

Digital Marketing and Consumer Scepticism. Can Viral Marketing Alleviate Consumer Digital Marketing Fears on Online Electrical Gadgets Purchases in Zimbabwe?

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Abstract

The major transition from conventional marketing platforms to digital marketing platforms has created many fears for customers as they can only interact with the organisation and its products on a global sphere. The ability of the consumer to tangibly assess the quality of the products before completing a sale has been compromised leading to many consumers wishing firms to revert back to brick and mortar shops as they have been exposed to digital cyber-crimes that they can neither blame to the organisation nor themselves. The study was conducted to determine consumer digital marketing fears and how consumers eradicate those fears when conducting online transaction in the purchase of electronic gadgets. To narrow down the research scope, three digital marketing media dimensions were selected for research which encompassed; social media marketing, website marketing and visual marketing (YouTube). The study adopted a pragmatic approach where quantitative and qualitative data was collected. Research was conducted in Zimbabwe using a sample size of two hundred (200) consumers. Questionnaires were administered physically and through the use of online platforms which created less delimitation of the study as most of the entire country's was given an equal chance of being selected. SPSS was used as a data analytic tool. The driving motive for consumer influx to online marketing platforms is the need to satisfy their changing needs and wants which later exposes them to digital cyber crimes. The findings of the research will help in giving firms the major fears consumers face online and help firms design strategies to alleviate those fears to ensure sustainable online transactions.

Keywords: Digital marketing; Consumer scepticism; viral marketing; marketing fears; online transactions; Cyber-crimes; Cyber-security

1. Introduction

(Massive roll out of internet connectivity by many firms has created new customer segments that were not yet tapped by many businesses. The continuous growth in information technology has made many firms to redesign their marketing strategies through the adoption of digital marketing strategies to ensure increase in customer connectivity (West, 2015). The natural disasters usually serve as a barometer to check on the survival strength of many firms. When COVID 19 was first dictated in 2020, many firms that had already embraced digital marketing strategies were not severely affected as they could remotely reach and satisfy their consumer

needs and wants electronically (Chetty et al., 2020; Levy & Gvili, 2015). On a global view, an individual receives a maximum of 10000 adverts per day, with Google making revenue of more than 134Billion on advertisements (Statistics SA, 2020). The growth in digital marketing has created more benefits to firms such as conducting online marketing research (Ponde & Jain, 2019), monitoring consumer behaviour and ease in execution of marketing programs (Neha, 2014). According to Uloko and Elijah (2021) digital marketing is seen as the most beneficial human innovation to marketing whose effectiveness can only be measured by its ability to deliver its promise. Based on the above assertion, it cannot be under stated that digital marketing has benefited organisations and posed many fears than anticipated gains from a consumer perspective.

The Rural Electrification Agency (REA) in Zimbabwe saw the stretch of electrification to the rural set up and the introduction of solar powered houses in both rural and urban set up saw an increase in the purchase of electrical gadgets in Zimbabwe. Many of these electrical gadgets are purchased by consumers online than physical. The need by consumers to own electrical gadgets has accelerated online transactions embedded by mixed thoughts and fears by consumers as they transit into new online transactions with scepticism. According to Akhtar (2011) the major strategy of tapping the increasing market share is the ability of a company to re define its communication strategies, analyse electronic consumer behaviour traits (Ponde & Jain, 2019 and address consumer dissatisfaction that has been created by offline marketing strategies (Gujrati and Uygun, 2020). Based on the above aims to digital marketing this research seeks to close a research gap on whether digital marketing came to correct consumers' cries on the weaknesses of traditional marketing practices or it came to create new unanticipated problems for consumers than benefits. According to Datareportalreport, there are 5.74 million users in Zimbabwe as of January 2023, concluding that 34.8% of the entire population is connected to the internet and 52.7% of the entire population has access to electricity (International Telecommunications Union). Based on the above statistics, regardless of economic conditions in Zimbabwe, the increasing internet connectivity is leaving many customers making sacrificial purchases of electronic gadgets to improve their living standards.

1.1 Aim of the research

To determine consumer digital marketing fears and how consumers reduce those fears in the purchase of electronic gadgets.

