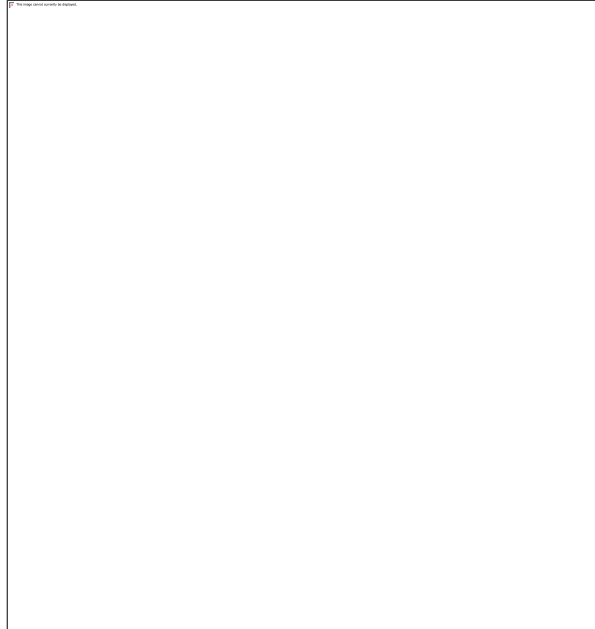


BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING
DEPARTMENT OF DISASTER RISK REDUCTION



**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DIGITAL MARKETING ADOPTION AND
ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY OF SMALL RETAIL
BUSINESSES IN MBARE MUPEDZANHAMO, ZIMBABWE (2020-2021).**

By

ENOCK CHAKAVARIKA

B210993B

**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO BINDURA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE BACHELOR OF
SCIENCE HONOURS DEGREE IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT STUDIES**

JUNE 2025

APPROVAL FORM

The undersigned certify that they have read this project and have approved its submission to the Geography Department for marking after confirming that it confirms to the Department requirements.

Supervisor: E Pedzisai.



Signature

25 June 2025

Date:

DECLARATION

I, Chakavarika Enock declare that this project is my own work. The work has not been copied or taken from any source without acknowledgement of the author or publisher.

Signed.....



.....

Date:22 June

2025

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends and loved ones who have supported me throughout this journey. Your encouragement, patience and love have been my pillars of strength. May this inspire and motivate others to strive for excellence.

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I would like to appreciate my wife Mrs. T Chakavarika for creating friendly environment during the time I was carrying out my research. She provided the support one would need especially in times like this. She has pushed me to stay focused during the research period. I also give appreciation to my family members (my mother Mrs. Chakavarika , my father Mr Chakavarika and my aunt Mrs. Gapara , and most thanks to my son Dwayne Chakavarika) for the encouragement and support during my entire academic journey. I extremely extend gratitude to my supervisor Dr. E. Pedzisai who deserves special mention as he has remained resourceful throughout the whole project. Also my greatest gratitude to Mr T Matara for providing necessary information and guidance during the research project. I further extend gratitude to Mbare Vendors Association and Mbare Mupedzanhamo small businesses owners for their cooperation. Above all , I give thanks to the Almighty Lord for his faithfulness, love, grace and overwhelming power for enabling me to work on this project .

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital marketing globally, transforming the way businesses operate and interact with customers. Small retail businesses faced significant challenges during the pandemic, including reduced foot traffic and changing consumer behaviors. Despite the growing importance of digital marketing in crisis management, there is a paucity of research on the adoption and adaptive strategies of small retail businesses in developing countries, particularly in Zimbabwe. This study aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses. The study was conducted in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, a high-density suburb in Harare, Zimbabwe. The target population consisted of small retail businesses operating in the area, with a sample of 100 businesses selected using a combination of stratified and random sampling techniques. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study found that small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo rapidly adopted digital marketing strategies, including social media marketing and online ordering, to adapt to the pandemic. The study also revealed that businesses with prior experience in digital marketing were better equipped to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of digital literacy and infrastructure in facilitating the adoption of digital marketing strategies. The results suggest that small retail businesses in Zimbabwe can leverage digital marketing to enhance their resilience and competitiveness in times of crisis. The study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of small retail businesses in Zimbabwe. The study recommends that policymakers and business support organizations provide training and resources to enhance digital literacy and infrastructure among small retail businesses, enabling them to fully leverage the benefits of digital marketing.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CCZ	Consumer Council Of Zimbabwe
COC	Chamber of Commerce
NAVA	National Vendors Association
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
UTAUT	The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology
WHO	World Health Organisations

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The study analyzed the effects of corona virus infection diseases of 2019 (COVID-19), on digital marketing adoption and adaptive methods, A Case Study of Small Retail Businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe (2020-2021). The chapter looked at the context of the study, the research problem also the objectives of the study. It also covered questions and the research methodology. The section also provides justification of the study.

1.2 Background

In 2019, a viral respiratory infection caused by Corona virus referred to as COVID-19 emerged in Wuhan, China (World Health Organization, 2020). It was initially deemed to have developed from bats and was passed to people through a host, possibly a savage sold at a seafood market in Wuhan (Zhang, 2020). The virus spread rapidly across the globe due to its airborne transmission. The significant number of fatalities caused by the virus made the World Health Organization to affirm it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Butola et al., 2020). Zheng et al. (2020) identified the virus as a critical respiratory disease, coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2, 2019-nCoV) because of its excessive analogy (80%) to SARS-CoV, that causes intense respiratory agony condition (ARDS).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Zimbabwe implemented its first national lockdown on March 30, 2020, as an idea to reduce the virus from spreading (Chitongo, 2021). The initial lockdown was announced by the government and intended to last for 21 days, although it was extended several times as the situation evolved. During this period, the government-imposed restrictions on movement, closed non-essential businesses, and limited public gatherings (World Health Organization, 2020). These

measures have had profound effects on different aspects of society, for example economic, social, and public health sectors. Among the most affected are small businesses, which faced immense challenges in adjusting to the fast-changing environment and ensuring their survival (OECD, 2020). As governments globally incorporated lockdowns and social distancing measures to curb the virus from spreading, businesses had to alter their operations and employ innovative strategies to remain afloat (United Nations, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed various aspects of business operations, with marketing practices being one of the most affected areas. Traditional marketing methods become less effective due to reduced face-to-face interactions, making the need for digital solutions more apparent (Torelli et al., 2020). In response, businesses turned to digital marketing approaches like social media marketing, e-commerce, and online advertising so as to maintain customer engagement and generate revenue (Gao et al., 2021). Zimbabwean small ret

However, In spite of the expanding value of digital marketing in the context of the pandemic, little research has focused on the experiences of small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo. This thesis sought to correct this gap by examining the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo similarly experienced the adverse effects of the pandemic, facing financial constraints, decreased foot traffic, and supply chain disruptions (Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, 2020). To adapt, many businesses adopted digital marketing practices to reach their customers and sustain their operations (Majoni and Ihlen, 2021). by these businesses and the success of their blueprints in maintaining customer engagement and business operations. By doing so, it aimed to contribute to the understanding of small business resilience and adaptive marketing practices in the face of crises, offering valuable insights for business owners and policymakers alike.

1.3 Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced businesses worldwide, with both large corporations and small enterprises experiencing unprecedented disruptions to their operations (United Nations, 2020; OECD, 2020). While larger businesses may possess greater financial resources and resilience to weather the crisis, small businesses, such as those in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, were particularly vulnerable due to limited access to capital, smaller customer bases, and fewer technological resources (Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, 2020). Small businesses, including those in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, constitute a significant proportion of the economy and saves a significant mandate in employment, income generation, and economic development, (Majoni and Ihlen, 2021). Zimbabwe, small businesses account for over 80% of the country's total employment (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2018). Therefore, their survival and success are essential for the overall health and stability of the national economy.

Despite the pivotal role of small businesses, there is a need to look at the problems faced by enterprises in adopting digital marketing practices during the COVID-19 era, particularly in the context of Zimbabwe. A better understanding of these problems and the effectiveness of the strategies used is crucial to support small businesses as it enables them to adapt, thrive in the fast-evolving business environment (Gao et al., 2021). Therefore, this thesis aimed to access effects of COVID-19 on internet marketing adoption by retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe. By analyzing the challenges encountered and the effectiveness of the strategies implemented, the research sought to contribute useful ideas and recommendations towards policymakers, small businesses, stakeholders, and ultimately promoting the resilience and success of these vital economic actors.

1.4 Aim of the Study

Primary aim of the study was to analyze the effects of COVID-19 on digital marketing integration by small business outlets in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, during period of 2020-

2021.

1.4.1 Specific Objectives

- 1** To identify challenges faced by small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the pandemic.
- 2** Identify the digital marketing strategies adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo in response to problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3** Examine the effectiveness of these digital advertising strategies in maintaining business operations and customer engagement.

1.5 Main Question

How did the COVID 19 pandemic influence the adoption and implementation of digital marketing strategies among small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo area?

1.5.1 Research Questions

- 1** What challenges did small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo face during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2** Which digital marketing strategies were adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo in response to problems caused the by COVID-19 pandemic?
- 3** How effective were these digital marketing strategies in maintaining business operations and customer engagement during the pandemic?

1.6 Justification of the Research

This study was justified on three primary reasons that underscore its significance and potential value. Firstly, while the importance of digital marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic has grown countless times, there is a lack of research exploring small retail businesses' experiences in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe. Drawing on a comprehensive review of issues faced, interventions initiated, and effectiveness of online marketing practices in use, the research aimed at closing such an epistemological divide and contributing to the common literature on small business resilience and adaptive marketing practices during times of crisis.

Second, the outcome of this thesis can update policymaking interventions in that they can elucidate the specific needs and limitations of small retail businesses in adopting digital marketing practices. In this respect, policymakers may utilize such findings to develop targeted interventions, support programs, and capacity-building programs that enhance the resilience and competitiveness of small businesses, especially under times of crises.

Lastly, small businesses play a pivotal role in employment, local economic development, and well-being in communities. Through drawing lessons from the experiences and survival tactics of small retail enterprises in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, this research can bring forth viable recommendations that not only touch entrepreneurs but also further the well-being and coping ability of the larger community. Additionally, the insights can be utilized to inform inclusive and sustainable growth strategies in the area and beyond.

1.7 Delimitations of the study

Delimitations define the scope of a thesis by specifying what will and will not be included. The study was limited to small retail businesses located in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, a specific area within Harare, Zimbabwe. It did not include businesses outside this area or in other regions of Zimbabwe or internationally. The research focused on the period from 2020 to 2021, specifically examining the impact of COVID-19 during this timeframe. It did not extend beyond this period, which could limit the understanding of long-term effects and recovery phases beyond 2021.

The study specifically targeted small retail businesses, including those in the informal sector and market vendors. It did not include large enterprises or multinational corporations that may have different experiences and resources. Additionally, this thesis primarily looked on the integration of digital marketing strategies by small businesses in response to the problems as a result COVID-19 pandemic. Other marketing practices

or aspects of business operations unrelated to digital marketing are beyond the scope of this thesis.

1.9 Organisation of the project

The research was organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the thesis by providing its background, problem statement, its objectives as well as its significance. It also showed the limitations and delimitations. Chapter 2 is a review of literature on the study highlighting the study gaps and it provides the basis from which research outcomes are discussed. Chapter 3 plans the methodology of the study portraying the study area, study design, sampling and data collection methods, including the materials used in data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 shows the results of the study and discussion. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary, conclusion and recommendation as derived from the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The section reviews the influence of COVID-19 on small firms by utilizing existing research that targeted the integration of online marketing. This research reviews the influence of small businesses' usage decisions as well as the primary challenges they faced during the epidemic and their digital marketing initiatives. It aimed to identify the relevance of digital marketing in helping resilience of businesses outlets through the times of COVID-19 crisis.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Various theories are relevant to examine how COVID-19 affected business integration of digital marketing practices. Therefore, this research was informed by two such applicable theories namely the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), (Davis, 1989) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, (UTAUT), (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The two approaches are as briefly described on the following subsections.

