



Digital Marketing's Impact on Consumer Behaviour in FMCGs: A Case Study of National Milling Zambia (2021–2024)

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of digital marketing on consumer behavior within Zambia's Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector, using National Milling Corporation Limited as a case study. Despite the growing use of digital tools such as social media marketing, mobile advertising, email campaigns, and influencer collaborations, there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of these strategies in influencing consumer behavior in the Zambian FMCG market. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the actual outcomes of digital marketing initiatives on consumer engagement, brand awareness, and purchasing decisions.

The findings indicate that digital marketing especially through platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp has significantly improved customer interaction, information accessibility, and responsiveness compared to the pre-digital era. Consumers reported greater exposure to promotions, a better understanding of products, and increased trust and loyalty toward brands that actively engage online. Statistical analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship between digital marketing efforts and changes in consumer purchasing behavior.

The study concludes that digital marketing plays an essential role in shaping modern consumer behavior in the FMCG sector. It recommends that companies like National Milling Corporation continue to invest in digital platforms while also retaining traditional marketing channels like radio to ensure inclusivity for audiences with limited digital access. These findings provide practical guidance for marketers aiming to maximize the effectiveness of their digital strategies in emerging markets like Zambia.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Digital Marketing, Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (Fmcg), Social Media, Zambia

Introduction

Digital marketing has emerged as a crucial tool for organizations aiming to enhance consumer engagement, drive sales, and build strong brand-consumer relationships. Unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing enables companies to reach broader audiences through cost-effective, targeted, and interactive online platforms such as social media, search engines, email, and content marketing ^[1]. These platforms facilitate real-time engagement, targeted messaging, and detailed campaign analytics, making digital marketing highly effective in today's competitive business environment.

Broadly defined, digital marketing involves promoting products or services using digital technologies, primarily the internet, as well as mobile phones, display advertising, and other digital mediums ^[2]. It encompasses all marketing efforts conducted through electronic devices, leveraging digital channels such as search engines, social media, email, and websites to actively engage current and prospective customers. This form of marketing is interchangeably known as online, internet, or web marketing ^[2].

The growth of digital marketing is closely entwined with technological advancements. It depends on electronic devices and the internet to connect companies with customers, with adoption levels varying across different regions due to infrastructural and socio-economic factors.

In the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector, which includes frequently purchased items such as food, beverages, toiletries, and household products, digital marketing plays a vital role. FMCGs rely on high volume, low margin, and repeat purchases, making visibility, convenience, and consistent consumer engagement essential for loyalty and market share expansion [3]. Digital platforms empower FMCG companies to distinguish themselves through personalized advertisements, real-time promotions, influencer marketing, and data-driven product placements [4]. Central to digital marketing is understanding consumer behaviour the actions, preferences, and decision-making processes consumers follow when selecting, buying, using, and disposing of products or services. This behavior is shaped by psychological, social, cultural, and economic factors, increasingly influenced by digital interactions [5]. Today's consumers extensively utilize digital platforms to research brands, compare prices, read reviews, and engage in product discussions prior to making purchase decisions [6].

Globally, digital marketing has reshaped how brands and consumers connect, strengthening brand equity, influencing purchase intentions, and fostering loyalty, especially through influencer endorsements and social media engagement [7, 8]. By 2023, the global internet user base exceeded 5 billion, with approximately 4.8 billion active on social media highlighting vast digital marketing opportunities [9]. For example, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign used personalized labels and social media influencers to bolster consumer connections and increased sales by over 2% in certain regions [10]. Similarly, Alibaba employed artificial intelligence and predictive analytics for customized advertising during its Singles' Day event, achieving record sales of \$84.54 billion in 2021 [11].

In Africa, digital marketing adoption is growing though uneven due to infrastructure gaps, digital literacy, and affordability challenges. Countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya demonstrate significant progress, integrating social media and mobile platforms to engage tech-savvy urban consumers [12]. Kenya's Safaricom exemplifies this trend, using social media and SMS marketing to promote its M-Pesa mobile money service, now serving over 30 million users [13].

Zambia has experienced notable digital marketing growth over the past five years, with businesses increasingly transitioning from traditional advertising such as billboards and print media to digital platforms. This shift is supported by improved digital infrastructure, rising smartphone usage, and lower internet data costs. By 2023, more than 50% of Zambians had internet access, largely attributed to mobile connectivity and a digitally active middle class [14]. A key example is Zambia's National Milling Corporation (NMC), a major FMCG company producing maize meal, flour, and animal feed. Prior to 2021, NMC relied predominantly on traditional marketing methods, but the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a pivot toward digital marketing through social media campaigns, WhatsApp, and personalized email newsletters [15].

