

Business Model Adaptation of Ghost Kitchens in the Era of Digital Transformation: The Role of Social Media as a Sales Channel

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has transformed the culinary business model from conventional to modern with digital technology. This change has led to the emergence of an innovative business model, namely the ghost kitchen, a culinary business that operates without dine-in services and focuses on online ordering and distribution systems. In this business, social media is not only a communication medium, but also a means of promotion, interaction with consumers, and the product sales process. Therefore, the use of social media is a crucial factor in the operational success of ghost kitchens in the digital era. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply understand the adaptation of the ghost kitchen business model to face the digital era. Data were collected through interviews with five business owners, observation of marketing activities on social media, and documentation of promotional content. Informants were selected purposively with the criteria of businesses that implement the ghost kitchen concept and actively utilize social media as a marketing tool. The results show that Instagram is the main platform used for promotional activities, interactions, and product orders. Other platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and marketplaces are used as supporting media to expand market reach. Marketing strategies include creating visual content in the form of photos and videos, presenting attractive promotional content, and utilizing paid promotion features to increase visibility. Thus, social media plays a strategic role in supporting the adaptation of the ghost kitchen business model while maintaining the sustainability of digital-based culinary businesses.

Keywords: *Culinary business, Digital marketing, Digital transformation, Ghost kitchen, Social media.*

INTRODUCTION

There have been many changes that have resulted from the digital revolution in the areas of manufacturing, services, and trade. With the advancement of information technology through online channels, businesses have an opportunity to reinvent themselves by incorporating digital platforms in their processes and marketing activities (Verhoef et al., 2021). Through digitalization, businesses can achieve increased flexibility and efficient means of communication with consumers compared to traditional methods (Vial, 2021). Moreover, digital transformation provides a lot of avenues for innovation in product development and service delivery.

With regard to the culinary industry, digitalization has greatly impacted the manner in which business activities are conducted and consumer engagement approaches. It has enabled food businesses to incorporate technology into all activities associated with the business ranging from the ordering process, preparation, distribution, and marketing of products. Consequently, it is necessary for businesses to come up with new business strategies that would enable them to cope with changes in the market environment. Apart from changes in the marketing strategies of the products,

digitalization requires businesses to redesign their operational systems to create value for their customers (Arumsari et al., 2022).

Moreover, there has been an increased trend of internet users and social media users, which has led to more people buying goods, thus bringing changes to the process of transaction towards the digital process. People are more likely to seek information about the product, compare them, and make purchases online without requiring physical interaction (Kaur & Jaggi, 2026). In addition to impacting the customers' decisions, this development calls for change on the side of businesses by adjusting their marketing and business strategies to match the needs of consumers. An example of one such online tool is the social media. Social media have become important tools of communication that enable businesses to create conversations with consumers, seek their feedback, and adjust their product or promotions.

Besides serving as communication tools, social media have become strategic tools that integrate marketing and sales activities of firms. The business can engage in branding activities, promotion activities, and transactions through this medium. This ensures that companies are able to expand their reach, thereby interacting with many customers (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Social media engagement can assist in establishing connections with customers as well as in swaying decisions among customers. Consequently, social media is not just an avenue for communication but can become a key tool within the digital business landscape.

The rapid development of the digital era has brought about changes and innovations in business models, particularly in the culinary sector. Currently, the culinary sector is developing a new business model called the ghost kitchen. Ghost kitchens are a business model that does not offer dine-in or eat-in facilities. This business model focuses more on food production and distribution through platform-based delivery services (Talukder et al., 2026). This business model emerged based on changes brought about by digitalization. People's lifestyles, increasingly accustomed to using gadgets, have provided opportunities for culinary businesses to utilize digital media. This business model is increasingly attractive to the public because it is faster and easier to access.

From an operational perspective, this business model offers numerous advantages for businesses, as it cuts operating costs for space rental and facility maintenance, allowing businesses to further increase production (Kumari et al., 2025). Moreover, ghost kitchens enable the management of different brands or menus through the same kitchen, leading to increased efficiency and effectiveness. With the advantage of cost savings, there is also an opportunity to experiment with new concepts within the menu without risking significant costs.

The ghost kitchen business model demonstrates that this business model is an adaptation for the culinary industry to technological developments and consumer trends (Yupardhi, 2023). By integrating online messaging apps and social media as communication and sales channels, ghost kitchens serve as a concrete example of how technology can drive efficient business innovation and respond to market trends. This situation underscores the urgency of research to better understand how business owners manage operational and digital marketing strategies in the context of ghost kitchens.