2.2.1 Technology Acceptance Model, (TAM)

Users develop their behavior and intentions to make use of the technology can be described using principles described in Technology Acceptance Model propounded by, (Davis, 1989). The TAM advances that people choose to utilize technology based on its perceived utility and usability (Davis, 1989). According to Davis (1989), perceived utility reveals how much a person believes technology enhances their performance, and accessibility reveals how simple a person believes using a technological system is. Therefore, the TAM is widely used in various fields including marketing, organizational behavior, and information systems (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). The TAM is therefore useful in this study since it assesses the influence of digital marketing techniques on Mbare Mupedzanhamo small businesses especially during COVID-19 crisis. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to many businesses, with some

experiencing collapse. However, small businesses in Mbare's Mupedzanhamo market demonstrated resilience and adaptability by leveraging digital marketing strategies to survive in that difficult economic situation. TAM serves to detect which elements influence business' outlets evaluations of online marketing approaches both in terms of benefit and functionality and shows their connection to adoption behaviors.

2.2.2 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, (UTAUT)

The Unified Theory of Acceptance, and Use of Technology, (UTAUT) is a theoretical foundation that was introduced by Venkatesh et al. (2003). It helps users to build their attitudes about technology use (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The UTAUT, combines eight pre-existing patterns to provide more thorough insights than the TAM about the integration of technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Specifically, within the UTAUT prototype, show expectancy, exertion expectancy, social sway and enabling conditions are four primary elements that motivate people to adopt technology, (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

There are several studies which applied UTAUT model to explain technology. For example, Al-Gahtani and King (1999), had earlier explored a concept that resembles that of UTAUT, yet basically highlighting the motivation in understanding technology adoption in various contexts. Furthermore, Dwivedi et al. (2017) applied UTAUT in examining the integration of online technologies, including online marketing strategies. Therefore, model UTAUT is relevant for application in this study since it may facilitate explanation as to how small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo could have utilized online marketing strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the UTAUT model can help identify factors that push small businesses' intentions to make use of digital marketing strategies, and how these factors impact their adoption decisions, hence its adoption in this study.

2.3 Definition of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is defined as advertising of brands, products or services using digital channels like emails, websites and social media, (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

It includes leveraging digital techniques to attain, engage, convert customer base, (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Online marketing encompasses different approaches, for example content marketing, email marketing and engine optimization (Ryan, 2016).

2.4 Global Trends and Issues in Digital Marketing Adoption

Worldwide, businesses understand digital marketing strategies as essential due to challenges affecting physical and face-to face marketing. Therefore, there are circumstances that make physical contact difficult such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made digital marketing a favorable strategy for marketing products. The integration of digital marketing approaches across Africa and global market receives analysis to explain both opportunities and challenges for small businesses.

Modern well-established organizations today utilize different digital marketing channels for outreach to their audiences as a worldwide trend (Riaz, 2014). Thus, social media has become the essential medium for businesses since it allows businesses to get in touch with their customers while establishing brand presence and generating traffic for their websites (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For example, Coca-Cola and Nike effectively utilize Facebook and Twitter to run advertisements while distributing relevant content which permits them to maintain real-time customer conversations. As such, social media adverts are one of the key marketing strategies used by American businesses to connect with their customer base under the control of major companies especially Facebook and Google (Riaz, 2024). Meanwhile, Chinese market recognizes WeChat and Weibo as essential tools for business customer engagement, and Alibaba and Tencent use these platforms to enhance their e-commerce activities (Sohaib, 2022; Shan, 2021). Through email marketing, businesses build loyalty with customers and convert them while simultaneously developing leads (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Companies such as Amazon and Airbnb normally send personalized offers to customers which are generated from data analysis of customer purchase histories.

According to the University of Brighton (2015) businesses in the United Kingdom rely

heavily on email marketing to contact customers where ASOS and Tesco derive sales growth through their emailed communications. The integration of internet marketing strategies by small retail businesses encounters multiple obstacles because of their restricted monetary means and absence of specialized expertise and unclear measurement of ROI (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019, Edirisuriya, 2023). Small business operators in India encounter multiple hurdles during their efforts to develop engaging content and handle various social media outlets while operating their daily business operations (Gupta, 2020). The small business owners in Brazil struggle to obtain digital marketing expertise because the nation has limited skilled professionals who can provide this service (Reis and Lenxi, 2017).

Digital illiteracy at high levels stands as one of the major difficulties facing African businesses today (Ochoa et al, 2022). Businesses struggle to find qualified digital marketing professionals because many Africans cannot effectively use digital technologies (Okeke and Chukuma, 2023). For example, digital marketing implementation is difficult in Ghana and Tanzania because they lack qualified digital marketing experts (Mukwada and Mugadza (2019). The digital skills development in Egypt and Morocco has yielded meaningful results as their number of digital marketing professionals continues to grow (Zhu, 2023). However, the ongoing challenges in adopting digital marketing strategies do not deter many African businesses from implementing effective digital campaigns. For example, the Nigerian e-commerce companies Jumia and Konga rely on digital marketing platforms to create e-commerce sales and market themselves to consumers in Africa (Jumia, 2022). Eastern Africa customers can now access services from Safaricom and M-Pesa mostly through digital marketing strategies (Christensten, 2020; Mugume, 2021). The success of African companies applying digital marketing demonstrates both the potential of this approach as well as business opportunities to expand their customer reach and enhance growth through digital platforms (Domingo, 2024).

Mahboub and Sadok (2023) state that business success globally depends heavily on

digital marketing because of modern-day complexities in the digital domain. The shows that digital marketing adoption serves as a primary force which drives business success while advancing market competitiveness both in worldwide business patterns and independent African company situations (Moussa, 2023). The present research explores digital marketing adoption factors among Zimbabwean small businesses specifically in the Mbare Mupedzanhamo area. The study evaluates digital marketing adoption factors for Mbare Mupedzanhamo small businesses to give strategic guidelines which will improve policy development for Zimbabwean business expansion.

2.5 Digital Marketing Adoption by Small Businesses in urban areas during COVID-19

Research interests about small businesses adopting digital marketing approaches increased significantly throughout recent years (Dwivedi, 2021). Small businesses encounter three main hurdles for digital marketing strategy adoption because they have constrained resources and insufficient expertise and difficulties determining. Return on Investment (ROI) (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick 2019). Kotler and Keller (2016) shows that small enterprises generally struggle to implement digital marketing strategies because they lack necessary resources together with expertise. However, they always try to implement digital marketing methods via social media, email and search engine optimization (SEO) techniques to expand customer base and foster business expansion successfully (Kotler and Keller, 2016). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) small companies using social media saw substantial growth in website activity and customer participation. Although specific quantitative data is not provided, Kaplan and Haelein (2010)'s research highlights the potential for small companies to enhance website traffic and boost customer engagement by effectively leveraging social media platforms.

Research shows that small firms that use digital marketing are more likely to increase website traffic, customer interaction, and sales. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), small businesses can profit from digital marketing by becoming more visible online, accessing a bigger audience, and developing stronger relationships with their customers.

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) found that small retail businesses that adopted digital marketing approaches like focus on SEO, PayPer-Clickadvertising, or social media marketing showed higher levels of traffic and engagement. Kumar et al. (2017) reported that small firms who used social media advertising had higher online traffic and consumer engagement. Kumar et al. (2017) further highlighted the case of a small business with an online fashion brand that achieved a 50% growth in web traffic and a 20% increase in sales due to advertising its products through social media.

Looking at the above, it becomes clear that small businesses can greatly benefit from embracing digital marketing methods in order to establish a stronger online presence, attract a larger audience, and nurture more meaningful relationships with their customers. The case study presented by Kumar et al. (2017), which illustrates a small fashion brand achieving a 50% growth in web traffic and a 20% increase in sales through social media advertising, provides further evidence of the potential impact digital marketing can have on small businesses. These scholarly works emphasize the importance of online marketing strategies towards helping small businesses thrive in an increasingly competitive online landscape. By embracing these tactics, small businesses can not only expand their coverage and engage their customer base effectively, but also foster the growth and success they strive for.

E-mail marketing is another example of digital marketing activities used by small businesses. According to Dwivedi et al. (2017), small businesses on average get return on investment up to 4,300% through email marketing. For instance, Groupon, a daily deals website, used e-mail marketing to promote deals and increase its sales (Dwivedi et al., 2017). The SEO is one important digital advertising strategy small businesses often make use of to reach customers and thus drive their growth. Lee and Kim (2017) discovered that small businesses who optimized their websites for search engines experienced significant increases in traffic and customer interaction on the site. They mentioned Warby Parker, an online eyewear retailer that utilized SEO to increase traffic and sales. It demonstrates that digital marketing methods may be an extremely

effective strategy for small firms to reach and grow (Marquis and Villa, 2012). According to Kabeyi (2019), adopting these techniques requires an equal level of work, meticulous planning, and execution, as the owner and manager must devote time to empower their skills and knowledge properly.

However, in spite of its benefits, digital marketing is still beset by adoption languages, some of which are the biggest obstacles small businesses have ever faced. According to Al-Qirim (2007), small firms may lack the resources necessary to effectively use internet marketing. For example, Fillis et al. (2014) found that access to digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet, presents significant challenges for small firms that operate especially in rural places where network coverage is often a challenge. Martin and Matlay (2001) for example, found out that small enterprises mostly do not have resources to spend in online marketing. Despite these obstacles, small businesses also implement digital marketing strategies by enlisting the assistance of outside specialists (Sharabati, 2024). Thus, the adoption of digital marketing strategies within an entire small business context is complex and multifaceted particularly during the COVID-19. This clearly shows that many such businesses have adopted marketing strategies through the use of digital media with some degree of success, many others continue to encounter notable challenges towards adoption.

Considering the aforementioned, COVID-19 pandemic caused unanticipated changes in the business climate; many small enterprises had trouble in adapting to this new reality. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), small enterprises are more susceptible to external shocks as a result of their lack of economies of scale and restricted resources. Many firms have shifted to digital platforms in order to contact customers and sustain sales, and the pandemic has hastened the shift to digital marketing (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). This is demonstrated by the fact that, despite the fact that digital marketing has become crucial, small businesses in developing nations including Zimbabwe face significant obstacles to uptake, primarily because of lacking digital skills, limited financial resources, and restricted access to digital infrastructure (Al-

Qirim, 2007; Fillis et al., 2014). The pandemic has worsened these challenges since many small enterprises across Zimbabwe found it hard to adapt to the digital view. From literature above, it is clear that the significant challenges faced by small businesses across the developing world include unavailability of digital infrastructure, limited digital skills, and limited financial resources (Al-Qirim, 2007; Fillis et al., 2014).

2.6 The Impact of COVID-19 on Small Businesses

Small businesses across the world have experienced enormous effects from the COVID-19 pandemic which deeply affected their financial operations and business survival (Apedo-Amah, 2020). The pandemic has led to substantial drops in sales along with revenue and employment levels for small businesses as indicated by the research by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) and that resulted in extraordinary operational difficulties for businesses to survive. The pandemic proved most challenging for informal businesses operating on a small scale since they constitute a big portion of employment markets across developing areas (Engidaw, 2022). Small businesses continue to face intensified difficulties because the pandemic disrupted worldwide supply systems which resulted in vital products reaching customers with delays (World Economic Forum, 2020). This shows that small businesses in developing countries faced daunting challenges because of the pandemic that demonstrates their high level of vulnerability and shows the urgent requirement for specific recovery assistance.

The World Bank (2020) demonstrated that developing countries' small businesses suffered severe effects from the pandemic because they struggled to obtain financing and market opportunities as well as technological infrastructure. The research showed that small businesses in these locations were unable to handle economic pandemic impacts because they did not have enough access to finance and weak infrastructure and digital capabilities (World Bank, 2020). Small businesses operated by women, youths and marginalized groups encountered additional obstacles in obtaining resources and market connections and support because of the pandemic (Rahayu, 2023).

According to the World Bank (2020), it is crucial to create specific policy support systems which help small businesses in developing countries to recover from COVID-19 shocks while enhancing their future resilience.

