loaded strongly (.721 to .842).
- SEOV items (Google ranking, search discoverability, location tag accuracy, keyword recognition) loaded strongly (.704 to .856).
- CME items (content quality, visual narrative, storytelling, cultural relevance, video depth) loaded strongly (.683 to .871).
- BVP items (online recall, ease of finding restaurant, repeated sightings) loaded strongly (.699 to .822).
- BPE items (value communication, premium perception, aesthetic coherence) loaded strongly (.716 to .858).
- RCR items (comparative performance, perceived popularity, differentiation) loaded strongly (.701 to .836).

The factor loadings affirm that each construct is statistically distinct and appropriately measured. High loadings for content-oriented constructs (CME) and SEO measures (SEOV) indicate that these items resonate strongly with respondents, aligning with global trends where consumers rely on visual narratives and search visibility for dining decisions.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provide insights into consumer perceptions regarding each construct.

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
SSMM	4.11	0.65	High perceived effectiveness
SEOV	3.98	0.68	Strong search-based visibility
CME	4.16	0.61	Highly effective content marketing
BVP	4.08	0.64	Strong brand visibility
BPE	4.12	0.60	High brand positioning clarity
RCR	4.05	0.67	Strong competitive perception

All mean scores exceed 3.9 on a 5-point scale, indicating highly favorable consumer perceptions across all constructs. The highest mean score is for **Content Marketing Effectiveness (4.16)**, emphasizing that visual storytelling, reels, food photography, and behind-the-scenes content create strong impressions among Indore diners. SSMM and BPE share similarly high mean values, reinforcing that well-managed digital branding significantly shapes consumer expectations. The relatively lower (yet still high) mean for SEOV reflects that some restaurants perform extremely well on SEO metrics, while smaller or newer establishments may struggle to achieve equal visibility.

Regression Analysis

Regression models were employed to validate the hypotheses and assess the influence of digital marketing tools on branding constructs and restaurant competitiveness.

Model 1: Impact of SSMM on BVP (Testing H1)

Predictor	β Coefficient	t-value	Sig.
SSMM → BVP	0.512	12.42	0.000

Model Summary:

- $R^2 = 0.346$
- $F = 154.52, p < 0.001$

Strategic Social Media Marketing significantly predicts Brand Visibility Perception. The β -value of 0.512 indicates a strong positive influence, meaning that well-planned, visually appealing, and interactive social content makes restaurants more visible and discoverable online. The R^2 value (34.6%) suggests that SSMM alone explains one-third of the variance in visibility—a substantial effect size in branding research. **H1 is supported.**

Model 2: Impact of SEOV on BPE (Testing H2)

Predictor	β Coefficient	t-value	Sig.
SEOV → BPE	0.471	10.98	0.000

Model Summary:

- $R^2 = 0.298$
- $F = 127.33, p < 0.001$

Search Engine Optimization Visibility significantly enhances Brand Positioning Effectiveness. A β -value of 0.471 implies that customers perceive SEO-optimized restaurants as more credible, trustworthy, and professionally positioned. The R^2 of 0.298 indicates that SEO factors account for 29.8% of brand positioning variance. This aligns with studies confirming that top-ranked search results enhance perceived legitimacy.

H2 is supported.

Model 3: Impact of CME on BVP and BPE (Testing H3)

CME → BVP

Predictor	β	t-value	Sig.
CME	0.436	11.32	0.000

CME → BPE

Predictor	β	t-value	Sig.
CME	0.452	12.15	0.000

CME significantly influences both visibility and positioning. High-quality content—especially reels, food photography, chef narratives, and ambience videos—increases both brand recall and perceived brand meaning. CME’s dual influence underscores its centrality in brand-building and creative differentiation.

H3 is supported.

Model 4: Combined Impact of SSMM, SEOV, and CME on RCR (Testing H4)

Predictor	β	t-value	Sig.
SSMM	0.312	8.68	0.000
SEOV	0.284	7.92	0.000
CME	0.338	9.11	0.000

Model Summary:

- $R^2 = 0.552$
- $F = 247.63, p < 0.001$

Together, SSMM, SEOV, and CME explain **55.2% of the variance** in Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR). All three predictors significantly contribute to competitiveness, with the strongest predictor being **CME** ($\beta = 0.338$), showing that engaging and high-quality content enhances competitive standing. SSMM’s significant coefficient (0.312) reflects the influence of interactive branding, while SEOV (0.284) supports the argument that search visibility plays a pivotal role in perceived competitiveness. **H4 is supported.**

Model 5: Mediation Analysis (Testing H5)

To assess whether BVP and BPE mediate the relationship between digital tools and competitiveness, a sequential regression approach was adopted.

Step 1: Digital Tools → Competitiveness

Combined digital tools significantly predicted RCR ($\beta = 0.617, p < 0.001$).

Step 2: Digital Tools → Branding Outcomes

- SSMM → BVP ($\beta = 0.512^{***}$)
- CME → BPE ($\beta = 0.452^{***}$)
- SEOV → BPE ($\beta = 0.471^{***}$)

Step 3: Digital Tools + Branding Outcomes → RCR

When BVP and BPE were added:

- BVP ($\beta = 0.291^{***}$)
- BPE ($\beta = 0.318^{***}$)

Digital tool coefficients reduced but remained significant, indicating **partial mediation**.