Several previous studies on the ghost kitchen business model, including those by Festivalia & Swantari (2022), demonstrated that ghost kitchens are a highly optimal business adaptation strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on operational and marketing cost efficiency. In addition to this, the study conducted by Haposan Rahma Naibaho (2025) focused on product innovation through the introduction of rotating virtual menus by applying the technique of analyzing big data for consumer sentiment and market reaction towards ghost kitchen techniques. Moreover, the study conducted by Lubis & Muryati (2025) was based on the significance of social media marketing with the help of the RACE framework to create brand equity of ghost kitchens. Digital interaction can convert physical constraints into emotional strength. The above-mentioned studies have generated many findings separately. Researchers have found few concrete studies that explore the role of social media as a strategic step in adapting the ghost kitchen business model, from operations and marketing to consumer interaction. Researchers believe this is a crucial aspect, as the success of ghost kitchens depends not only on operational efficiency or product innovation, but also on the business owner's ability to utilize social media to increase sales, competitiveness, engage with consumers, and strengthen sustainable digital-based sales strategies.

On the basis of that, researchers aim to address the issue of adaptation of ghost kitchen business models in terms of digital transformation and the role played by social media in such strategic business initiatives to enhance sales performance and consumer engagement. This study is focused on the issue of adaptation of ghost kitchen business

models to the concept of digital transformation, particularly in terms of the role played by social media in the sales process as a strategic tool. In particular, this study intends to investigate how organizations use social media platforms as part of their digital marketing strategy and interact with customers to maintain sustainable business operations in the online environment. This research would be able to make significant contributions to strategic management and digital marketing literature theoretically, while also introducing new insights into this area of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of digital technologies has brought major transformations in the business sector, including in the food industry. The purpose of this literature review is to assess the impact of these transformations through social media, innovations in business models, and entrepreneurship approaches.

Culinary Business in the Digital Era

The development of digital technology has fundamentally changed the structure and dynamics of the culinary business (Abdullah, 2024). Current digital developments require businesses to utilize digital media in business processes, from marketing and order management to product distribution. In today's digital era, businesses that are able to optimize digital platforms are the ones who can compete, expand market reach, and improve operational efficiency (Talukder et al., 2026). The ongoing digital revolution is making it more and more necessary for food businesses to formulate more dynamic marketing campaigns. Besides being utilized as an effective means for product promotion, social media has become an important part of the branding process through the creation of attractive content (Danar et al., 2020). Instagram, Tiktok, and Facebook enable MSMEs to create content that informs the viewers and sets them apart from competitors, thereby widening their market reach.

Digital culinary marketing requires storytelling as a method of communicating the values and personality of brands (Hakim et al., 2025). The purpose of storytelling is to inform the target audience about the history of a product, including the manufacturing process, background of the enterprise, cultural values, or reasons behind its establishment. History stories told by the brands help the consumers to develop emotional bonding with the products, making them loyal. As suggested by phenomenological studies of food MSMEs, the history stories narrated by the MSMEs significantly influence the way consumers perceive the brands (Isma & Alisyahbana, 2023).

In addition to that, digitalization is once again pushing the MSMEs to innovate and create new business models, which will help them tailor their marketing strategies to meet the growing dynamics of customer behavior and dependency on digital platforms (Lubis, 2025). In addition to facilitating the ease of online sales transactions, e-business and social media marketing allow the MSMEs to use the advantages of hashtags, stories, reels, and influencer collaboration to engage their target audiences and form more active customer communities (Oktaviani & Rustandi, 2018). It is especially important considering that the expectations from consumer experiences are getting higher in the age of digitalization.

At the same time, successful digital marketing does not rely only on frequent postings and aesthetically pleasing images since communication plays an essential role. Brands should be able to establish a dialogue with their customers, responding to their comments and using the opportunities of two-way communication channels provided by social media (Lestari, 2025). In addition to allowing the businesses to respond to consumer questions quickly, such dialogues help the businesses collect information and use customer feedback to adjust their strategies (Trulline, 2021).

Ghost Kitchen

Ghost kitchens represent one of the biggest innovations in the modern model of culinary business operations, where delivery becomes the primary method of reaching customers without requiring a physical restaurant to operate from (Suganob, 2022). The idea of using only deliveries was prompted by the increasing need for efficient operations and the trend toward greater convenience in food ordering online (Ali Akbar et al., 2022). With the absence of physical facilities to operate, ghost kitchens do not have to deal with expenses associated with rent, interior, and hospitality-related services.