According to the Harvard Business Review (2020), small businesses faced considerable challenges in maintaining client relationships, managing supply chains, and acquiring funding during the epidemic. Companies in the retail and hospitality industries struggled due to lower consumer traffic and sales caused by continued government restrictions aimed at preventing the virus's spread (Shafi, 2020). For example, a modest New York City restaurant had a 70% revenue reduction as clients avoided dining out owing to health concerns (Stankovich, 2023). Small enterprises in the manufacturing sector encountered significant supply chain disruptions when authorities implemented limitations on goods and people transit (Harvard Business Review, 2020). For example, a Bangladeshi textile firm saw a 50% decline in production due to difficulties sourcing raw materials and boosting exports (Mondal et al, 2025). Furthermore, small firms struggled to obtain financing and credit finance as banks and other financial institutions tightened lending standards and cut lending volumes during the epidemic (Gur, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a particularly negative impact on African small companies. According to the African Development Bank (2020), small firms in Africa confront significant barriers to financing, market access, and technology. For example, many small firms in Africa struggled to gain access to digital payment systems, which would have allowed them to engage in the digital economy and expand into new markets (Engidaw, 2022). In Kenya, for example, many informal enterprises found it difficult to utilize digital payment apps such as M-Pesa, limiting their ability to collect payments and obtain credit (Ndung'u, 2021). Small businesses across Africa found it difficult to obtain digital infrastructures such as internet connections and cloud computing services, limiting their ability to engage in the digital economy and enter new markets (Yeboah-Boateng et al., 2021). For example, in Nigeria, small firms have

difficulty acquiring dependable and affordable internet services, limiting their capacity to enter digital markets and engage in e-commerce (Alexander, 2022). Furthermore, the epidemic has exacerbated existing disparities and vulnerabilities in Africa. As a result, small companies owned by women, youth, and marginalized groups have suffered the most from the epidemic in terms of access to resources, markets, and support (Rahayu, 2023). In South Africa, women-owned small enterprises faced challenges in accessing funding, markets, and digital infrastructure during the pandemic (Moipolai, 2022).

Small businesses in Africa frequently struggle to create resilience and adaptation, particularly in the face of pandemic-induced upheavals. In this context, the African Development Bank (2020) stated that small enterprises have the capacity to stimulate economic growth and create jobs in Africa. However, many tiny businesses require assistance and funding to overcome the obstacles they confront. In particular, support should be provided to install the necessary digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet, broadband services, and cloud computing support, while small businesses should be trained on digital skills so they can use digital technologies to access markets and run their businesses (Achieng, 2022). This must be supplemented by policymakers and development partners in addressing structural obstacles such as ease of access to money, markets, and technology for small company owners in Africa, as outlined by Njanike (2019). So, by taking a planned and coordinated approach to aiding Africa's small enterprises, untapped potential can be freed, resulting in continental economic growth and development.

2.7 Digital marketing strategies for Small Businesses during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic sped the shift of enterprise into marketing, forcing many small enterprises to rely on digital means to reach clients and maintain sales (Rahayu, 2023). According to Harvard Business Review (2020), small businesses who engaged in digital marketing during the pandemic were more likely to witness increased sales and revenue.

Social media marketing is an emerging and important digital marketing approach for small retail businesses during the pandemic. On social media platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter, the marketing cost for business outlets to reach customers and support their products and services is minimal (Ahmad · 2020). For example, a small business owner might build a public profile on Instagram to showcase their latest designs, share behind-the-scenes footage, and engage in a two-way conversation with their customers through commenting and direct messaging (Xu, 2023). A survey by Belas et al (2021) reports that 71% of small businesses advertise their products or services via social media, while 63% engage with customers through the same medium. In addition to that, social media offers several features and tools to help small businesses reach and engage with customers, like the ability to tag their products directly in posts and stories through Facebook's "Shop" feature (Onaopemipo, 2025). For instance, a small business in foods can obtain a wider reach for their products using Facebook's Shop feature, where customers can purchase directly from their page.

Email marketing is an additional successful digital marketing approach for small businesses during the pandemic. Small firms can use email marketing to send tailored communications to consumers and prospects, advertise products or services, and generate revenue (Thomas et al, 2022). For example, a small business owner with e-commerce can utilize email marketing to create newsletters informing subscribers about new products, promotions, and discounts (Sabbagh, 2021). Direct Marketing Association (2020) estimated that email marketing had an average return on investment (ROI) of 4300% for small firms, making it one of the most effective techniques of generating sales and money.

Email marketing allows small businesses to personalize communications even further by segmenting their consumer base and raising conversion rates (Thomas, 2022). For example, a small business owner in the hospitality industry may use email marketing to send highly targeted promotions to past hotel guests, offering unique discounts and

packages (Murniati and Bawono, 2020). Furthermore, firms utilize email marketing to nurture leads and create relationships with clients who are not actively purchasing (Lidberg, 2024). For example, a small business owner in the software industry can send instructional information and tutorials to its leads via email marketing to make them aware of the product's benefits, increasing the chances of conversion.

In addition to email marketing and social media, search engine optimization (SEO), payper-click (PPC), and content marketing may provide paradigms for small businesses as they sell themselves in the aftermath of the pandemic (Ologunbe, 2023). SEO is focused with improving a website such that it looks bigger in search engine results pages (SERP), increasing business visibility and trust (Aryani et al., 2023). For example, a small business owner in the healthcare industry may optimize by utilizing keywords related to its services, such as telemedicine or online doctor consultations, increasing the likelihood of further site traffic and lead creation (Ologunbe, 2023). Allazov (2020) defines PPC advertising as the design and publication of adverts in which marketers are charged every time a customer clicks on the ad.

An e-commerce small business owner can create a PPC ad campaign to market their products on Google Advertisements or Facebook Advertisements, targeting specific keywords and demographics. Content marketing refers to the process of developing and publishing valuable, relevant, and consistent material in order to attract and maintain a certain audience (Kritzing and Weidman, 2013). For example, a small business owner in financial services can start a blog and publish articles and recommendations on personal finance and investment, establishing themselves as an industry thought leader and attracting potential consumers (Ologunbe, 2023). Small businesses that implement these digital marketing methods will improve their popularity on the internet, increase the number of visits to their websites, thus generate leads and sales.

Apart from social media and email marketing, other digital marketing strategies can be

used by small business owners during a pandemic, like optimizing the search engine, payper-click advertising, and content marketing (Kotler and Keller, 2016). SEO entails making enhancements to a website in order to improve its ranking when measured against search engine results pages (SERPs), thereby improving the visibility and credibility of that business (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For example, a small business owner in the healthcare business might look to optimize their website with relevant keywords pertaining to their services, notably "telemedicine" or "online doctor consultations" (Halligan and Shah, 2019). In so doing, they may be able to attract additional traffic to their websites and generate leads.

Meanwhile, PPC advertising creates and puts ads online that are charged each time a person clicks on the ad (Li and Du, 2011). For example, owners of a small business in the e-commerce industry may employ PPC advertising to promote their products on Google Ads or Facebook Ads targeting specific keywords and demographics (Zarrella, 2010). Content marketing consists of creation and publishing useful, relevant and uniform content with the intention to attract and retain a clearly defined audience (Pulizzi, 2012). For instance, a small business owner would be able to highlight their expertise in the financial services industry through articles and guides on personal finance and investing that can be published on their blog. In so doing, they prove to be thought leaders in their industry and attract potential customers (Gillin, 2007). By integrating some of these digital marketing strategies, small businesses are enhancing their visibility, driving traffic to their websites, and creating leads and sales.

The pandemic accelerated the move to digital marketing, which benefited small firms that used the correct digital marketing tactics to survive at the time (Guyer, 2021). Small businesses enhanced their online visibility and website traffic by using social media marketing, email marketing, SEO, PPC advertising, and content marketing, resulting in more leads and sales. The epidemic was thus considered as a catalyst for digital change, and the lessons acquired along the process could still be useful informants for small firms looking to improve their digital marketing efforts (Mishrif,

2023). Learning from the pandemic and its impact on digital marketing can help firms understand how to build resilience, acquire competitive advantage, and drive growth in a rapidly changing market.

2.8 Benefits of digital marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic

Benefits of digital marketing on small businesses during the pandemic have been explored in several empirical studies. There are several positive effects of online marketing for small retail businesses. Increase in sales is one benefit. For example, Kumar et al. (2020), analyzed the effect of social media marketing on small businesses amid the pandemic, to find out that it boosted sales and by increasing customer engagement. In that study, Kumar et al. (2020) noted that small businesses that utilized social media platforms namely, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which resulted in a huge increase in website visits and online sales.

Aside from increasing traffic to a company's website and improving online sales, social media marketing has helped small businesses increase brand awareness in the market and instill client trust (Oliviera, 2021). As a result, their findings support social media marketing as a panacea for small businesses seeking to connect customers and drive sales amid natural disasters. Furthermore, the findings underscored the need of producing highly engaging and relevant information on social media, as well as establishing a two-way communication method that includes immediate positive responses to client comments and messages (Alshaketheep et al, 2020). This will assist small businesses in developing relationships with their customers and cultivating a positive internet reputation.

Digital marketing promotes contact between small businesses with their customers. Lee et al. (2020) assessed the effectiveness of email marketing for small businesses during the pandemic. Email marketing provided small organizations with a successful channel to get in touch with customers and produce business revenue (Lee et al., 2020).

However, Lee et al. (2020) concluded that promotions and discounts in personalized email content built superior results than non-personalized email content because they generated increased open rates as well as higher click-through rates and conversion rates. Lee et al. (2020) also noted that email marketing succeeded best for businesses in e-commerce because these companies mainly relied on online purchases from customers during the pandemic.

Digital marketing helped small businesses become more resilient and better equipped to react to changing market conditions (Chen, 2020). When it came to adapting their corporate structure and operations to pandemic conditions, small businesses who used digital marketing shown advantages. While digital marketing automation enabled firms to swiftly adapt to shifting consumer habits in the marketplace, small businesses continued to maintain an online presence in order to shift their sales through e-commerce (Oliviera, 2021). Digital marketing proven to be crucial for small businesses during uncertain times since it helped them build trusting relationships with their customers during these trying times. Small businesses used digital marketing platforms to share information with their audiences while delivering operation updates and beneficial resources throughout the difficult period (Lee et al, 2020). Research results indicate that digital marketing stands crucial for small businesses to develop resistance and modify their operations in response to marketplace changes.

When considering the impacted industries, which include retail, hotel, and food services, the use of digital marketing shown a stronger favorable correlation with small business performance (Sharabati, 2024). Since it helps them thrive, especially in industries that face significant challenges, digital marketing is a crucial tool for small businesses to endure during trying times. This study's analysis uses empirical research to show how the use of digital marketing improved small business operational effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic. During difficult times, entrepreneurial operations must embrace and engage in digital marketing strategies to maintain operations while increasing sales and improving business performance (Rossato and Castellani, 2020).

2.9 Research Gap

The research investigates an important deficit within existing pandemic-related studies about digital marketing effects on small business survivability. The short-term digital marketing effects on small enterprises remain studied extensively yet research about digital marketing effects on business resilience over time remains limited. The research has neglected to explore both how particular digital marketing platforms help companies become more resilient and which digital marketing channels work best for this purpose. The researcher intends to address this knowledge gap by examining how digital marketing affects small business resilience throughout the pandemic specifically through long-term outcomes and evaluation of particular digital marketing channels.

2.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed all available studies relating to digital marketing practices alongside small business resilience during COVID-19 period. The chapter showed digital marketing stands vital for small companies while disruptions hit the market. The existing literature shows insufficient research on the permanent effects of digital marketing on small business resilience after the pandemic. Digital marketing research serves as base information for understanding the present study which explores how digital marketing affects small business resilience throughout pandemic times. The upcoming chapter details the research methodology that was employed for this thesis together with its layout, data collection procedures and data analysis procedures.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Introduction

The chapter presents research methods adapted to examine effects of COVID-19 on the acceptance of digital marketing by small retail enterprises in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe. This chapter provides a thorough discussion of the study design, including its sampling strategy, data gathering methodologies, and selected analysis methods. Some restrictions that were encountered during the study process are discussed along with the mitigation techniques that were put in place. This chapter builds appropriate support for the study's final findings through an open and thorough research technique.