Despite these advancements, concerns remain about the effectiveness of digital marketing in Zambia's FMCG sector. There is limited evidence showing that digital campaigns

have significantly influenced consumer decisions, loyalty, or sales growth. Observations suggest that traditional marketing channels such as radio, roadshows, and community activations still outperform digital efforts in certain areas of consumer engagement [15, 16]. Furthermore, the critical period from 2021 to 2024 marked by accelerated digital adoption due to the pandemic has not been sufficiently studied to understand its impact on consumer preferences and purchasing behaviors in Zambia. The lack of empirical data creates a knowledge gap hindering FMCG marketers from accurately evaluating the return on investment of their digital strategies.

This research thus seeks to explore the extent to which digital marketing has influenced consumer behavior in Zambia's FMCG sector between 2021 and 2024. Without such analysis, companies risk investing in marketing strategies that do not align with consumer expectations, potentially leading to suboptimal outcomes in an increasingly digital economy.

In conclusion, digital marketing represents a transformative opportunity across sectors globally and in Zambia's FMCG industry specifically. While technological and infrastructural progress has enabled broader adoption, understanding the real impact on consumer behavior remains critical to optimizing marketing strategies and achieving sustained growth in digital engagement and sales [1, 2, 3].

Methods

This study applied a mixed methods approach under a pragmatic philosophy, combining a structured questionnaire for 173 customers and semi-structured interviews with 14 sales and marketing staff at National Milling Zambia (2021–2024). The descriptive case study design enabled an in-depth focus on shifts in consumer behaviour before and after digital marketing adoption. Data collection was conducted physically in retail outlets and online via Google Forms, with participation voluntary and consent obtained. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in Excel, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework.

Results and Discussion

Results

Response Rate

The study recorded a 100% overall response rate as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. This reflects strong participant engagement and successful data collection efforts. A total of 187 participants contributed to the study, comprising 173 respondents who completed the questionnaire and 14 participants who took part in in-depth interviews. There were no cases of non-response, as all distributed instruments were fully completed and returned.

Table 1: Response Rate Questionnaires

| Response Rate | Distribution | |
|---------------|--------------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Responded | 173 | 100% |
| Non response | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 173 | 100% |

Source: Author's Illustration

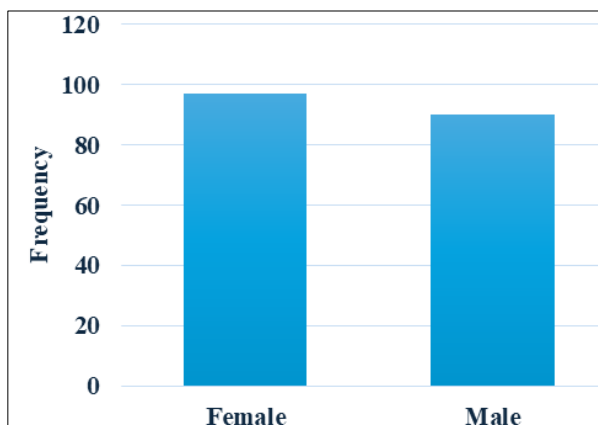
Table 2: Response Rate Interviews

| Response Rate | Distribution | |
|---------------|--------------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Responded | 14 | 100% |
| Non response | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 14 | 100% |

Source: Author's Illustration

Gender Participation

The quantitative sample consisted of 173 participants, and qualitative sample consisted 14 participants. The total number of participants was 187 participants. From a total of 187 respondents, 97 were female participants representing 51.9% of the population whereas 90 were male participants representing 48.1% of the population as depicted in Figure 1. It is imperative for researchers to have a balance of gender in research as this limits the amount of bias in the output of results and ensures comprehensive and conclusive findings^[17]. The chart below depicts the gender distribution of the respondents.

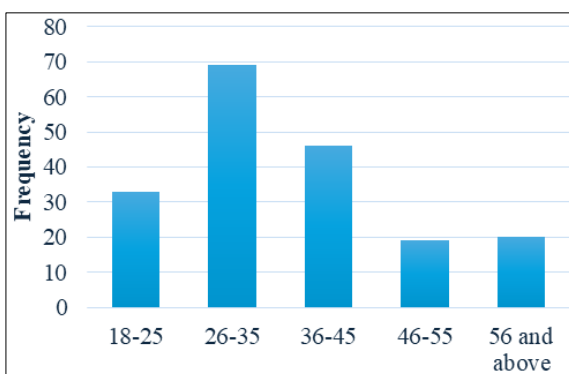


Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 1: Gender of Respondent.

