

Digital Versus Traditional Marketing and Consumer Buying Behavior in the Hospitality Industry: Evidence from Sunbird Hotels and Resorts in Malawi

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Abstract

This study examines the comparative influence of digital and traditional marketing on consumer buying behaviour in the hospitality industry, using Sunbird Hotels and Resorts in Malawi as a case study. Grounded in a pragmatist philosophy, the study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were collected from 200 hotel customers using structured questionnaires measured on a five-point Likert scale. In contrast, qualitative data were obtained from 15 marketing and management personnel through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that digital marketing has a stronger, statistically significant influence on booking behavior ($p < 0.01$; OR = 2.53) than traditional marketing ($p < 0.05$; OR = 2.01). Key digital drivers include online reviews, social media engagement, and website usability. Traditional marketing remains relevant in reaching consumers with limited digital access. The study concludes that an integrated marketing approach combining digital and traditional channels is most effective in hybrid connectivity environments. The study contributes to hospitality marketing theory by extending the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and provides practical insights for marketing strategy in emerging economies.

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry has undergone a significant transformation due to digitalization, fundamentally reshaping how consumers search for, evaluate, and purchase hotel services. Digital platforms such as social media, travel websites, and mobile applications now play a central role in influencing booking decisions.

However, in developing economies such as Malawi, digital transformation remains uneven due to infrastructure limitations, affordability constraints, and varying levels of digital literacy. As a result, hospitality firms operate in a dual marketing environment where both digital and traditional channels remain important.

Despite significant investment in both marketing approaches, there is limited empirical evidence comparing their relative effectiveness in influencing consumer buying behaviour in Malawi's hospitality sector. This creates a managerial challenge regarding the optimal allocation of marketing resources. This study, therefore, investigates the comparative influence of digital and traditional marketing on consumer buying behaviour at Sunbird Hotels and Resorts.

2. literature review

2.1 Evolving Role of Marketing in Hospitality

Marketing in hospitality has shifted from single-channel communication to multi-touchpoint ecosystems shaped by digital transformation. While digital marketing enhances interactivity and personalization, its effectiveness is not universal and is constrained in developing economies by access and literacy limitations. Traditional marketing, therefore, remains relevant as a complementary mechanism that supports inclusivity and brand visibility [2]

Studies suggest that efficiency in hospitality is determined by an organization's ability to integrate various communication channels into a cohesive customer experience. According to [10], consumers interact with hospitality organizations using both online and offline platforms before making a booking decision. In line with this, [11] argue that customers are becoming more difficult, requiring businesses to integrate digital engagement with traditional activities to maintain consistent brand messaging. This change is important in developing markets, where customer access to technology varies across population segments. Hospitality organizations cannot depend on either digital or traditional marketing but must use a combined approach to balance technological innovations with market realities and maximize reach, trust, and engagement.

2.2 Digital Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Digital marketing enhances engagement through interactivity, user-generated content, and real-time communication. However, its influence on consumer behaviour is not direct but mediated by psychological constructs such as trust, perceived usefulness, and perceived risk. This suggests that digital marketing functions as a stimulus requiring cognitive and emotional processing before influencing booking decisions [1].

A study by [11] proposes that customer engagement does not lead to purchasing decisions impacted by large context and psychological factors. [10] argues that digital transformation in hospitality creates value when consumers use online platforms as reliable, useful, and secure. When trust in online transactions differs, contextual factors must be considered when evaluating the impact of digital marketing on consumer behavior.

2.3 Traditional Marketing in Emerging Markets

Traditional marketing continues to play a critical role in reaching consumers who are not fully integrated into digital ecosystems. Its influence is primarily indirect, shaping brand familiarity, trust, and emotional resonance rather than immediate conversion. This positions traditional marketing as a foundational rather than conversion-driven tool in hospitality marketing systems [6].

Research shows that traditional marketing is still an important part of hospitality promotion in developing and mixed community markets. Traditional channels such as radio, printed media, outdoor advertising, and word of mouth communication help in enhancing brand credibility, increasing awareness, and building customer confidence among audiences with limited digital access. This channel helps to enhance consumer confidence and familiarity with the brand, which promotes future booking decisions and customer loyalty [4].

2.4 Integrated Marketing Perspective

Current literature increasingly supports the view that marketing channels should not be treated as competing systems but as integrated components of a unified communication strategy. Consumer decision-making is shaped through cumulative exposure across both digital and traditional channels, particularly in fragmented markets where access to information varies significantly [7].