Furthermore, ghost kitchens provide fresh avenues for culinary entrepreneurs to extend their operations over a more extensive geographical region through the use of mobile applications currently on the market (Jones et al., 2024). This can be exemplified by the mobile applications, such as GoFood, GrabFood, and ShopeeFood, which enable culinary entrepreneurs to create a digital presence without setting up a physical establishment.

The ghost kitchen model also drives digital transformation in the culinary sector. It is advisable for entrepreneurs to embrace technological means, such as kitchen management platforms, automated stock tracking, and customer analysis, to increase efficiency and quality of services offered (Nigro et al., 2023). The technological intervention helps ghost kitchens estimate their supply and adjust the quantities according to consumer needs. Consumers get services quickly and efficiently.

Ghost kitchens can be referred to as an appropriate measure taken to assist entrepreneurs with handling uncertain circumstances in the market, especially during the spread of the virus. Due to the limitations placed on interactions and closure of dine-in places, most companies were forced to come up with a new business strategy. The new way of conducting business incorporates ghost kitchens, thus allowing firms to continue operating without any risk involved.

In addition to this, the ghost kitchen strategy presents possibilities of being innovative with menus and diversifying into other forms of business. Since there is a lower cost of investment associated with ghost kitchens, businesses can try out different cuisine ideas or even partner with other companies without making too much financial commitment (Kaur & Jaggi, 2026). In essence, the ghost kitchen strategy makes culinary business creative, but also gives room for collecting consumer feedback.

Social Media as a Marketing and Sales Channel

Social media platforms have become one of the most important components of digital marketing campaigns for culinary businesses such as ghost kitchens. Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, among other social media, act as a venue where businesses use visuals to introduce their products, engage with customers, and develop their branding stories (Danar et al., 2020). The effective use of social media, especially creative content posting, increases brand recognition and encourages sustained interaction with consumers.

Social media not only acts as an advertisement medium but is also an important instrument of creating consumer trust through direct engagement (Lubis, 2025). Brands interact with people through replies to their comments and messages, as well as by responding to their feedback. Besides fostering an emotional connection, direct consumer engagement allows businesses to collect valuable feedback and analyze information that helps them improve customer experience and the services offered (Naibaho, 2025).

Apart from facilitating interaction, social media is a highly strategic tool in developing the brand identity of entrepreneurs while increasing product visibility (Oktavianingrum et al., 2023). The use of stories, reels, creative videos, and collaboration with influencers helps ghost kitchens to engage audiences in a more interesting and personal manner (Fadly, 2025). It not only facilitates consumer interaction but also increases the likelihood of purchases being made by these consumers via digital channels.

Moreover, the advancement of technology has helped social media to become a convenient means through which consumers can transact and place orders for products (Andhini & Khuzaini, 2017). Ghost kitchens can take advantage of the integration of e-commerce and social media and achieve greater sales in spite of the absence of physical presence. This is in line with current consumer preferences that favor convenience, speed, and digital transactions.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply understand the adaptation of the ghost kitchen business model to the digital transformation, particularly in utilizing social media as a sales channel (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on exploring the practices, experiences, and strategies of business actors in managing digital-based culinary businesses contextually (Sahir, 2021). Through a case study design, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the ghost kitchen phenomenon in real-life situations, allowing the dynamics of business decision-making and digital marketing

strategies to be analyzed within the business's operational context (Fitrah, 2018). The research was conducted at a culinary business unit implementing the ghost kitchen concept, namely a food business without dine-in services and oriented towards an online ordering system. The research subjects were determined using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: (1) the business implements the ghost kitchen or virtual kitchen concept, (2) utilizes social media as a means of promotion and marketing communication, and (3) the business owner or manager is directly involved in business decision-making. The research informants consisted of business owners or managers who understand the operational and marketing strategies applied in business management (Sumargo, 2021).

Furthermore, data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations of marketing activities on business social media accounts, and documentation in the form of archives of promotional content and online marketing materials relevant to the research focus. The obtained data were then analyzed continuously from the collection process to the interpretation stage through the stages of data reduction, data presentation in the form of thematic categorization, and drawing meaning to identify patterns of adaptation of the ghost kitchen business model in the context of digital transformation. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to the use of social media as a sales channel, business adaptation strategies, and business management dynamics, thus generating a conceptual understanding of the role of social media in supporting the sustainability of the ghost kitchen business.