Age Participation

From the total of 187 participants, there was a diverse age range of participants in the study. Participants in the age range of 18 to 25 consisted of 17.6% of the total population, participants in the age range of 26-35 consisted of 36.9% of the total population, participants in the age range of 36-45 consisted of 24.6% of the total population, participants in the age range of 46-55 consisted of 10.2% of the total population and participants in the age range of 56 and above consisted of 10.7% of the total population.

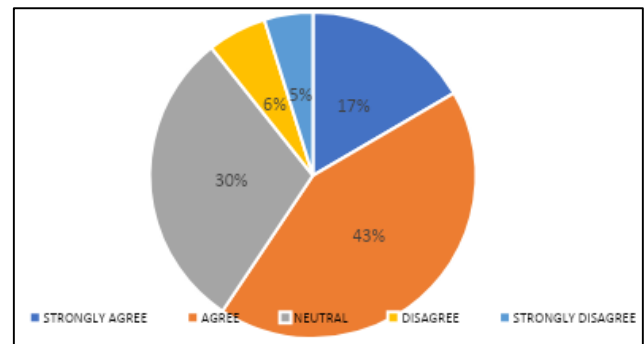


Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 2: Age of Participants

Understanding Digital Marketing

The researcher established that 56% of the population that participated in the interview had extensive knowledge of digital marketing, 24% of the population had a neutral stance and 10% did not understand digital marketing. From the questionnaire, it was established 16.6% of the population strongly agreed to having understood digital marketing, 42.8% of the population agreed, 29.9% of the population had a neutral stance, 5.9% disagreed and 4.8% strongly disagreed to having knowledge of digital marketing. The chart below depicts the outcome of the findings from the questionnaire.



Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 3: Understanding Digital Marketing rating

A significant proportion of the overall population agreed to having an understanding of digital marketing. The concept of digital marketing has evolved with changes in technology and communication styles. It is important for the general public to understand the concept of digital marketing as it brings enhances the relationship between consumers and product/service providers. This limits the likelihood of a tense relationship as digital marketing often bridges between formal and informal communication^[18].

Pre-Digital Marketing Implementation

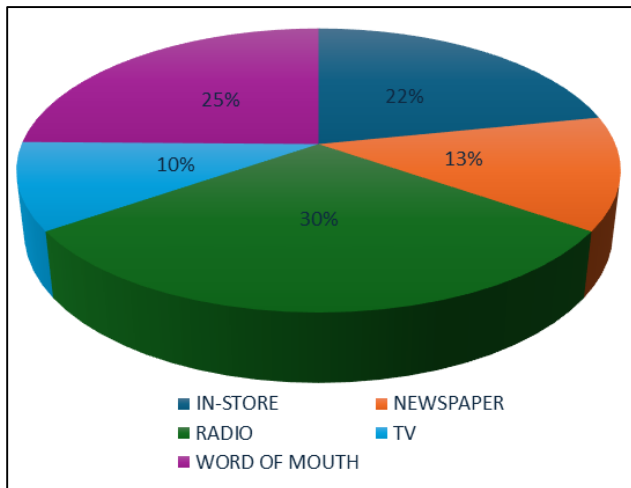
Prior to the implementation of Digital Marketing, National Milling Corporation Limited used traditional marketing mediums as a form of outreach to existing and potential clients. The questionnaire and interview guide assessed the mediums of outreach that clients had with National Milling prior to the implementation of Digital Marketing. The questionnaire further assessed client purchase frequency and product aware before and after the implementation of digital marketing.

Customer Engagement before Digital Marketing

Traditional marketing media were used before the implementation of digital marketing. It involves the use of communications, including radio, television, newsletters, billboards or ad-spaces in physically distributed media such as magazines and newspapers^[19].

From the questionnaire, it was established that 31% of the population had come across National Milling advertising on the radio, 24.6% of the population had come across National Milling advertising through referrals (word of mouth), 21.9% had come across National Milling advertising from In-store advertising/promotions, 9.6% had come across National Milling advertising on television and 12.8% had come across National Milling advertising through physically distributed media such as newspapers and magazines. The chart below

depicts the outcome of the findings of the questionnaire.