2.5 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. Digital and traditional marketing act as external stimuli, influencing internal psychological states such as trust, attitude, and perceived usefulness [8]. These internal states subsequently determine consumer buying behaviour, particularly booking decisions. The framework integrates elements of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to better explain behavioral responses in hybrid marketing environments.

2.6 Conceptual framework and Theoretical linkages

The conceptual framework guiding this study is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) logic, which explains how external marketing stimuli influence internal psychological states and subsequently shape behavioral outcomes [8]. In this study, digital marketing and traditional marketing represent the external stimuli, while consumer buying behaviour represents the behavioral response.

As illustrated in Figure 1, both digital and traditional marketing are conceptualized as independent variables that directly influence consumer exposure to marketing messages. However, their effect on actual purchasing

behaviour is not purely direct. Instead, it is mediated by a set of psychological constructs, trust, perceived usefulness, and attitude which represent the internal cognitive and affective processes of the consumer.

These moderating constructs play a critical role in explaining why marketing strategies do not produce uniform behavioral outcomes across consumers [7]. Trust reflects the consumer's confidence in the credibility and reliability of the marketing message and the service provider. Perceived usefulness captures the extent to which consumers believe that the information provided through marketing channels enhances their decision-making efficiency. Attitude reflects the overall evaluative disposition of the consumer towards the brand and its marketing communication.

Together, these psychological factors shape how consumers interpret marketing stimuli and determine whether exposure translates into actual booking behaviour. In this sense, consumer buying behavior is understood not merely as a transactional outcome [9]. But as the final behavioural expression of a cognitive evaluation process influenced by both rational and emotional considerations.

In the context of Malawi's hospitality industry, this framework is particularly relevant because consumers operate in a mixed-connectivity environment where both digital and traditional marketing channels coexist. Therefore, the effectiveness of marketing strategies depends not only on exposure, but also on how consumers psychologically process that exposure within their technological and informational constraints.

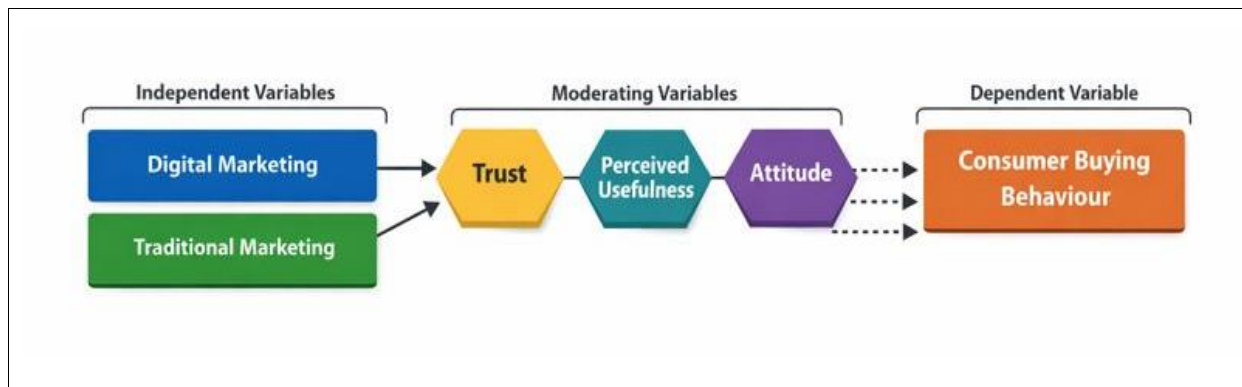


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

2.7 Interpretation of the Conceptual Framework

The framework demonstrates a structured relationship between marketing inputs, psychological mediators, and behavioural outcomes. Digital marketing and traditional marketing serve as dual external stimuli that initiate consumer exposure.

However, the transition from exposure to behaviour is filtered through trust, perceived usefulness, and attitude, which act as psychological mechanisms shaping consumer interpretation and evaluation. Ultimately, these internal states determine consumer buying behavior, specifically reflected in booking decisions within the hospitality context [5].

This model therefore advances a context-sensitive understanding of consumer behaviour by recognizing that marketing effectiveness in emerging economies is not solely dependent on channel type, but on the interaction between marketing exposure and consumer psychological readiness.