1.2 Research objectives

- To identify digital marketing platforms consumers use to purchase electronic gadgets..
- To identify factors that motivate consumers to use digital platforms in the purchase of electronic gadgets.
- To analyse consumer digital marketing fears when conducting transactions on electric gadgets purchases.
- To determine strategies used by consumers in reducing digital marketing induced fears on the purchase of electric gadgets.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital marketing concept

Digital marketing has emerged as a long awaited communication medium to help organisations bridge up the information gap between the organisation and its customers (Ponde & Jain, 2019). The main objective of its recent growth is its ability to ensure real time automated consumer behaviour monitoring by organisations (Etale and Uranta, 2022). Digital marketing is defined as the management process of carrying out marketing activities through the use of the internet (Neha, 2014), direct marketing strategy to create linkage between an organisation and its customers (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018), Marketing that is done through the use of computers , smart phones or cell phones tablets (Fusun, 2015).Uloko and Elijah (2019) have a different view to digital marketing as an inventive business idea to create an electronic channel of selling products to prospective consumer through the use of World Wide Web or internet.

Many firms have used digital marketing strategies all in the quest to drive online store traffic and achieve their marketing goals. The highest ranked in terms of effectiveness have been noted as company websites, social media platforms and online advertng platforms (Uloko and Elijah 2021). Digital marketing its continuously picking its usage based on its uses such as remote shopping, transaction or bill payment, ease in product information search and consumer online gaming among other uses. According to Schutte and Chauke (2022) the rise of digital marketing credit is its effectiveness in content advertising and its effectiveness to distinguish competing brands online, creation of wider customer data bases (Sinha & Singh, 2018) at a lower cost as compared to traditional marketing platforms (Erevelles et al., 2016).Digital marketing platforms range from online to offline platforms (Kee &Yazdanifard, 2015), online platforms being websites, Search engine marketing, YouTube, social media platforms, internet marketing and Big Data marketing while offline strategies include television, electronic bill boards, radio, SMS and MMS (Veleva and Tsvetanova, 2020).

2.2 Factors that motivate consumers to use digital platforms

The major drive that make many consumers flood the digital space is its accessibility any time, navigation and speed of transaction completion (Uloko and Elijah, 2021). Digital marketing creates a platform for consumer to consumer marketing (Word of Mouth) that leads to increased store traffic especially social media platforms (Levy & Gvili, 2015). The development of Big data analytics to marketing has created a platform for organisations to analyse consumer buying intentions and this has led to the effective personalisation and customisation of products (Donnelly et al., 2015). The major factor that distinguishes the digital marketing platforms from another is their ability for customers to use them at a lower costs, efficiency in creating individualised customer centric communication and efficiency in ensuring delivery of up to date commercials, advertising messages and instant solving of consumer problems Khuu & Do (2018); Schutte and Chauke, (2022).

The major factors that have always been affecting consumers on which digital platform to use per each purchase include personal factors, product factors, media factors and state factors (Bouchaâla et al. 2020). Consumer characteristics and attitudes towards as personal factors have not been spared as determining factors to usage of digital platforms (Tungushbayeva, 2021). The other major factor according to Surugiu, Gheorghiu, and Iordache (2020) is the platform's ease of use and perceived benefits from the customer's perspective. Other factors determining usage choice of digital marketing platforms is consumer exposure to the platform, its ability to facilitate comparative purchases, social and psychological affiliations, interactivity, innovativeness of the platform and its level to be entertaining during usage (Hall & Towers, 2017; Stephen, 2016; Godey et al., 2016). On another note Uloko and Elijah (2021) identified personal factors as the most determining factors which included usefulness of the platform to solve consumer queries, consumer attitude towards online platforms, ease of use and consumer urgency to shop online, and convenience of online shopping (Tungushbayeva, 2021).

The growth of digital marketing has also given birth to a number of players who have now penetrated the business arena. Instead of customers having to travel long distances to buy products that they need, there are now middlemen who bring products closer to the customers and there are called '*Runners*'. These also pose a threat to the customers since they do not usually have physical presence. They are purely virtual e-tailers operating on the virtual landscape. These companies offer lucrative deals to consumers hence consumers are attracted in buying gadgets through them. The most popular '*runners*' offering electronic gadgets for the Zimbabwean market are Shein wholesalers, Jay wholesalers, Manhenga wholesalers, Sea-rise marketing and Women in business in Zimbabwe among others.