3.3 Study Area

Mbare Mupedzanhamo market place is considered one of the largest market places in Harare, Zimbabwe. It was launched in year 1907 and it stretches almost 3 kilometers coming from the Central Business District (CBD) Harare towards East of Harare (ZAFP 2014). Masundira (2012) observed that Mbare has around 20 000 small business owners and sellers and is the most populated marketing areas with at least 10 people living in one business flat. Mubaiwa (2006) argued that it facilitates the central Bus station for Harare and the largest agriculture produce market. This district is congested by unregulated economic activities and illegal traders. While the informal sector enables industrial development. The study area map is shown on Figure 1.



Figure 1: Study Area Map in Mbare Ward 3, Mupedzanhamo area in Harare.
(Source: primary data)

3.2 Research Approach

The thesis incorporated a varied-methodology, involving use of quantitative and qualitative methods to establish an in-depth comprehension of how COVID-19 has influenced the uptake of digital marketing among small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe (2020-2021). The mixed-methods approach was employed because it has the ability to offer triangulation, complementarity, and added explanation (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Triangulation made the research evidence valid and reliable by bringing together different data sources.

The mixed-method approach enabled the study to reflect different aspects of the research problem. Quantitative data provided insights into prevalence and trends in digital marketing adoption, while qualitative data offered a deep insight into the experiences and thoughts of small retail business companies (Bryman, 2016). The

synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods facilitated a better explanation of the research phenomenon since the qualitative data aided in interpreting and offering contextual explanations to the quantitative findings (Miles et al., 2019).

For this study, the quantitative component involved questionnaires and surveys for data collection on the digital marketing strategies used by small retail businesses, their effectiveness as perceived by them, and setbacks faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative component involved focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with the owners of small retail businesses to understand their experiences, motivations, and decision-making in adopting digital marketing. The employment of the mixed methods assisted the researcher in gaining a rich and holistic understanding of the research problem and contribute to the overall rigor and validity of the research.

3.4 Research Design

The thesis design was a case study and the study subject was small business enterprises in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). Case study research design was employed for its ability to provide contextual information, contain complexity, and provide thick data (Harrison et al., 2017). Case studies enable qualitative in-depth analysis of a phenomenon in its natural context. The synthesis of this research was to examine the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption of small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, given the need for context-based comprehension.

Research problems entailed various factors such as challenges faced by small enterprises, digital marketing techniques employed, and their effectiveness in maintaining business continuity and customer interaction. Case studies allowed the researcher to collect rich, in-depth data from numerous sources, like interviews, focus groups, and observations (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The mixed-methods case study assisted in developing a fine-grained, comprehensive knowledge of the experience and strategies of small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during

the COVID-19 crisis, which ultimately assisted in the development of effective policies and practices for business sustenance during crises (Miles et al., 2019).

3.5 Target Population

Targeted population for this study consisted of all small retail businesses operating in Mupedzanhamo, Mbare, Harare, Zimbabwe. These businesses included informal sector enterprises and market vendors in the area. The study focused on businesses that were in operation during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021. This population was deemed appropriate as it represented the context of small businesses that faced the problem caused by the pandemic and potentially adopted digital marketing strategies in response. The insights gathered from this population contributed to a better understanding of the experiences, strategies, and problems of small businesses in the context of crisis and digital transformation (Fjørtoft & Smart, 2020). The definition of small retail businesses in this context aligns with existing literature, which often defines small businesses as those with limited employees and resources (Kibera and Mkuna, 2020).

3.6 Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

Sampling is defined as the process of identifying a subgroup of individuals for the purpose of data collection and analysis (Etikan and Bala, 2017). In this study, a composite of random sampling and purposive selection techniques was employed.

For the quantitative component of the research, simple random selection was used to select 45 market vendors from population of all small retail businesses in Mupedzanhamo, Mbare (Acharya et al., 2018). This method ensured a fair representation of the diverse businesses in the area and allowed each vendor an equal chance of being selected for the study. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was utilized to select 10 participants who are market vendors and can provide rich, in-depth information related to the research questions (Robinson, 2018). The purposeful selection was based on factors such as the types of digital marketing

strategies adopted by the vendors, the longevity of their businesses in the area, and their willingness to share their experiences and strategies.

Additionally, 3 key informants were selected from the Zimbabwe Chamber of Commerce and the National Vendors Association, as they possessed specialized knowledge and expertise on the subject matter, which contributed valuable insights to the study. Combining these two sampling methods and including key informants allowed the study to capture both the diversity of small retail businesses in Mupedzanhamo and the detailed perspectives of those with relevant experiences in adopting digital marketing strategies during COVID-19 pandemic.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

The data necessary for this study can be categorized into available and unavailable data. Available data includes public reports, government statistics, and research articles on small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe, and the impact of COVID-19 on these businesses. Unavailable data includes firsthand information on the experiences, challenges, and strategies adopted by small retail businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically focusing on digital marketing adoption. To gather the unavailable data, the following data collection instruments were utilized;

3.7.1 Questionnaire survey

A methodical questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data from the 45 market vendors selected through random sampling (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The questionnaire included closed-ended questions to gather information on the digital marketing strategies employed by the businesses, their perceived effectiveness, and problems faced during the COVID-19 crises. Questionnaires are suitable for collecting data from a large number of participants and allow for the quantification of results (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.7.2 In-Depth Interview

An in-depth interview guide was used to gather qualitative data from the 10 market vendors selected through purposive sampling (Robinson, 2018). The guide included open-ended questions and prompts to probe the participants' experiences, motivations, and decision-making processes related to digital marketing adoption. In-depth interviews provide rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon (Miles et al., 2019).

3.7.3 Fieldwork

The thesis also made use of fieldwork as a data collection method to gather rich and contextual data from small business owners in Mbare. Through observation of business operations and customers interactions, in-depth interviews with owners and immersive engagement with local community, the study collected nuanced data on digital marketing adoption strategies. The fieldwork approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the research context, enabling the collection of detailed insights into the experiences, challenges, and strategies of small business owners during the COVID 19 pandemic.

3.8 Data collection tools

The study utilized two primary data collection tools which include questionnaires as shown in Appendix B and interview guides as shown in Appendices C and D. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data from small retail business owners in Mbare Mupedzanamo area. The questionnaire used closed-ended questions collect information on digital marketing adoption, challenges and results.

Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from small business owners and industry experts. The guides included open-ended questions to explore adaptive digital marketing strategies, lessons learned and key factors influencing digital marketing adoption.

3.9 Data Collection Procedure

To ensure the smooth and systematic collection of data, the researcher started by contacting authorities such as local government offices and Mupedzanhamo Market management because Saunders et al. (2019) stress the importance of this step. The researcher completed questionnaire and interview guide development by making them logical and easy to understand while keeping the objectives in mind. The researcher conducted preliminary tests using a small sample of participants to evaluate the data collection instruments before starting actual data collection following the guidelines provided in Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). The researcher executed questionnaire distribution to choose market vendors while conducting in-depth interviews with participant groups that met specific criteria. Oral interviews were recorded for transcription before storage in a safe facility. All filled questionnaires received safe storage. Protecting participant confidentiality along with privacy at all times was enabled through complete anonymization of data (Kaiser, 2019).

3.10 Data Analysis Method

The study employed thematic content analysis for qualitative data and detailed statistical analysis for quantitative data. For qualitative data obtained from interviews, thematic content analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The study transcribed audio recordings verbatim, read and re-read the transcripts to become familiar with the data, identified and coded key ideas, concepts, and emerging themes, grouped codes into overarching themes, and interpreted the themes in relation to the existing literature and research objectives.

For quantitative data collected through questionnaires, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel (Field, 2018). The study organized and coded responses, calculated measures such as frequencies, percentages, and means to summarize the data, and used charts and graphs to visualize the data. By employing thematic content analysis for qualitative data and descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative data, the study generated a comprehensive understanding of the impact of

COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption by small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations that may have impacted the research outcomes. One limitation was potential sampling bias due to the sampling method, which may have introduced bias due to the self-selection of participants (Etikan & Bala, 2017). To address this, the researcher strived for maximum variation among participants to ensure diverse perspectives were captured.

Another limitation was the limited generalizability of the findings, as the case study approach did not provide insights applicable to the entire population of small retail businesses in Zimbabwe (Yin, 2018). The researcher transparently communicated this limitation and focused on the study's contextual understanding and in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. The study also faced challenges in data collection, such as potential low response rates or reluctance to share sensitive information (Saunders et al., 2019). To tackle this, the researcher established rapport with participants, ensured confidentiality, and used multiple data sources to triangulate the findings. By acknowledging these limitations, the researcher maintained the credibility and rigor of the study.

3.12 Validity and reliability

The data collection tools were pretested to ensure validity and reliability hence a pilot study was done using few participants from Mupedzanhamo. These participants were not considered in the main study. Based on this study the data collection tools were revised to make sure that they gathered the intended data. The data gathering methods allowed for triangulation, verified, collaborated and enhanced the credibility of the data. Therefore both reliability and validity of this study were improved by triangulation of data gathering methods, piloting of the study prior to data collection and pretesting of data collection tools.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

The study sought for permission from Harare City Council. The data was collected from small business owners in Mbare including some relevant officials and in order to gather successful results, the following was incorporated: informed consent, confidentiality, avoiding leading questions, use of vernacular language, avoiding interfering in social private life of the participants, avoiding making promises of any form after the interview and filling in of questionnaires. As part of confidentiality, respondents did not write their names and information that will lead to their identity to be known on questionnaires. The study also took note of different cultural ethics in the society. Lastly, the participants had freedom to withdraw from the study any time they feel so.

3.14 Chapter Summary

The research methodology employed to explore how COVID-19 affects digital marketing adoption by small retail enterprises in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe, has been discussed in this chapter. The study design, sampling plan, data collection techniques, and data analysis methods used in the study were all detailed in this chapter. The study limitations and how they were managed were also discussed. This chapter has laid the foundation for explaining and discussing the findings in later chapters by clearly detailing the research methodology and how the study was undertaken. The next chapter shall illustrate and analyze data.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the effects of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe. Using thematic content analysis and descriptive statistics, the findings are organised by research objectives, thus providing insights into how the small-scale businesses adapted during the pandemic. Data was collected from 43 respondents, 10 participants who participated in in-depth interviews as well as 3 key informants who gave insights on the study findings particularly on policy. The chapter begins with background information before detailing the research findings.

4.2 Response Rate

The study was successful in engaging all participants/respondents for interviews and questionnaires, and the response rate is shown below.

Table 1: Response rate

	Distributed	Returned	Response Rate (%)
Questionnaires	45	43	95.6%
Interviews	10	10	100%

Source: Primary Data

The response rate was highly acceptable (95.6%) since more than 70% is considered excellent (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003) while all the 10 interviewees were completed. This is important as it shows the credibility and reliability of the findings, ensuring a representative sample for drawing accurate conclusions about the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption among small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe.

4.3 Demographic Data of Respondents

This section presents the population characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study. The demographic data includes age, sex, and business tenure.

4.3.1 Age and sex of Respondents and Length of operation

The study managed to look on the demographic data of respondents particularly those who participated in the survey. The results are presented on the table below.

Table 2: Age and sex distribution and length of operations of the respondents

Age Group (years)	Frequency	Percentage
18-24	6	14%
25-34	10	23%
35-44	17	40%
55+	10	23%
Sex of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Male	21	49%
Female	22	51%
Duration of operation (years)	Frequency	Percentage
0 - 5	20	47%
5 - 10	15	35%
10 - 15	4	9%
15 +	4	9%

Source: Primary Data

Table 2 shows that the majority of a respondents are aged 35-44 years, followed by the 45-54 cohort. The age, sex, and business tenure distribution at Mupedzanhamo during COVID-19 may be influenced by various factors, such as the market's temporary closure and subsequent reopening, which affected businesses' operating durations. Additionally, the relatively balanced representation of both female and male respondents might reflect the diverse range of entrepreneurs and business owners at Mupedzanhamo, while the concentration of respondents within the 36-45 age group

could suggest an active presence of individuals in their mid-career stage, likely experienced in adapting to market changes caused by the pandemic.