2.8 Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on digital marketing, there is limited empirical evidence comparing digital and traditional marketing effectiveness in African hospitality contexts using behavioural data. Additionally, existing studies rarely examine these channels as integrated systems under conditions of digital inequality. This study addresses these gaps through an organization-specific analysis of Sunbird Hotels and Resorts in Malawi.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design guided by pragmatism, integrating quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The study targeted customers and employees of Sunbird Hotels and Resorts. A sample of 200 customers was selected using systematic sampling, while 15 marketing and management staff were selected purposively.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected using structured questionnaires (5-point Likert scale) and semi-structured interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis

3.5 Model Specification

The dependent variable was the booking decision (1 = booked, 0 = not booked). Independent variables included perceived digital marketing influence and traditional marketing influence.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative findings

Regression results indicate that both digital and traditional marketing significantly influence consumer booking behaviour, with digital marketing exerting a stronger effect

- Digital marketing influence: $p < 0.01$, OR = 2.53
- Traditional marketing influence: $p < 0.05$, OR = 2.01
- Digital engagement frequency positively predicts booking conversion
- Other variables show weaker or insignificant effects

4.2 Qualitative findings

Interview findings confirm that digital platforms are preferred due to accessibility, interactivity, and real-time engagement. However, traditional marketing remains important for reaching consumers in low-connectivity areas and reinforcing brand visibility.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that digital marketing is a more dominant influence on consumer buying behavior than traditional marketing among consumers at Sunbird Hotels and resorts. Digital marketing proposes that customers rely on online platforms such as social media, hotel websites, and online reviews when making booking decisions. The outcomes of this study are in line with present studies, which argue that digital platforms promote customer engagement, provide fast information, and promote informed purchasing decisions within the hospitality sector [5]. The results show the growing significance of digital channels in shaping customer behavior in a technology-driven marketplace.

The qualitative findings explain these results by showing that customers value the convenience, accessibility, and interactive nature of digital platforms. Participants reported that online review websites' usability and social media content play a significant role in building confidence and reducing doubt before making a booking decision. This suggests that digital marketing impacts consumer behavior not only by using information provision but also by enhancing trust and perceived usefulness. Related findings have been reported by [8], who discovered that word of mouth and online customer reviews impact hotel selection and travel decision-making processes.

Traditional marketing also had an impact on consumer buying behavior. The findings show that developing countries such as Malawi, where access to digital technologies is uneven across different groups of people, channels such as radio, print media, outdoor advertising, and word of mouth communication it hence brand visibility, familiarity, and credibility among consumers with limited Internet access. This is in line with the study by [2], who argue that traditional marketing remains important in emerging markets because it promotes digital communication and increases market reach.

The study proves the importance of stimulus-organism response theory in describing consumer buying behavior within the hospitality industry. The finding proposed that digital and traditional marketing act as external stimuli, trust, attitude, and impressive usefulness influence the consumer decision-making process. The outcome supports the view that good marketing requires combined approaches, which include both digital and traditional marketing, to enhance credibility and inclusiveness of traditional communication channels. For hospitality

organizations operating in a mixed connectivity environment, such as Malawi, a combined approach would be ideal to promote consumer buying behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that digital marketing has a stronger influence on consumer buying behaviour than traditional marketing in the Malawian hospitality industry. However, traditional marketing remains strategically important in ensuring inclusivity and broader market reach. An integrated marketing strategy combining both channels is therefore the most effective approach for hospitality firms operating in hybrid connectivity environments.

7. Theoretical Implications

The study extends the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework by demonstrating that marketing stimuli (digital and traditional) influence consumer behaviour through psychological mediators such as trust and perceived usefulness. It further reinforces TAM and TPB by showing that technology adoption and behavioural intention are shaped by both cognitive evaluation and contextual constraints.

8. Practical Implications

- For Sunbird Hotels and Resorts, the study recommends:
- Strengthening digital marketing through social media, SEO, and mobile optimization
- Maintaining traditional marketing for rural and offline segments
- Integrating both channels using unified messaging and QR-enabled offline campaigns
- Enhancing trust through secure booking systems and verified reviews

9. Limitations

The study depends on self-reported data gathered using questionnaires and interviews, which may impact personal perceptions, and social challenges also show bias. The cross-sectional nature of the research meant that data were collected at a single point in time, limiting the ability to observe changes in attitudes, behavior, or experiences over time. These limitations may affect the depth and generalizability of the findings, the use of a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative enhance the credibility of the study, and comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

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