2.3 Consumer digital marketing fears

According to Schutte and Chauke (2022) on their research on the behaviour of a millennial consumer, the major challenge faced by consumers is the influx of advertising messages whenever they view other adverts which poses security risks as they assume their browsing behaviour is being tracked for future hacking. This challenge is made concrete by Smith (2011) that one of the challenges consumers face is annoying online messages that pop up without their solicited request. Another concern according to Kuhns & Saksena, (2016) is the inability of the consumer to validate the authenticity of the online platform before making a transaction,

some point out security issues (Arkhipova & Gurieva, 2018), while some consumers anticipate scam especially if the site lacks positive reviews which other consumers lack digital skills to navigate online stores (Nagrani and Kumar, 2021). History of online hacking has always remained a major cause of concern for many consumers involved in digital purchases (Schutte and Chauke, 2022).

2.4 Strategies used by consumers in reducing digital marketing induced fears

According to Zarouali et al. (2020) consumers are always sceptical to using the digital purchasing platforms because of high prevalence of cyber-crimes. Many consumers install information technology enhanced security such as blocking untrusted sites, installing third party trackers and influx of questioning before subscription to a program or idea. Customers protect themselves online through limited personal information disclosure, declining cookies, proactively report to organisations any suspected hacking, soliciting for limited transfer of information, deleting existing social media accounts if suspected hacking is noted, un-friending contacts, exiting some social media groups, unsubscribing to certain sites, use of encrypted communications, limited digital based activities, reducing time spent online, turning off location bases access, limited personal information disclosure, revisiting frequently asked questions, checking testimonials page, verifying firms' privacy policies and securing transactions (using https protocols), changing passwords, blocking advertisements and seeking technical and social assistance from friends and relatives on safer sites once used (Walker, 2016; Kaaniche et al., 2020; Martin & Murphy, 2017).

2.5 Viral Marketing

It is defined as person to person network encompassed by recommendations towards a specific purchase or product line (Leskovec, Adamic and Huberman, 2007). It is diffusion of information relating to a certain product line over a defined network, also known as word of mouth marketing enhanced online. It is also known as referral mechanism by consumers to other consumers. Buzz marketing through social media and YouTube.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed research methodology which enabled the researchers to get detailed information pertaining to the study. To gather quantitative data, close ended questionnaires were used and administered electronically through Google forms. Data was collected from a sample size of 200 digital customers through random selection as the questionnaire was sent through various social media platforms to generate digital customer users of other platforms such as website users and YouTube users as the research only narrowed the research to afore mentioned platforms only.

Qualitative data was also gathered to supplement quantitative data. Online focus group discussions were conducted with the selected respondents. Qualitative data was also gathered through an analysis of responses posted on the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section of selected companies that are in the business of selling electric gadgets. The data obtained from the focus groups and FAQ section was analysed and presented through Thematic analysis. This is whereby themes were generated from the responses obtained from the respondents and then presented, supporting authors were also consulted.

4. Discussion of Findings

The researcher took into consideration, gender, age, income levels and level of education in enhancing the study

Table 4.1 gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	female	47	47.0	47.0	47.0
	male	53	53.0	53.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Source: Primary Data 2023

The table indicates that 47% of the females participated on the study while on the other had 53% were male participants. The variance between participants is very limited indicating that both males and females equally participate in the purchase of electric goods.

4.2 Digital platform frequently used

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid website.	18	18.0	18.0	18.0
Socialmedia	81	81.0	81.0	99.0
youtube	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

From the three digital platforms selected for research, the results show that most prominent digital platform is social media with 81% followed by website usage 18% and finally YouTube with a single percentage.

Table 4.3 Qualifications

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid high school	40	40.0	40.0	40.0
diploma or degree	51	51.0	51.0	91.0
masters or phd	9	9.0	9.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Source: Primary Data 2023

The results indicate that the usage of digital marketing strategies by consumers is not based on the education level of the consumer but on the need to satisfy an need or want as most of the users hold diploma or degrees followed by high school level users and finally few PHD users who are generally few even in numbers in comparative to other users generally.

Table 4.4 Income level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	lower level	76	76.0	76.0	76.0
	middle level	20	20.0	20.0	96.0
	higher level	4	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Source: Primary Data 2023

The results indicate that most of customers that most of the customers of electrical gadgets are lower to middle income level as an indication of the qualifications they hold, high school to diploma and degree holders.