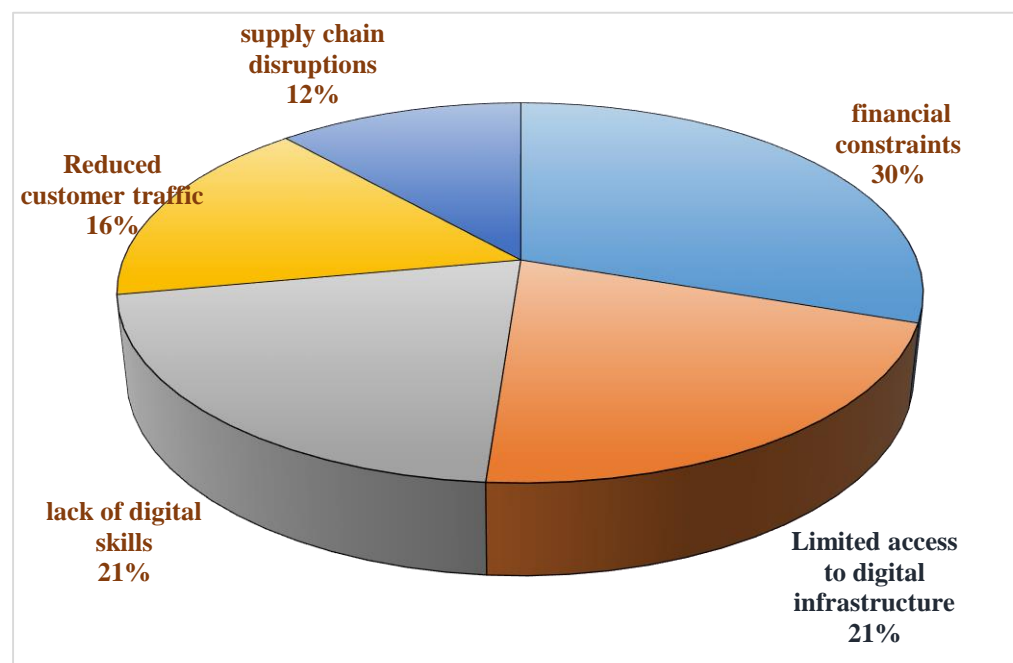
4.4 Research Findings

The study's objectives are addressed in this section, which explores the challenges faced by small businesses during the pandemic, the digital marketing strategies adopted in response to these challenges, and the effectiveness of these strategies in maintaining business operations and customer engagement.

4.4.1 COVID-19 related challenges faced by small scale businesses in Mbare

The first objective of this thesis was to identify the issuers faced by small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that small businesses encountered various challenges that affected their operations and survival. Figure 2 illustrates the challenges faced by small businesses from the questionnaire survey.

Figure 2: Challenges Faced by Small Businesses during COVID-19



Source: Primary Data

Figure 2 shows that financial constraints were the most significant challenge faced by small businesses, followed by limited access to digital infrastructure and lack of digital

skills. The least important were reduced customer traffic and supply chain disruptions issues. The findings will be further explained and supported in the subsequent subsections, where verbatims from in-depth interviews will be used to provide more insights into the challenges faced by small businesses during the pandemic.

4.4.1.1 Limited Access to Digital Infrastructure

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis is limited access to digital infrastructure. A critical aspect of digital infrastructure is access to smartphones, which can facilitate digital marketing adoption. The findings shows that only 49% had access to smartphones with the remaining not having accessibility to them. This finding suggests that a significant proportion of small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo lacked access to smartphones, which can have hindered their ability to adopt digital marketing strategies during the pandemic.

The lack of access to smartphones was also highlighted in the in-depth interviews with market vendors. One participant (P) indicated that;

During the pandemic, I didn't have a smartphone, and even if I did, buying data was a challenge. Data is expensive, and it's hard to afford when you're not selling much. (P3)

A second participant concurred with this viewpoint echoing that;

Even those of us with smartphones struggled to use them for business during the pandemic because of data costs. It's not just about having a phone, it's about being able to afford to use it for business purposes. (P7)

A third participant indicated the following to cement the same opinion on the issue;

For us, it's not just about having a smartphone, but also about having a reliable internet connection. During the pandemic, network outages were common, and it was hard to stay connected with customers (P9)

The lack of access to digital infrastructure, including smartphones, affordable data, and reliable internet connectivity, was a significant challenge for small businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4.1.2 Financial Constraints

One of the key findings from the study highlights that financial constraints were a significant challenge for small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the COVID-19 pandemic as indicated on Figure 2. Participants indicated that limited financial resources hindered their ability to adopt and implement digital marketing strategies. A participant indicated that;

The pandemic affected our cash flow, and we didn't have the money to invest in digital marketing. We were just trying to survive. (P2)

Another participant indicated the same and was quoted saying

We didn't have the financial resources to hire someone to manage our social media accounts or create a website. It's hard to do it yourself when you're not an expert. (P5)

A key informant echoed the same sentiments and was quoted saying

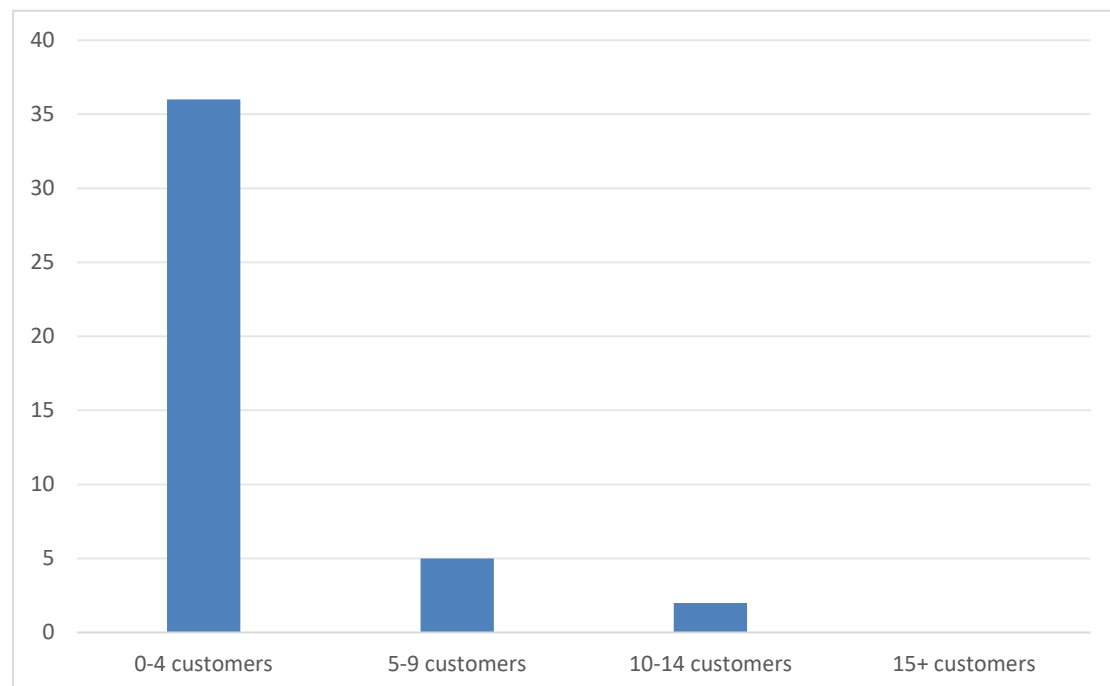
Many small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo were severely affected by the pandemic, and financial constraints were a major challenge. They didn't have the resources to invest in digital marketing, and many were just trying to stay afloat. (Key Informant 2)

The above narratives shows that small businesses' financial struggles during the pandemic are consistent with previous research that emphasizes the use of financial resources in promoting the adoption of digital marketing.

4.4.1.3 Reduced Customer Traffic

Participants showed that reduced customer traffic was a significant challenge for small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 shows the number of customers per day during the pandemic to further highlight this challenge.

Figure 3: Customers per day during COVID-19 period



Source: Primary Data

Figure 3 shows that the majority of small businesses (88%) reported having 0-4 customers per day during the pandemic, indicating a significant decline in customer traffic. Participants in in-depth interviews also discussed the problem of decreased client traffic. One participant who was interviewed raised this concern;

During the pandemic, customer traffic reduced significantly. People were afraid to come to the market, and those who did were very cautious. It was hard to sell anything. (P1)

Another participant had the same concern and was quoted saying;

It was really hard to get customers because of restrictions which didn't allow them to move to markets like Mbare. Some were even afraid of the disease so they avoid movement at all cost. This affected our business. P10

Participant 4 mentioned this issue of lockdown restriction which he claims as a serious challenge. He states that;

The lockdown restrictions affected our business badly. People couldn't move around, and those who could were not willing to spend money. It was a tough time. (P4)

One of the three key informants employed in the study to give insights on the study findings also backed this, and was reported as saying:

Many small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo experienced a significant decline in customer traffic during the pandemic. It was a challenge to adapt to the new reality. (Key Informantt 3)

4.4.1.4 Supply Chain Disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of supply chains, with small businesses in Mupedzanhamo being severely impacted. Lockdown restrictions, transportation hurdles, and supplier insolvency issues hindered their ability to procure products and maintain inventory levels. One participant indicated that it was difficult to source stock from suppliers. He was quoted saying;

During the pandemic, sourcing stock from suppliers was a significant challenge. Delivery delays and incomplete orders were common, making it difficult to maintain inventory levels. (P6)

Participant 8 echoed the same sentiments and was quoted saying;

Lockdown restrictions crippled our supply chain. We struggled to get products on time, and when we did, they were often incomplete. It was a frustrating experience. (P8)

A key informant from the National Vendors Association was also quoted highlighting this same issue;

Supply chain disruptions were a major concern for many small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the pandemic. Sourcing products and maintaining inventory levels became a

significant challenge. (Key Informant 3)

The narratives above highlight the vulnerability of supply chains, since lockdown restrictions, transportation challenges, and supplier insolvency affect small enterprises in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, making it more difficult for them to acquire goods and keep inventory levels stable.

4.4.1.5 Limited Digital Literacy

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of digital literacy for small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo. Participants indicated that limited digital literacy was a major challenge in adopting and utilising digital marketing strategies. One of the participants had this to say;

We didn't have the necessary skills to manage our social media accounts and online presence. It was hard to create engaging content and respond to customer inquiries. (P3)

I didn't know how to use digital marketing tools effectively. I struggled to create ads and track their performance. (P9)

A key informant from the Zimbabwe Chamber of Commerce echoed the same sentiments,

Many small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo lack the digital literacy needed to compete in today's market. It's a significant challenge for them to adopt and utilize digital marketing strategies. (KI2)

Participants mentioned that one of the biggest obstacles to implementing and using digital marketing techniques was a lack of digital literacy.

4.4.2 Digital Marketing Strategies Adopted by Small Retail Businesses

The third objective of this study was to identify the digital marketing strategies adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. A survey of 43 small retail businesses revealed the following distribution of responses:

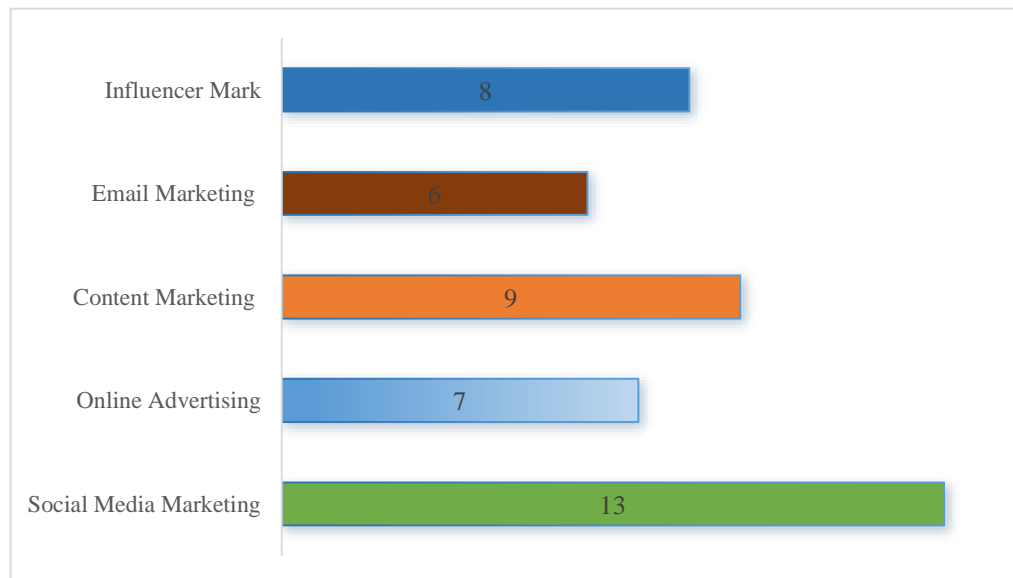


Figure 4: Marketing strategies adopted by small retail businesses

Source: Primary Data

Figure 4 illustrates the adoption of various digital marketing strategies among 43 small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social Media Marketing was the most popular strategy followed by Online Advertising, with influencer marketing and content Marketing being the least popular. These themes will be further explained and bolstered by participant verbatims, offering a more thorough comprehension of the digital marketing tactics used by small retail enterprises to address the COVID-19 difficulties.