DISCUSSION

This section presents research findings obtained from in-depth interviews with five ghost kitchen entrepreneurs and observations of social media marketing activities. To provide an initial overview of the characteristics of the research informants, a brief profile of the businesses involved in the study is presented. This profile includes the type of business, the social media platforms used, and the level of activity in utilizing social media as a marketing tool.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

No	Informat Code	Business Type	Main Platform	Activity Level
1	Informant A	Coffee & Cake Shop	Instagram, TikTok	Very Active
2	Informant B	Coffee Shop	Instagram, WhatsApp	Active
3	Informant C	Aci Meatball	Instagram, WhatsApp, Marketplace	Active
4	Informant D	Cookies & Brownies	Instagram, WhatsApp	Active
5	Informant E	Coffee Shop	Instagram, WhatsApp	Less Active

Source: author's work.

Based on the characteristics of these informants, the analysis then focused on research findings related to the adaptation of the ghost kitchen business model to digital transformation. The results of this study were organized thematically to identify patterns, strategies, and dynamics emerging from the informants' business practices.

1) Utilization of Social Media as a Marketing Channel in Ghost Kitchen Businesses

The development of digital technology has driven significant changes in marketing patterns in the culinary industry. Social media is now one of the primary platforms used by businesses to promote products, build brand identity, and reach a wider consumer base (Bilgin, 2018). In the context of digital-based culinary businesses like ghost kitchens, the use of social media is becoming increasingly important because this business model does not rely on a physical restaurant that can be visited in person by consumers (Jones et al., 2024).

Based on observations and interviews, it was found that all the business owners who responded to the questionnaire are using Instagram as the main marketing tool for promoting their products. Along with Instagram, there are also other platforms that some of the respondents utilize to conduct their marketing processes and connect with their customers. Based on Instagram usage, it can be inferred that this platform plays a strategic role in ghost kitchen marketing due to the presence of opportunities for visual promotion through photos and videos, as well as information about menu, prices, promotions, and ordering process.

WhatsApp, on the other hand, is used as a way to interact with the customer through direct messaging, especially while ordering and confirming the transactions. Interaction through WhatsApp helps businesses build relations with the consumers, answer any queries they might have and receive feedback from them. Social media thus becomes not only a platform for promotion, but also a medium for interacting with consumers and conducting transactions. This point is further supported by the following informant's opinion:

"Social media is very helpful for our business because customers can directly see the products we sell from our posts. Usually, after seeing the posts, they contact us directly to place an order." (Informant 1)

Interpreting the results shows that apart from being a promotional platform, social media is used as a marketing platform where products can be marketed, consumer interactions conducted, and businesses made visible. This supports past literature that suggests that social media helps culinary businesses widen their market reach and enhances their promotions than using traditional methods (Grubor & Jakša, 2018).



Figure 1. Instagram Account of a Ghost Kitchen Business

2) Digital Marketing Strategies Through Content and Promotional Features

One of the main factors that influence consumer attention, interest, and perception in digital marketing is engaging and relevant content (Deepak & Jeyakumar, 2019). Right content does not only inform but contributes to building a brand image, increasing engagement, and creating an overall positive impression about the company. In relation to ghost kitchens, however, there is an additional reason why content is important because these businesses have no

physical location where clients can see their products. Therefore, they must use the power of visual communication through social media platforms to create impressions.

Social media channels such as Instagram provide a wide array of features that can be used to enhance digital marketing strategies by posting photos or videos, making stories or reels, or adding a direct way to make purchases. These features enable businesses to visually represent their products, provide information regarding prices, sales, and orders, and communicate with their audiences instantly (Almohaimmeed, 2019). Using them, ghost kitchens can promote their menu, visual presentation, and overall image successfully.

According to research findings, it can be noted that the most common form of content that ghost kitchens use includes images of the products, videos, promotional content, and testimonials from their customers. This content is always posted on social media regularly to ensure that they stay engaged with their audience while at the same time making sure that they know what products they sell. There are some ghost kitchens that go an extra step and make their posts more aesthetically pleasing depending on their branding. This is especially common in cookie and brownie businesses, where the businesses promote their products using graphics that make the products more appealing.