4.5 Factors that motivate consumers to use digital platforms in the purchase of electronic gadgets

Online focus group discussions were scheduled and conducted with the target respondents. The focus group discussion was done using the most commonly used social media platform which is Facebook after it has been discovered that the majority of consumers who buy electronic gadgets have Facebook accounts and most companies have Facebook pages that they use to interact with customers. Facebook pages for the companies have FAQ section and customer reviews which were also consulted for qualitative data.

From the responses obtained from the focus groups, FAQ as well as customer reviews, the following themes were generated:

‘Convenience is the major factor motivating us to buy electric gadgets using digital platforms.’

Consumers find it convenient to purchase electronic gadgets online as they can easily compare prices, read reviews, and make purchases from the comfort of their own homes. Consumers often find better deals and discounts when purchasing electronic gadgets online than they would in traditional brick-and-mortar stores. Bazarov & Yeo (2018) supports the above notion by stating that digital platforms offer more convenience as compared to traditional physical shops. Customers are always busy and digital platforms offers them the convenience that they need when purchasing electric gadgets.

‘When buying products using digital platforms, there are a lot of products to choose from and you get a lot of product related information from the reviews of other customers who would have used the products.’

Online platforms provide consumers with access to a wider range of products and brands than traditional stores. Digital platforms offer consumers access to detailed product information, specifications, and reviews, which helps them make informed purchase decisions (Khare & Rakesh 2021). From the above it is clear that consumers are motivated to buy electric products using digital platforms due to availability of many products online where they can choose from and also product related information.

‘In this technological era we are living in, buying products online is now an in-thing, no one wants to be left behind so we are forced to buy through the digital platforms to show that we are moving with the times’.

Consumers often rely on the opinions of others when making purchasing decisions. Online platforms provide consumers with access to user reviews and ratings, which can influence their purchasing decisions (Shin & Kim 2018). Social proof is important in motivating customers as far as online purchase is concerned.

‘When buying products online you get personalised attention and even the products themselves can be tailor-made to our specification. This enables me to get the exact product that I will be looking for.’

Lee, Kim & Park (2017) asserts that online platforms use data analytics to personalize the shopping experience for consumers by recommending products based on their previous purchase history, search history, and other behaviors. The experience that the customers get from the online environment motivates them to buy electric gadgets through the online platforms.

From the above themes it is evident that issues to do with convenience, price, product information, availability, security, social proof, and personalization are key motivators for consumers to use digital platforms in the purchase of electronic gadgets.

Table 4.6 Consumer digital marketing fears when conducting transactions on electric gadgets purchasesCoefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.136	.255		8.392	.000
Fear of hacking	.101	.047	.208	2.134	.035
Fear of scams	.088	.036	.225	2.454	.016
Fear of being tracked	-.200	.050	-.397	-4.002	.000
Fear of failure to purchase	-.043	.073	-.063	-.585	.560

a. Dependent Variable: digital platforms frequently used

Source: Primary Data

Table 4.6 shows correlational relationship that most consumers when purchasing electrical goods online they fear being hacked, fear scams and fear of being tracked for future hacking or having their credentials stolen online and used for criminal purposes. The association between variable varies shows 0.00 and 0.035 p-values for three measurement instruments that were significant as they were less than 0.05. The findings also indicate that there is no correlational relationship between fear of failure to purchase online and the media frequently used, this is depicted by digital platform users that are educated, indicated by a p value of 0.560.

The qualitative data gathered on consumer fears on buying electric gadgets through digital platforms, a number of factors were discovered and two major themes were developed which are discussed below:

‘Transacting online is risky because you are not sure of you are dealing with a legitimate business. Before purchase you need to know if there are other people who would have interacted with the company through the online platform.’

The nature of the transactions involved will require the customers to question the authenticity of the companies they will be dealing with. Consumers may be concerned about the authenticity of the electronic gadgets they purchase online, particularly when buying from lesser-known or unverified sellers (Loureiro,& Kaufmann 2018). Consumers are afraid of doing business with unauthenticated suppliers in case they fail to deliver the ordered products.

‘Security issues are of concern whenever you want to engage in online transactions. Buying online you will be disclosing your personal financial details to strangers. This is one of the major fear that as consumers we have in regard to buying electronic gadgets online. Most of the times these gadgets will be costly.’

Consumers may be concerned about the security of their personal and financial information when making online purchases. They may be worried about the potential for identity theft or fraud (Lee, Kim & Park (2017). This may discourage the consumers from buying through the online platforms.