4.4.2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing emerged as a key digital marketing strategy adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare during the COVID-19 pandemic. Picture 1 below from fieldwork shows that social media was one of the best tools used to market products during the COVID-19.

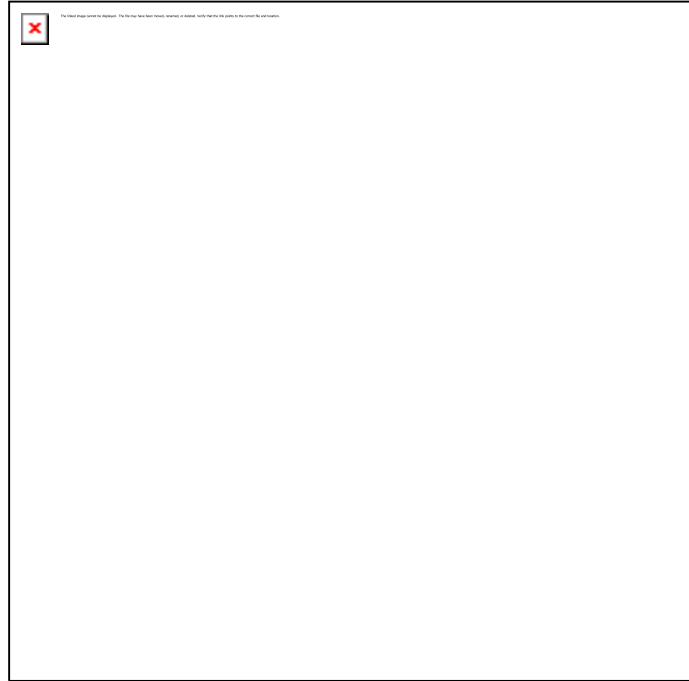


Figure 5: One of the vendor's facebook page marketing his business.

Source: Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100089181611309>

Figure 5 above shows a one of the vendor's Facebook page marketing his business. The vendor also provided the whatsapp number where the potential customers could use in case they want to buy. On this issue, participants also shared their experiences, highlighting the importance of social media in maintaining customer engagement during the pandemic. One participant was quoted saying:

Social media helped us to stay connected with our customers during the pandemic. We were able to share updates, promotions, and engage with our customers in real-time. (P10)

Another participant echoed the same sentiments and was of the view that;

We used social media to showcase our products and services, and it helped us to maintain our customer base during the pandemic. (P5)

This shows that social media platforms allow businesses the chance to interact with customers, improve brand awareness, and boost website traffic and sales.

4.4.2.2 Online Advertising

Online advertising was another digital marketing strategy adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared their experiences, highlighting the importance of online advertising in maintaining visibility and attracting new customers during the pandemic. A participant shared this insight:

Online advertising helped us to stay visible during the pandemic. We were able to target specific audiences and increase our online presence. (P3)

Another participant shared the same perspective and indicated how effective online advertising was during the pandemic;

We used online advertising to drive traffic to our website and social media pages. It was an effective way to reach new customers and promote our products. (P6)

Through their personal stories, participants emphasized the value of internet advertising in preserving visibility and drawing in new clients throughout the pandemic. Online advertising's promise as a focused and quantifiable marketing tool is demonstrated by the adoption of it by small retail firms in Mbare.

4.4.2.3 Email marketing

Email marketing was a notable digital marketing strategy employed by small retail businesses in Mbare during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey results showed that in Fig 4 shows that most respondents utilised email marketing to reach their customers and promote their products. To reinforce this finding, participants shared their experiences, highlighting the effectiveness of email marketing. One participant noted,

Email marketing allowed us to stay in touch with our loyal

customers and inform them about new products and promotions. It was a great way to drive sales and increase customer loyalty. (P9)

Moreover, participant 8 supported the above sentiment and was quoted saying,

Our email list helped us to target specific customers with tailored promotions, which resulted in increased sales and customer engagement. (P8)

Furthermore, one key informant from the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce added depth to this finding indicating that;

Email marketing is a cost-effective way for small businesses to reach their customers and promote their products. However, it requires a well-curated email list and regular communication to be effective.

This indicates that a portion of Mbare's small retail enterprises made good use of email marketing, and it worked effectively for them.

4.4.2.4 Content Marketing

Small retail businesses in Mbare as indicated in Fig 4 also utilised content marketing as a digital marketing approach during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 9 out of 43 respondents (20.9%) (Fig 4) creating and distributing valuable content to engage with their customers and promote their products. Participants shared their experiences, highlighting the impact of content marketing and participant 3 noted;

Creating valuable content helped us to establish our brand as an authority in the market. Our customers appreciated the informative content, and it helped to build trust in our brand. (P4)

Another participant shared the same view and was quoted saying

Our blog posts and videos provided valuable information to our customers, and it helped to drive traffic to our website. We saw an increase in sales after implementing content marketing. (P8)

This was also supported by a key informant from Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises noted:

The Ministry has been promoting online marketing approaches, including content advertising, to support small businesses in Zimbabwe. We believe that content marketing can play an important role in helping small businesses build their brand and reach new customers. (Key Informant 3)

A key informant from the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce added:

Content advertising is a powerful means of small businesses to differentiate themselves and build a strong brand identity. Creating useful and relevant content, help small businesses to attract and retain customers. (Key informant 2)

This shows that the respondents were using content marketing as a tool in promoting their business during COVID-19.

4.4.2.5 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing was the least adopted digital marketing strategy among small retail businesses in Mbare as indicated on Figure 4. Despite its limited adoption, participants who used influencer marketing reported positive experiences. This was

also indicated by a small retail business owner who utilises B Wezhira a to market her products. Figure 6 shows a picture from advert found during fieldwork.

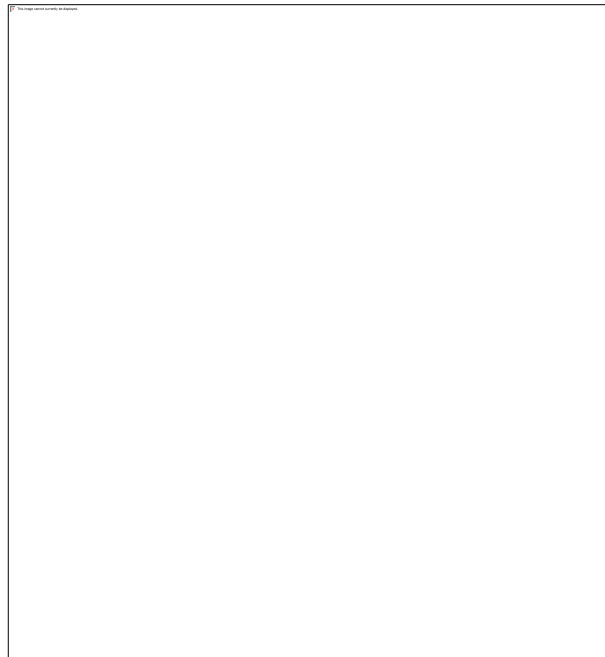


Figure 6: A social media influencer B Wezhira marketing products for a customer.

Source: Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/BeeWezhira>

Figure 6 shows a social media influencer B Wezhira marketing products for a customer. The facebook post is attracting many followers and this shows that it is very essential on marketing. That participant who was the owner of the business being advertised was quoted saying

Partnering with influencers like Bee Wezhira the Comedian helped us to cover a wider audience and increase brand awareness. Our sales increased significantly after the influencer campaign. (P2)

Another participant also did the same with various social media influencers to market his business. He had this to say;

We collaborated with local influencers who had a large following on

social media. They helped us to promote our products and services to their followers. (P10)

A key informant who had vast experience on how SMEs run also shared the same view. He had this to say;

Influencer marketing is one effective means for small retail businesses to cover new customers and improve their brand. However, it's essential to choose influencers who align with the business's values and target audience. (Key Informant 3)

Another key informant echoed the same sentiments

Influencer marketing requires careful planning and execution. Small businesses need to make sure that they partner with influencers who have a clear interest in their products or services. (Key Informant 1)

This shows that influencer marketing was also seen as the key digital marketing strategy to survive during COVID-19.

4.4.3 Effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in maintaining business operations and engagement

The thesis managed to assess the efficacy of digital marketing methods in maintaining business operations and interaction among small retail businesses in Mbare during the COVID-19 pandemic. This objective addresses the outcome of digital marketing plans on business performance, customer engagement, and overall sustainability. The findings of this objective are presented in following subsections. Section explores the effectiveness of digital marketing tactics through the mentioned five key themes. These themes will be further explained and supported with verbatims from participants,

providing a deeper insight of the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies employed by small businesses in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

4.4.3.1 Social Media Marketing

The study finds that participants have got different perspectives and views on the level of effectiveness of social media marketing during the crisis. Table 3 shows the effectiveness of social media marketing to small retail businesses during COVID-19.

Table 3: Effectiveness of social media marketing during COVID-19 pandemic

Level of Effectiveness	Frequency
Very Effective	25
Effective	10
Neutral	5
Ineffective	2
Very ineffective	1

Source: Primary Data

Out of 43 small retail businesses, a popular number sees the utilization of social media as effective during the pandemic, with only few respondents seeing it as ineffective. In support of its effectiveness, a one of the 10 participants who were interviewed stated;

Social media marketing allowed us to cover a wider audience and engage with our customers despite the pandemic. (P7)

However a participant who sees it as ineffective was quoted saying;

We found it challenging to create engaging content and compete with larger businesses on social media handles.

This perspective reflects the effectiveness of social media advertising as well as the challenges associated with capturing attention and standing out in a saturated social media landscape.

4.4.3.2 Email Marketing

The study also explored the different responses on how effective was email marketing during the pandemic. Table 4 shows the level of effectiveness email marketing was during the COVID-19.

Table 4: Level of effectiveness email marketing has during the pandemic

Level of Effectiveness	Frequency
Very Effective	2
Effective	3
Neutral	8
Ineffective	10
Very ineffective	20

Source: Primary Data

Email marketing received mixed reviews, with a highest number of participants considering it ineffective and a few respondents deeming it effective. A participant who sees it ineffective highlighted,

Our emails often ended up in spam folders, and we struggled to build a strong subscriber base.

However, on of the participant who sees it effective had this to say;

Targeted email campaigns helped us nurture leads and drive repeat business. (P2)

These perspective shows that there were participants who were against and some who supports the notion of using personalized email content to foster customer loyalty .

4.4.3.3 Content Marketing

The study also finds out that participants have got different responses towards content marketing as a strategy of boosting sales during the pandemic. The Table 5 shows how

effective was content marketing was to participants.

Table 5: Participants' response on how content marketing was to their businesses

Level of Effectiveness	Frequency
Very Effective	18
Effective	8
Neutral	10
Ineffective	5
Very ineffective	2

Source: Primary Data

Content marketing received a positive response, with a highest score with a less score giving a negative response. Among those who gives positive response one participant was quoted saying,

Creating useful and relevant content helped us attract and retain customers by enhancing our brand's reputation.