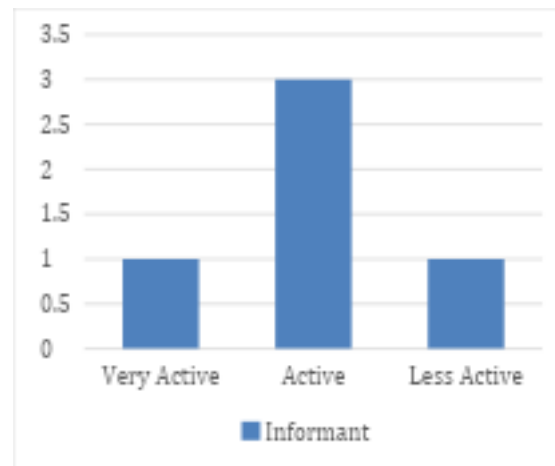


Figure 2. Content Upload Frequency

Aside from organic content, organizations employ Instagram's paid promotion tools to increase their marketing coverage. The tool enables organizations to promote their posts through people who are not even following their business page. Therefore, this means that the marketing campaign is not only dependent on the number of times an organization uploads its content but also on the visual appeal of the content and digital promotional tools. One informant emphasized the importance of visualization in attracting consumer attention:

"On social media, people are usually attracted first by the appearance. So we try to create engaging content so that people who see the posts are interested in trying our products." (Informant 4)

The analysis of these results indicates that the effectiveness of the digital marketing of the ghost kitchen is largely contingent upon the skills of the business owner to manage the content effectively and strategically by using compelling images, maintaining brand consistency, and leveraging the digital aspects. The effective management of content could raise awareness, impact the decision-making process of consumers, and foster customer loyalty through digital engagement. This finding concurs with previous studies which stressed that engaging visual content on social media could draw the attention of consumers and impact their decision-making process (Grubor & Jakša, 2018). Thus, the utilization of social media as a content platform could be regarded as the basis of digital marketing.

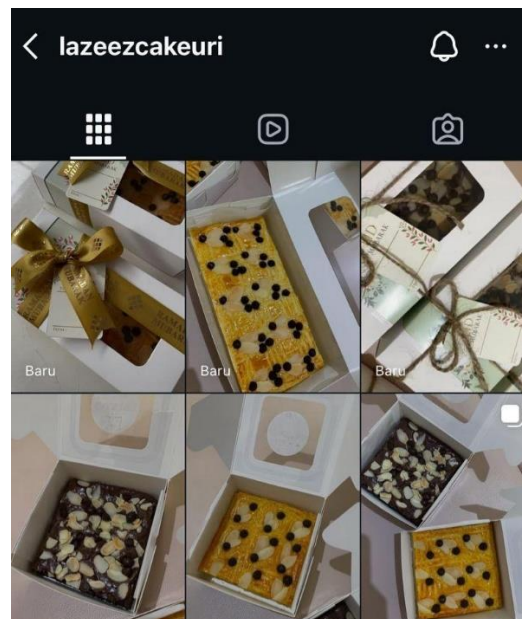


Figure 3. Example of Product Promotional Content on Instagram

3) The Role of Social Media in Consumer Interaction and Sales

In addition to being a medium for promoting their products, social media acts as a very important two-way communication channel between organizations and their consumers (Tuten, 2023). Communication that takes place via comments on postings, direct messaging, or applications such as WhatsApp enables the company to get consumer insight, answer any queries, and even receive feedback from them. Through such methods, organizations can develop better intimacy with their customers and build up loyalty within them (Grubor & Jakša, 2018).

Research observations indicate that the majority of ghost kitchen orders come from consumers who see the product on social media and then directly contact the business to place an order. This is reinforced by the statement of one informant:

"Usually, customers see posts on Instagram, then they immediately contact us via message or WhatsApp to place an order." (Informant 2)

From the above interpretation of the findings, it is evident that social media plays the role of a medium where three roles can be achieved at once, including promoting, interacting, and executing transactions. The leading position occupied by Instagram as the primary medium proves that the success of the ghost kitchen business heavily depends on the effectiveness with which digital media are used. From the interactions on social media platforms, businesses can customize their products, offer more information regarding the menu, pricing, offers, and stock level, and address customers' issues promptly.

Moreover, such interactions can serve as a good source of customer information to implement marketing strategies. Customer comments, messages, and opinions are very valuable for improving the quality of products and offering menu options. Therefore, besides being an efficient means of increasing customer engagements, social media becomes part of the business strategy making process. This finding is consistent with the digital marketing concept that highlights the power of direct interactions with consumers via social media platforms, which result in higher sales (Danar et al., 2020).