‘It is very difficult to trust buying electronic products through online platforms. What if the product is not delivered after you have made huge payments for them? Again maybe a wrong product is delivered, how will you return it? Whenever I think about this it becomes difficult for me to buy online.’

Consumers may be concerned about the delivery of their electronic gadgets. They may worry about delays, lost packages, or the product being damaged during transit. Consumers may be concerned about the return and refund policies of online retailers. They may worry about the possibility of being stuck with a defective or unsatisfactory product (Arkhipova & Gurieva, 2018).

‘Most of the times the products advertised by these online companies tend to be different from the actual product that you receive when the actual product is delivered. The quality maybe compromised. This makes it difficult to trust the quality of the product because you are not given an opportunity to physically examine the product.’

Consumers may be worried about the quality of the electronic gadgets they purchase online. They may be concerned about receiving a defective or damaged product, or one that does not meet their expectations. This is also one of the fears that customers have when they are buying products online.

Overall, consumers' fears related to online purchases of electronic gadgets often stem from concerns about authenticity, quality, security, delivery, and returns and refunds. To mitigate these concerns, consumers can research and buy from reputable sellers, read product reviews, and ensure that the online retailer has a secure payment system and a clear and reliable returns policy

Table 4.7 Strategies used by consumers in reducing digital marketing induced fears on electric gadgets purchases.

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.180	.401		7.930	.000
Using referrals	-.351	.084	-.502	-4.176	.000
Checking testimonial and FAQs	.282	.070	.554	4.007	.000
blocking	-.001	.058	-.002	-.023	.982
Limited information disclosure	-.046	.079	-.057	-.586	.559
Changing passwords	-.012	.053	-.032	-.231	.817
Verifying company privacy policy	.013	.066	.027	.203	.839
Seeking friend assistance	-.179	.048	-.433	-3.714	.000

a. Dependent Variable: digital platform frequently used

Source: Primary Data 2023

Table 4.7 shows Strategies used by consumers in reducing digital marketing induced fears on electric gadgets purchases in relation to the digital marketing platform they would have chosen. The association of variables showing the relationship among the variables stood at 0.000 for three measurement instruments that were significant as they were less than 0.05. Using the items that have favourable p-values it should be noted that consumers use referrals, check testimonials and frequently asked questions on the website and finally seek assistance from friends and relatives who have once purchased electrical goods online. This shows clearly that consumers reduce digital based fears through embarking on viral marketing. The other variables do not add any substantial contribution in explaining ways consumers use to reduce their online purchasing fears, these variables include blocking websites, limited information disclosure, checking company privacy policy and changing passwords.

From the qualitative data gathered, it is evident that customers use a number of strategies to minimise the fears that they have regarding to buying of electric gadgets from digital platforms. The respondents indicated the following as some of the strategies that they use:

Seek Information: Consumers may seek information about the product they intend to purchase and the online seller they plan to buy from. This can include reading reviews from previous customers, researching the seller's reputation, and checking product specifications.

Choose Reputable Sellers: Consumers may prefer to buy from well-established, reputable sellers with a track record of reliable service and quality products.

Consider Payment Options: Consumers may prefer to use payment methods that offer more protection, such as credit cards, PayPal, or other secure online payment systems.

Check Return Policies: Consumers may want to review the seller's return policies to ensure they have options in case the product doesn't meet their expectations.

Seek Recommendations: Consumers may ask for recommendations from family and friends who have purchased similar products online, or consult with experts in the field.

Start with Low-Risk Purchases: Consumers may begin with low-risk purchases, such as accessories or inexpensive items, to build trust and confidence with the online seller.

Trust Your Instincts: Consumers may rely on their instincts and intuition when making purchasing decisions online. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. If a seller seems untrustworthy, it may be best to avoid them

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

- The research concludes that consumers trust messages from the viral buzz box of other consumers who have experienced the product and have gone through the buying process
- Companies in electrical goods should embrace viral marketing for it to serve as a social quality seal in enhancing goods online purchases.
- Organisations should invest in platforms that have platforms of enhancing extensive viral marketing like social media platforms, YouTube and websites with unaltered customer reviews.
- Viral marketing if well enhanced with intensive digital marketing platforms can act as a low cost marketing strategy as most of the marketing will be consumer to consumer marketing.
- Further research recommended on ways of monitoring viral marketing programs as some are conducted in platforms not designed by the organisation.

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