One of the participants who see this as ineffective also has this to say

Producing high-quality content consistently was resource-intensive, and measuring its impact on sales proved challenging. (P1)

These insights shows how useful content marketing was as well as indicating how ineffective it was.

4.4.3.4 Influencer Marketing

The study also discovered that participants had difference responses towards the usefulness of influence marketing during the pandemic. The Table 6 indicates how effective was the strategy to their businesses.

Table 6: Effectiveness of Influencer marketing to participants during the pandemic

Level of Effectiveness	Frequency
Very Effective	7
Effective	10
Neutral	6
Ineffective	13
Very ineffective	7

Source: Primary Data

Regarding influencer marketing, more respondents found it ineffective, and a few found it effective. One respondent who sees it ineffective said,

Partnering with influencers did not yield significant returns on investment, as their followers didn't convert into customers. (P4)

However on of the participants who sees it effective sees this in utilising influential marketing;

Collaborating with influencers helped us tap into their engaged audience and increase brand awareness. (P6)

This perspective reflects the challenges businesses face in identifying the right influencers and measuring campaign success. On the other hand, a few respondents considered influencer marketing effective.

4.4.3.5 Online Advertising

Participants also showed that they had different views on how useful was online adverting to their day-to-day operations at Mupedzanhamo. Table 7 shows the participants' responses quantitatively.

Table 7: Effectiveness of online advertising to the participants

Level of Effectiveness	Frequency
Very Effective	5
Effective	6
Neutral	11
Ineffective	12
Very ineffective	9

Source: Primary Data

Online advertising received mixed reviews from small retail businesses. A significant portion, found it ineffective, and only a few considered it very effective. One respondent stated,

We struggled with targeting the right audience and saw low conversion rates from our ads.

Conversely, a supportive respondent shared,

Investing in online ads helped us cover a wider audience base and drive traffic to our website.

This perspective reflects the potential benefits or disadvantages of online advertising.

4.5 Discussion of Results

The results of the study are shown in order of the research objectives. Findings of this study are compared to other similar studies to show its contribution to handle the research gap indicated in Chapter 2. Firstly, the study managed to identify the setbacks faced by small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first theme which emerged from the data analysis is limited access to digital infrastructure. A critical aspect of digital infrastructure is access to smartphones, which can facilitate digital marketing adoption. According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), (Davis, 1989), accessibility is a critical factor in determining a personal

intention to accept a new technology (Davis, 1989). However, if small businesses lacked access to digital infrastructure, they may not have been able to sense the value of digital marketing, let alone adopt it during the pandemic. Similarly, the model, Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, (UTAUT) suggests that supporting conditions, such as access to technology and affordable data, play a crucial role in determining an individual's behavior intention to use a technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The findings of this study are uniform with existing literature, which stand out the relevance of digital infrastructure in facilitating digital marketing adoption among small businesses, particularly during times of crisis (Mousa, 2023; OECD, 2020)

The study highlights that financial constraints were also a significant challenge for small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the pandemic. This clearly shows that small businesses' financial struggles during the pandemic are stable with previous research which emphasizes the application of financial resources in promoting the adoption of digital marketing (Ochoa et al., 2017, Mahboub and Sadok (2023). Perceived utility and perceived user-friendly are important determinants on personal intention to embrace new technology, in line with Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), (Davis, 1989). Even if small businesses think digital marketing methods are helpful, their capacity to use them may be limited by budgetary constraints. Likewise, following the model UTAUT, enabling factors like financial resources are important in influencing a person's behavior intention to make use of a technology, (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The findings of this study highlight need for financial support and resources to facilitate digital marketing adoption among small businesses, particularly during times of crisis.

Participants also showed that reduced customer traffic was a significant problem for small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the pandemic. Customer traffic declined. This is in cognizant with OECD (2020) and Pantano et al., (2020) who stated that small companies experienced a decrease in customer traffic during the pandemic, which is in line with previous research that emphasises how crises affect consumer

behavior and business operations (OECD, 2020; Pantano et al., 2020). Crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic can cause consumers to become more cautious and spend less, according to Pantano et al. (2020). This is due to the fact that during emergencies, people are more likely to prioritise necessities above non-essentials (Sharma et al., 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, the model UTAUT and the TAM can be used to understand the decreased client traffic. Perceived utility and perceived user-friendly are important determinants of a person's desire to embrace a new technology, according to TAM (Davis, 1989). However, due to limited access to digital infrastructure and budgetary constraints, small enterprises might not have been able to use digital technology to reach clients during the epidemic. Additionally, according to UTAUT, enabling factors like financial resources and technological access are important in shaping a person's behavior intention to utilize a technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic according to findings exposed the fragility of supply chains, with small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo being severely impacted. This result aligns with Ivanov's (2020) claim that supply chains are susceptible to interruptions, especially in emergency situations. According to Sharma et al. (2020), supply chain interruptions such as supplier insolvency and transportation delays might result from crises like the Covid-19 epidemic. Businesses that have access to rare, precious, and unique resources are better positioned to lessen the effects of supply chain interruptions confirming the TAM (Barney, 1991). However, it is possible that Mbare Mupedzanhamo's small businesses lacked the resources needed to create strong supply chain strategies. The UTAUT framework (Teece et al., 1997) also sheds light on the difficulties faced by small businesses during the pandemic, stating that enterprises must develop dynamic abilities to adjust to changing environments. In the case of supply chain disruptions, using UTAUT framework, small businesses must develop capabilities like inventory management, supplier diversification, and contingency planning to lessen the impact of disruptions. The study's findings emphasize the significance of creating strategies to mitigate supply chain disruptions, and small

businesses can gain knowledge from the experiences of other businesses that have successfully managed comparable difficulties and this is in support of Apedo-Amah (2020). It is possible for small firms to become more resilient and less susceptible to supply chain disruptions by investing in digital technologies, diversifying their suppliers, and creating backup plans.

The findings also showed that the pandemic highlighted the significance of digital literacy for small businesses in Mupedzanhamo. The idea that digital literacy plays a vital role in determining small enterprises' performance in the digital era is supported by this research (Lee and Kim, 2017). A person's while to accept a new technology is shaped by perceived ease of use, according to the model TAM, (Davis, 1989). Small firms' adoption of digital marketing tactics may be constrained by low digital literacy, which can make it more difficult for them to see digital marketing as straightforward. Additionally, according to Venkatesh et al. (2003), the model UTAUT, facilitate the adoption and use of new technologies, such as training and assistance, are crucial. To effectively use digital marketing tactics and stay competitive, small firms must engage in digital literacy training and development, according to the study's conclusions.

The study identified the digital marketing strategies adopted by small businesses in Mbare in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Social media advertising emerged as a key digital marketing strategy adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare during the COVID-19 pandemic which made business much easier. According to Trainor et al. (2014), social media marketing can be especially effective for small businesses, enabling them to cover a large audience with limited resources. The pervasive use of social media marketing among small retail businesses in Mbare demonstrates its potential as a potent marketing tool. Through the model UTAUT, the efficacy of social media marketing in this situation can also be comprehended. According to Venkatesh et al. (2003), enabling factors like technical assistance and access to digital infrastructure are essential for people to be able to accept and use new technologies. Access to these enabling factors may have increased the likelihood that

Mbare's small retail firms would use social media marketing, which would have enhanced their capacity to connect with consumers and advertise their goods during the epidemic. In line with Gummerus et al. (2017), social media marketing helps to improve business performance by increasing consumer involvement, loyalty, and retention.

The study also found out that online advertising is another digital marketing strategy adopted by small retail businesses in Mbare during the pandemic. Linking this with current literature, it clearly shows that, online advertising can be a useful strategy for companies looking to reach particular demographics and provide quantifiable outcomes, as propounded by Moipolai (2022). Businesses can reach their desired audience by using a variety of targeting choices offered by online advertising platforms, such as demographic, regional, and behavioral targeting (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). The efficiency of online advertising in this context can also be understood through the lens of the model, TAM. Davis (1989) suggests that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are critical factors in determining an individual's intention to accept new technology. Small retail businesses in Mbare may have perceived online advertising as useful for reaching new customers and promoting their products, and easy to use due to the user-friendly interface of online advertising platforms.

Email marketing was also found out to be a notable digital marketing strategy employed by small retail businesses in Mbare during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has shown that Email marketing is a tactic that small retail enterprises find appealing due to its focused nature. Research has demonstrated that email marketing can be a successful strategy for increasing client loyalty (Parasuraman et al., 2019), boosting sales (Kotler and Keller, 2016), and fostering customer relationships (Gronroos, 2014). The significance of personalization in email marketing has also been emphasized by academics like Merisavo and Raulas (2014), who point out that customised messages can boost conversion rates and customer engagement. Email marketing's potential as a customized marketing tool is demonstrated by the small retail firms in Mbare that have used it. These small businesses can increase revenue, foster client relationships, and

keep a competitive advantage in a demanding business climate by utilizing email marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the study found out that mall retail businesses in Mbare also utilized content marketing as a digital marketing method during the pandemic. The TAM, which contends that companies can obtain a competitive edge by utilizing their internal resources and capabilities, can be used to analyse how small retail enterprises in Mbare use content marketing (Barney, 1991). Therefore, in this instance, small retail enterprises can utilize content marketing as a useful tool to develop their brand and draw in clients. Research has demonstrated that content marketing is a successful strategy for increasing website traffic and revenue (Achieng, 2022), enhancing company reputation (Rose and Pulizzi, 2019), and establishing credibility and trust with consumers (Holliman and McFadden, 2018). Content marketing, according to Pulizzi (2014), refers to as the process of producing and disseminating worthwhile, timely, and uniformly material so as to draw in and hold on to a target audience.

Influencer marketing was the least adopted digital marketing strategy among small retail businesses in Mbare. Linking this finding with the theory and existing literature, the TAM gives a platform for understanding the limited use of influencer marketing by Mbare's small retail enterprises. Perceived utility and perceived user-friendly are important determinants of an individual's intention to accept a new technology or technique in the TAM (Davis, 1989). Influencer marketing may not have been widely adopted by small retail enterprises because they did not think it was helpful or simple to implement. Influencer marketing adoption can also be analyzed using the model UTAUT. According to UTAUT, the adoption of a technology or technique is shaped by a number of important aspects, including social influence, performance expectancy, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Small retail businesses may not have adopted influencer marketing due to limited performance expectancy, high effort expectancy, or lack of facilitating conditions. According to studies, influencer marketing, when done properly, may be a powerful tool for raising sales and brand

exposure (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Casaló et al., 2020). Small retail businesses in Mbare can make well-informed judgments on whether to use influencer marketing by knowing the elements that affect its acceptance.

The study lastly assessed the success of digital marketing plans in maintaining business operations and engagement among small retail businesses in Mbare during the pandemic. Out of 43 small retail businesses, a popular number sees the use of social media marketing as effective during the pandemic, with only few respondents sees it as ineffective. This finding is aligned with existing literature highlighting social media's potential for increased visibility and customer interaction (Kumar et al., 2016). However, some participants though a few of them found social media marketing ineffective This perspective reflects the challenges associated with capturing attention and standing out in a saturated social media landscape, as discussed by Liu et al. (2020). According to the model TAM, perceived usefulness and ease of use affects technology adoption and usage (Davis, 1989). Social media marketing seems to align with TAM, as its perceived usefulness and ease of use make it popular among small retail businesses.

Email marketing received mixed reviews, with a highest number of participants considering it ineffective and a few respondents deeming it effective. This aligns with available literature discussing challenges of email deliverability and maintaining engagement (Chaffey, 2020). However, a few participants see it as effective. This perspective supports the notion of using personalized email content to foster customer loyalty (Thomas et al., 2022). In the context of TAM and UTAUT, the effectiveness of email marketing may depend on businesses' ability to perceive its usefulness and ease of use, while also leveraging social influence and facilitating conditions. Businesses must consider these factors to ensure successful email marketing implementation. Content marketing also received a positive response, with a highest score with a less score giving a negative response. This aligns with available literature emphasizing the role of content marketing in establishing brand credibility and fostering customer

engagement (Pulizzi, 2016). This viewpoint by those who see it ineffective highlighted the resource constraints and measurement difficulties faced by small businesses in implementing content marketing strategies (Xu, 2023). In terms of TAM and UTAUT, businesses perceiving content marketing as useful and easy to use are likely to adjust to this strategy. Additionally, social influence from peers and the availability of resources and tools can facilitate content marketing adoption and usage, as per UTAUT.