The successful employment of social media as a medium for communication and transaction by ghost kitchens shows that the digital revolution is transforming not just promotional techniques but also operational strategies and business approaches. The efficient exploitation of social media helps ghost kitchens stay relevant and connected to customers despite the lack of an actual brick-and-mortar outlet.

4) Adaptation Strategies of Ghost Kitchen Business Models

The marketing strategies used involve the management of marketing using social media, generating creative visual content for promotion, and making use of various digital means of communication such as paid promotions to enhance the number of consumers reached out to. Some firms go further to post pictures of products, promotion videos, and testimonials from clients to make the content more appealing and enhance the perception of product quality.

Table 2. Observation Results of Social Media Activity

Aspect	General Findings
Platforms used	Instagram is dominant, supported by WhatsApp, TikTok, and marketplaces
Upload frequency	Majority active (3–5 times per week), one very active, one less active
Content type	Product photos, videos, promos, and testimonials
Information presentation	Engaging visuals with product descriptions and prices
Consumer interaction	Direct Message, comments, and WhatsApp
Promotion form	Discounts, package deals, visual content, and paid promotions

Source: Author's Work.

In addition to content management, adaptation is also evident in changes in business operational patterns, which are increasingly reliant on digital technology. Companies do not anymore depend on physical sales, but rather use different digital platforms to advertise, communicate with clients, and take orders. As illustrated in Table 2, all informants use Instagram as their main platform, with additional support from WhatsApp, TikTok, and markets to communicate and distribute orders. This indicates that different digital platforms have been integrated into businesses, allowing marketing and transactions to be conducted without any difficulty in one digital space.

Furthermore, the use of online ordering applications, digital payment systems, and interaction management through direct messaging and communication applications demonstrate that ghost kitchen operations have undergone comprehensive digitalization. These findings indicate that businesses are not merely adopting technology as a tool but have made it a core part of their business operations. Thus, the use of digital technology enables ghost kitchens to operate more efficiently, be responsive to consumer demand, and expand their market reach without requiring significant investment in physical facilities.

This adaptation also includes innovation in menu and service development. The firm can also easily customize menu options, prices, and promotions according to trends and feedback collected via social media platforms. It is clear that the digital transformation does not affect only marketing but leads to increased data-driven decision making. Therefore, ghost kitchens can try out different business concepts and menu combinations without taking huge risks and reacting to consumer demands.

Such an approach corresponds to business model innovation, which requires a continuous change of the business models in line with environmental changes (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Thanks to digitalization, ghost kitchens are capable of adjusting menu items, promotional material, and services in order to stay relevant. As a result, the introduction of digital technologies into the business model helps to become flexible, sustainable, and competitive in conditions of stiff competition in the field.

Consequently, the inclusion of social media in operational and marketing processes will become an important component of the success of ghost kitchens in the digital age. Social media becomes a platform for advertising and, at the same time, serves the purpose of information exchange and transactions conducted via social media. The success of ghost kitchens lies in the business owner's strategic implementation of the technologies of digital platforms ranging from visual elements to the use of interactive tools and advertisements.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The advancement of digital technology has led to many changes that affect the operations of culinary entrepreneurs, including those in the ghost kitchen industry. It can be deduced from the research findings, which include interviews conducted with five entrepreneurs and observation of digital marketing techniques, that social media acts as an important tool in the promotion and sale of goods in ghost kitchens. Instagram emerges as the dominant platform because of its capability to showcase visual posts, target diverse audiences, and offer features for successful digital marketing techniques. In addition, other platforms like WhatsApp, Tiktok, and marketplaces are also used by entrepreneurs as supportive tools for their marketing and promotion techniques. This research also shows that ghost kitchen entrepreneurs are adapting their business models in various ways to address digital transformation. Such adaptations can be seen from the use of social media as a virtual store to promote their product, the development of engaging promotions, actively interacting with customers, and using paid promotion to increase the marketing process. It shows that in addition to providing a good product, it is also important for ghost kitchen business owners to adapt the use of digital technology as a form of marketing and business development process amid growing competition within the culinary business sector. Based on the results above, ghost kitchen business entrepreneurs are encouraged to make effective use of social media in terms of its development of promotional content, making use of digital marketing features, and creating interaction with customers for creating customer loyalty. In addition, the expected further studies will broaden the scope of this study by including more number of informants, studying different forms of digital-based culinary businesses, or conducting deeper studies regarding the impact of social media in increasing sales and digital marketing for ghost kitchen businesses. Therefore, future studies will offer a complete view of digital-based culinary business development amid technological changes.

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