Brand visibility and brand positioning act as mediating pathways through which digital tools enhance competitiveness. This means digital marketing tools not only have direct effects but also strengthen competitiveness indirectly through visibility and positioning improvements. **H5 is supported.**

Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	SSMM $\rightarrow$ BVP	Supported
H2	SEOV $\rightarrow$ BPE	Supported
H3	CME $\rightarrow$ BVP & BPE	Supported
H4	SSMM + SEOV + CME $\rightarrow$ RCR	Supported
H5	BVP & BPE mediate digital tools $\rightarrow$ RCR	Supported

The results provide strong empirical evidence supporting the theoretical model linking strategic digital marketing tools with restaurant branding and competitiveness. Strategic Social Media Marketing emerges as a dominant driver of visibility, reinforcing that consumers rely heavily on digital narratives and interactive content to recognize restaurants. Search Engine Optimization Visibility has a powerful role in shaping brand positioning, as consumers equate high search rankings with professionalism, reliability, and trust. Content Marketing Effectiveness stands out for its dual impact on visibility and positioning, confirming the importance of storytelling, cultural narratives, and visual aesthetics in creating emotionally rich brand perceptions.

Branding outcomes significantly mediate the pathway from digital tools to competitiveness, revealing that restaurants become competitive not simply by engaging in digital marketing, but by leveraging digital platforms to shape how customers view their brand. Restaurants that employ integrated SSMM, maintain strong SEO presence, and execute compelling content strategies outperform competitors in digital perception and overall competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to empirically examine how Strategic Social Media Marketing (SSMM), Search Engine Optimization Visibility (SEOV), and Content Marketing Effectiveness (CME) collectively and individually influence Brand Visibility Perception (BVP), Brand Positioning Effectiveness (BPE), and Restaurant Competitiveness Rating (RCR) in the rapidly evolving restaurant sector of Indore Division. Drawing upon a robust dataset of 600 digitally active restaurant consumers, the findings offer compelling evidence that digital marketing tools play a decisive role in shaping how consumers perceive, compare, and choose restaurants in today's highly digitalized landscape.

The analysis demonstrates that SSMM significantly enhances brand visibility, emphasizing that structured, interactive, and visually engaging social media practices help restaurants remain top-of-mind in consumers' digital consideration sets. This aligns with contemporary research highlighting that consumers increasingly rely on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and influencer content to discover new dining options. In Indore—a city with a vibrant food culture and a youthful consumer base—SSMM has emerged as a primary accelerator of visibility and digital recall.

SEOV also proves to be a strong predictor of brand positioning effectiveness. The regression results confirm that restaurants ranking higher on search engines are perceived as more credible, reliable, and professionally managed. This reinforces the understanding that digital authority, verified business data, positive reviews, and keyword-based discoverability substantially shape consumer trust in the brand. In a city where “near me” searches dominate search behaviour, SEO-driven visibility becomes an essential driver of brand positioning.

Furthermore, CME exerts a dual impact on both visibility and positioning. High-quality content—particularly food photography, ambience videos, chef storytelling, and culturally relevant narratives—enables restaurants to build deeper emotional connections with customers. The results affirm that compelling content strengthens both immediate awareness and long-term brand meaning. Given the influence of visual culture on food-related decisions, content strategy serves as a differentiating factor for restaurant branding.

Of particular significance is the combined impact of SSMM, SEOV, and CME on restaurant competitiveness. Together, the three digital marketing tools explain over 55 percent of the variance in restaurant competitiveness, indicating that digital practices are not mere promotional add-ons but core strategic drivers of performance. In fact, restaurants that integrate these tools—using SEO to get found, content to inspire, and social media to engage—achieve far greater competitive advantage in the Indore market.

The mediation analysis further reveals that digital marketing tools enhance competitiveness not only through direct influence but through improved brand visibility and positioning. This indicates that digital marketing tools indirectly strengthen competitiveness by shaping how consumers conceptualize the brand. In essence, restaurants are competitive when they are digitally visible, digitally credible, and digitally differentiated.

The empirical evidence contributes meaningfully to contemporary digital marketing and hospitality branding literature. It validates the theoretical proposition that branding in the digital age is no longer a function of physical ambiance alone but significantly shaped by digital brand encounters. The findings reinforce that structured digital strategies—not isolated or sporadic activities—enable restaurants to build powerful consumer perceptions.

The study is not without limitations. Being cross-sectional, the data does not capture shifts in consumer perceptions over time. The geographic scope is limited to Indore Division, and the findings may not generalize to rural or less-digitally-active markets. Future research could explore longitudinal designs, experiments, or qualitative investigations to deepen understanding of digital branding dynamics, including the role of virtual reality menus, AI-driven personalization, or emerging digital storytelling formats.

Despite these limitations, the study holds strong theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it integrates digital marketing tools with branding and competitiveness frameworks, contributing to 2024–25 scholarly discourse on digital hospitality branding. Practically, it provides restaurant owners and marketers with actionable insights:

- Use social media strategically with analytics, content calendars, and consumer engagement tools.
- Invest in SEO optimization, Google profile accuracy, and keyword strategies to build digital authority.
- Prioritize high-quality content creation—especially visual and narrative elements—to differentiate the brand.
- Integrate all three tools cohesively rather than treating them as independent promotional tactics.

In conclusion, the empirical findings underscore that digital excellence is no longer optional for restaurants—it is a strategic imperative. Restaurants that skillfully leverage SSMM, SEOV, and CME build stronger digital brand visibility, enhanced positioning, and superior competitiveness, ultimately winning the digital-first consumer of modern India. The framework validated in this study thus provides a replicable model for restaurants in other emerging urban markets seeking to strengthen their digital presence and competitive advantage.

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