Regarding influencer marketing, more respondents found it ineffective, and a few found it effective. This aligns with existing literature acknowledging influencers' potential to enhance reach and engagement (Hughes et al., 2019). Khan et al. (2022) noted that followers are important in digital marketing. According to TAM and UTAUT, businesses may adopt influencer marketing if they perceive it as useful and easy to use. Social influence from other businesses successfully leveraging influencer marketing and access to resources and platforms can further facilitate its adoption and usage.

Online advertising received mixed reviews from small retail businesses. A significant portion, found it ineffective, and only a few considered it very effective. This aligns with the challenges businesses face in optimizing ad targeting and measuring advertising effectiveness (Ryan, 2016). This perspective also reflects the potential benefits of online advertising, such as increased visibility and website traffic (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). TAM and UTAUT suggest that businesses' perceived usefulness of online advertising will shape its adoption. Additionally, businesses may be more likely to adopt online advertising if they observe their peers' successful usage of it and have access to resources and platforms that facilitate its implementation.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This section presented analysis and discussion of data gathered from 43 small businesses in Mbare, Zimbabwe. The chapter addressed the setbacks faced by small retail businesses during the pandemic, the digital marketing methods they adopted in

response to these challenges, and effectiveness of these strategies in maintaining business operations and engagement. The analysis was supported by theoretical frameworks, including the model TAM and UTAUT, as well as relevant literature on digital marketing. The next chapter will provide a summary of key findings, draw conclusions based on study's objectives, and offer recommendations for small retail businesses, policymakers, and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of the study.

The thesis investigated the effects of COVID-19 on internet marketing acceptance and adaptive strategies among small business outlets in Mbare, Zimbabwe. The study used a mixed methodology approach, collecting data from 43 small retail businesses (for questionnaire survey) and 10 participants (for in-depth interviews), whilst 3 key informants were also involved in in-depth interviews to provide a clear insight on what was studied. The study's objectives were to identify the problems faced by small businesses during the pandemic, the digital marketing strategies they adopted in response, and the effectiveness of these strategies in maintaining business operations and customer engagement. The research was guided by model UTAUT and TAM, which provided a framework for comprehending the adoption and utilization of digital marketing strategies among small retail businesses.

The first objective of the study was to identify the problems faced by small businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the pandemic. The findings reveal that small businesses encountered various challenges that affected their operations and survival. Financial constraints were the most significant challenge, cited by 30% of respondents, followed by limited access to digital infrastructure and lack of digital skills, each cited by 21% of respondents. Reduced customer traffic and supply chain disruptions were also significant challenges. The five key themes that came from data analysis were limited access to digital infrastructure, financial constraints, reduced customer traffic, supply chain disruptions, and lack of digital skills. These findings were further shaped by verbatim from in-depth interviews, which highlighted struggles to adapt to new market conditions, difficulties in accessing financial support, and challenges in maintaining customer relationships.

The study's second objective was to explore the digital marketing strategies small retail businesses in Mbare adopted to cope with the pandemic. The results showed that most businesses (69.8%) leveraged social media marketing, making it the most popular strategy. This was likely due to its accessibility and cost-effectiveness. Online advertising (46.5%) and email marketing (34.9%) were also widely used, indicating a shift towards digital channels to reach customers. Content marketing (27.9%) and influencer marketing (11.6%) were less common, possibly due to resource constraints or limited expertise. These findings were further enriched by insights from participants, which provided a deeper understanding of how small retail businesses utilized digital marketing strategies to navigate the pandemic's challenges, including maintaining customer engagement and adapting to new market conditions.

Lastly, the objective of this study was to evaluate how well digital advertising strategies worked to keep small retail businesses in Mbare operating and engaging with their customers throughout the pandemic. The results showed that different digital marketing tactics varied in their effectiveness. 81.4% of respondents said social media marketing was effective or very effective, whilst 60.5% said content marketing was effective or very effective. On the other hand, 69.8% of respondents said that email marketing was ineffective, and 74.4% said that influencer marketing was very ineffective. The results showed that although 48.8% of respondents thought online advertising was useless or extremely ineffective, 25.6% said it was effective or very effective. In terms of sustaining business operations and client interaction, 69.8% of respondents said their digital marketing strategy was effective or extremely effective. These findings were further enriched by insights from participants, providing a deeper comprehending of the effects of digital marketing strategies on business performance and sustainability during the pandemic.

5.3 Conclusion

This study provides insightful information about how COVID-19 has affected small

retail firms in Mbare, Zimbabwe, in terms of their use of digital marketing and adaptive strategies. Regarding specific objectives, the study shows that small businesses encountered significant challenges including financial problems (30%), restricted access to digital infrastructure (21%), and reduced digital competences (21%) that negatively impacted their operations and sustainability. With social media marketing used the most at 69.8%, followed by web promotion at 46.5% and email promotion at 34.9%, the study shows that small retail businesses adopted a variety of digital marketing methods in reaction to the epidemic. While email marketing (69.8%) and influencer marketing (74.4%) seemed to be rather less effective, the efficacy of these strategies displayed notable variation; social media marketing (81.4%) and content marketing (60.5%) demonstrated effectiveness in sustaining business operations and fostering customer engagement. Particularly with regard to digital infrastructure, talent development, and competent digital marketing strategies, the information given emphasises the need of targeted help and resources to improve the digital competences of small retail businesses. Policymakers and stakeholders can create exact interventions to help small retail businesses use digital marketing strategies within the COVID-19 epidemic to acknowledge their complexity and potential and so promote their recovery and progress.

5.3 Recommendations

The research objectives and findings culminate in one to four concise recommendations:

- ❖ Policymakers and business support organizations should offer specialized digital skills training to small businesses, highlighting successful digital marketing plans, social media marketing, and online marketing.
- ❖ Policymakers need to give highest importance to programs enhancing access to digital infrastructure-like low-cost internet and digital devices-for small enterprises.
- ❖ Small businesses should formulate customized digital marketing plans suitable to their target market and business objectives, and then continually assess their performance.

The research objectives and emphasis on addressing the most critical issues small businesses are dealing with in embracing digital marketing initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic inform these recommendations.

5.4 Implications for Disaster Management Science

Results of this study have significant consequences for growth of disaster management science, more especially in domains of digital marketing and small businesses. These consequences can help small firms and communities create resilience and sustainability against disasters by means of more effective laws, policies, and disaster management strategies developed from these considerations. Among the main effects are:

- ❖ The study underlines for small companies the need of digital resilience against natural catastrophes. Encouragement of digital literacy, infrastructure development, and digital technology accessibility helps one integrate digital resilience into catastrophe preparation.
- ❖ The findings of the research on adaptable corporate strategies can inform field of disaster management practice and policy. Small companies may help disaster management authorities develop adaptable strategies with web marketing included to increase their resilience and sustainability.
- ❖ Research on internet marketing helps one to lead catastrophe reaction and recovery. Disaster response and recovery companies may use internet marketing tools to distribute information, provide supplies relief, and interact with victims.

These findings show how well digital technologies internet marketing and social media may enhance disaster management. In disaster management, the authorities might take into account how digital technology could enhance their actions for response and rehabilitation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

My name is Enock Chakavarika, a student from Bindura University of Science Education, doing a Bachelor's degree in Disaster Management Science (Hons). I am undertaking a research project on "**The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Marketing Adoption and Adaptive Strategies: A Case Study of Small Retail Businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe (2020-2021).**"

Purpose and Participation

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses. You are invited to participate in this study by completing a questionnaire and/or participating in an in-depth interview. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality and Risks

All information collected will be treated with confidentiality and anonymity. Your responses will be used solely for the purpose of this study. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study.

Consent

If you participate in this study, you consent to the use of your responses for research purposes. You understand that your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

Agreement

I, (not real name), agree to participate in this study and understand the terms outlined above.

Signature

_____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE FORM

I am Enock Chakavarika, a student from Bindura University of Science Education, conducting a research study on the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe. The purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges faced by small businesses during the pandemic, the digital marketing strategies adopted, and the effectiveness of these strategies in maintaining business operations and customer engagement.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and all information collected will be treated with confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Your responses will contribute significantly to the understanding of digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Enock Chakavarika

Date of completion Respondent No.....

Instructions:

- Please fill in the space provided
- Place a tick where appropriate

SECTION A

1. Sex

Male	Female

2. Age group (years)

18-24	25-34	35-44	45-53 +	55+

3. Length of operation (years)

0-4	5-9	10-14	15+

4. Type of Business

Retail	Wholesale

5. Do you have access to smartphone

Yes	No

SECTION B: Challenges Faced During the Pandemic

6. What challenges did your business face during the COVID-19 pandemic? (Select one very significant to your business)

Challenge	Mark
Financial constraints	
Limited access to digital infrastructure	

- Lack of digital skills	
- Supply chain disruptions	
- Reduced customer traffic	

7. How did these challenges affect your business operations?

Section C: Digital Marketing Strategies Adopted

8. Did your business adopt any digital marketing strategies during the pandemic?

(Yes/No)

9. If yes, which digital marketing strategies did you adopt? (Select the one that apply to your business)

Strategy	Mark
Social Media Marketing	
Online Advertising	
Email Marketing	
Content Marketing	
Influencer Marketing	

10. How did you implement these digital marketing strategies?

.....

Section D: Effectiveness of Digital Marketing Strategies

11. Please rate the effectiveness of each digital marketing strategy adopted by your business during the pandemic:

Category	Very effective	Effective	Neutral	INEFFECTIVE	Very ineffective
Social media marketing					
Online advertising					
Email Marketing					
Influencer marketing					
Content Marketing					

12. Number of customers per day

Number of customers per day	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
0-4							
5-9							
9-14							

15+							
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APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this in-depth interview. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe.

Interview Questions

Section A: Challenges Faced During the Pandemic

1. Can you describe the challenges your business faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did these challenges affect your business operations and customer engagement?

Section B: Digital Marketing Strategies Adopted

1. Did your business adopt any digital marketing strategies during the pandemic? If so, can you describe them?
2. What motivated you to adopt these digital marketing strategies?
3. How did you implement these digital marketing strategies?

Section C: Effectiveness of Digital Marketing Strategies

1. How effective were the digital marketing strategies in maintaining business operations and customer engagement during the pandemic?
2. What benefits did your business derive from adopting digital marketing strategies during the pandemic?
3. Were there any challenges or limitations in implementing digital marketing strategies? Explain them.

Conclusion

Thank you for sharing your insights and experiences. Your participation will contribute significantly to the understanding of digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR KEY INFORMANTS

Introduction

My name is Enock /.... An understgraduate student doing research on (topic)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this in-depth interview. As a key informant, your expertise and insights will provide valuable context to the study on the impact of COVID-19 on digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo, Zimbabwe.

Section A: Industry Insights

1. What were the most significant challenges faced by small retail businesses in Mbare Mupedzanhamo during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the pandemic affect the retail industry as a whole?

Section B: Digital Marketing Trends

1. What digital marketing trends did you observe among small retail businesses during the pandemic?
2. How did small businesses adapt to digital marketing during this period?

Section C: Support and Resources

1. What support or resources were available to small retail businesses to help them adopt digital marketing strategies during the pandemic?
2. Were there any initiatives or programs that stood out in supporting small businesses?

Section D: Future Outlook

1. What opportunities or challenges do you foresee for small retail businesses in terms of digital marketing post-pandemic?
2. How can small businesses continue to leverage digital marketing to drive growth and sustainability?

Conclusion

Thank you for sharing your expertise and insights. Your participation will contribute significantly to the understanding of digital marketing adoption and adaptive strategies among small retail businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

APPENDIX E: Fieldwork Visual Checklist

1. Photograph of a social media post from facebook page advertising.
2. Photograph of a social media influencer engaging with clients.