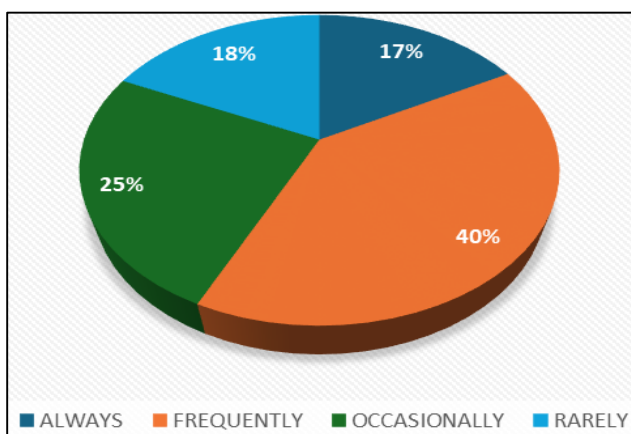


Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 4: Customer Engagement Before Digital Marketing

Purchase Frequency

Purchase frequency is the repeated decision to source and consume products based on several factors including trust and attitude towards these products (J Dumotier *et al.*, 2017). With regard to the study, purchase frequency refers to the increase in purchasing from new and existing clients. From the questionnaire it was established that 40.1% of the population frequently purchased National Milling products, 25.2% occasionally purchased products, 17.6% rarely purchased products and 17.1% always purchased products before the implementation of digital marketing. The chart below depicts the outcome of the findings from the questionnaire.



Source: Author's Illustration

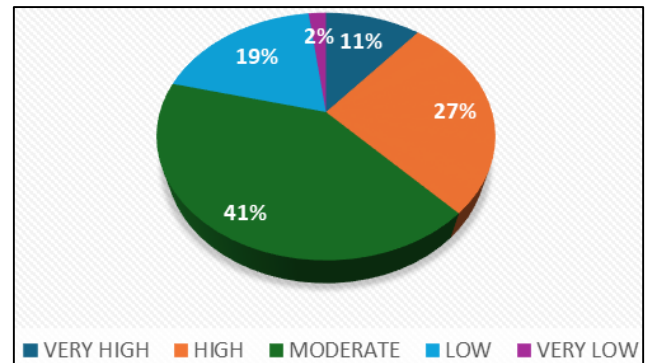
Fig 5: Purchase Frequency Before Digital Marketing

Brand Awareness Prior Digital Marketing

Brand awareness refers to how aware customers and potential customers are of a business and its products [20]. With regard to the study, brand awareness will refer to existing and potential customer knowledge of National Milling products prior to the introduction of digital marketing.

From the questionnaire, it was established that 10.7% of the population had a very high awareness, 26.7% had a high awareness, 41.2% had a moderate, 19.3% had a low awareness and 2.1% had a very low awareness of the National Milling Brands. The chart below depicts the findings from the

questionnaire.



Source: Author's Illustration

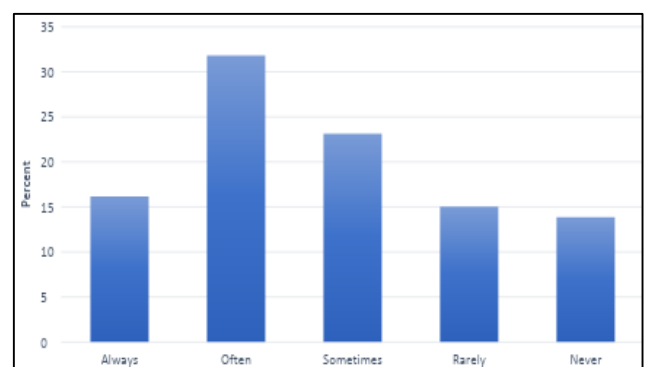
Fig 6: Brand Awareness Before Digital Marketing

Post Digital Marketing

The implementation of digital marketing at National Milling Corporation has had an impact on several aspects of the business, including customer engagement, perception and purchasing behaviour/frequency and brand awareness. The questionnaire and interview guide explored these aspects to established the impact of digital marketing on National Milling Corporation.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is the ongoing interaction and relationship between a customer and a brand or company extending beyond a single transaction. Customer engagement is often characterized by a customer's active involvement and emotional investment to a particular company or brand [21]. From the questionnaire it was established that 16.2% of the population have high engagement with digital content, 31.8% of the population indicated that they often engagement with digital content, 23.1% indicated that they sometimes engage with digital content, 15% of the population indicated that they rarely engage with digital content and 13.9% indicated that they have never engaged with digital content from National Milling. The chart below depicts the responses from the questionnaire.



Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 7: Customer Engagement After Digital Marketing

Digital marketing has a positive impact on customer engagement. The findings above coincide with several studies conducted that depict a positive relationship between digital marketing and customer engagement. Digital marketing impacts customer engagement in a positive manner such as impacting customer purchase intentions [22]. Furthermore, digital marketing has a positive impact on

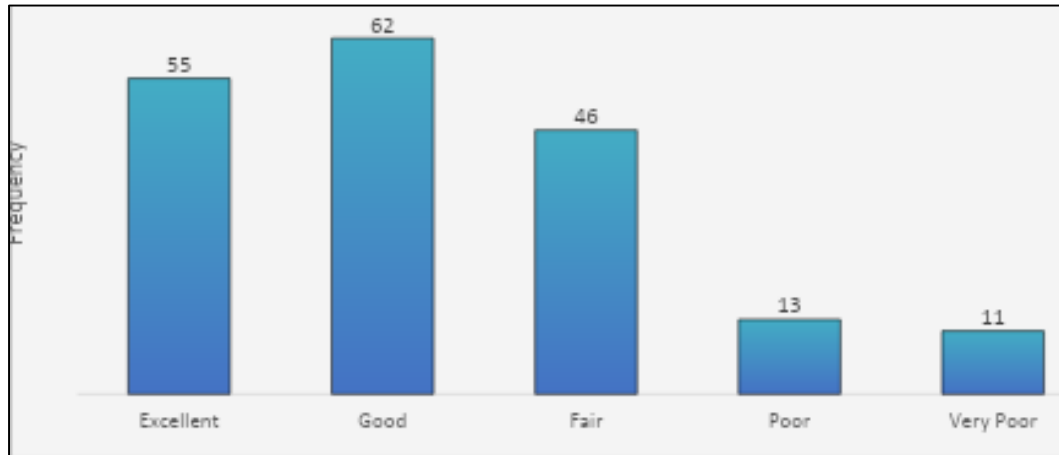
customer experience which often impacts customer retention [23].

Consumer Perception of Digital Marketing

Customer perception refers to customer beliefs formed about a brand, product or a service [24]. In the context the study, customer perception was assessed by evaluating customer opinions on the informative nature of National Milling's

digital marketing content.

From the questionnaire it was established that 29.4% of the population described the informative nature of National Milling's digital marketing as excellent, 33.2% described it as good, 24.6% described it as fair, 7% described it as poor and 5.9% described it as very poor. The chart below depicts the responses received from the questionnaire.



Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 8: Customer Perception

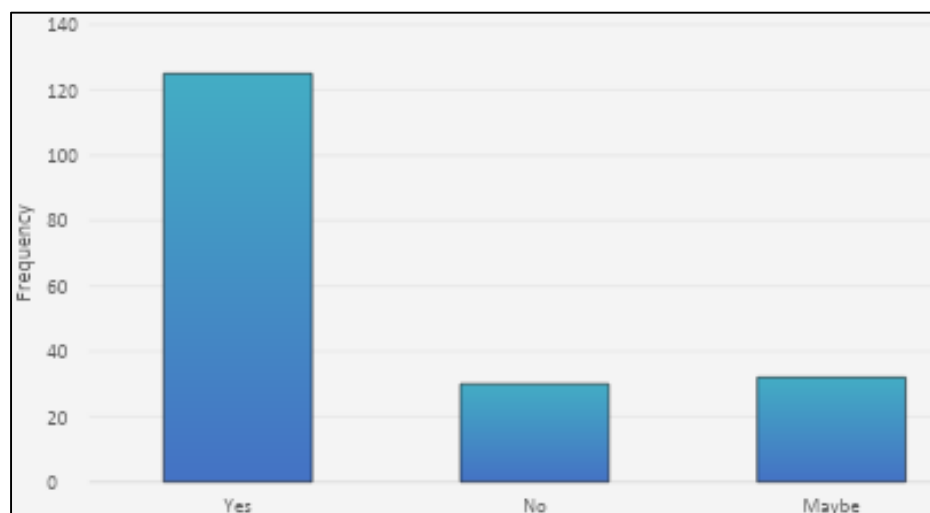
Digital marketing has an influence on information availability and consumption. The implementation of digital marketing to provide information to clients across a specified range can in most cases be advantageous to those implementing it as well as those that seek knowledge through information about the product or service [25].

Consumer Purchase Behaviour

Customer purchase behaviour refers to the actions, decisions,

and processes individuals go through when selecting, buying, using, and disposing of products or services to satisfy their needs and wants (Duffet, 2015).

From the questionnaire, it was established that 66.8% of the population suggested that National Milling's digital content had an impact on their purchasing behaviour, 17% suggested that it may have had an impact and 16% suggested that it did not have an impact on their purchasing behaviour.



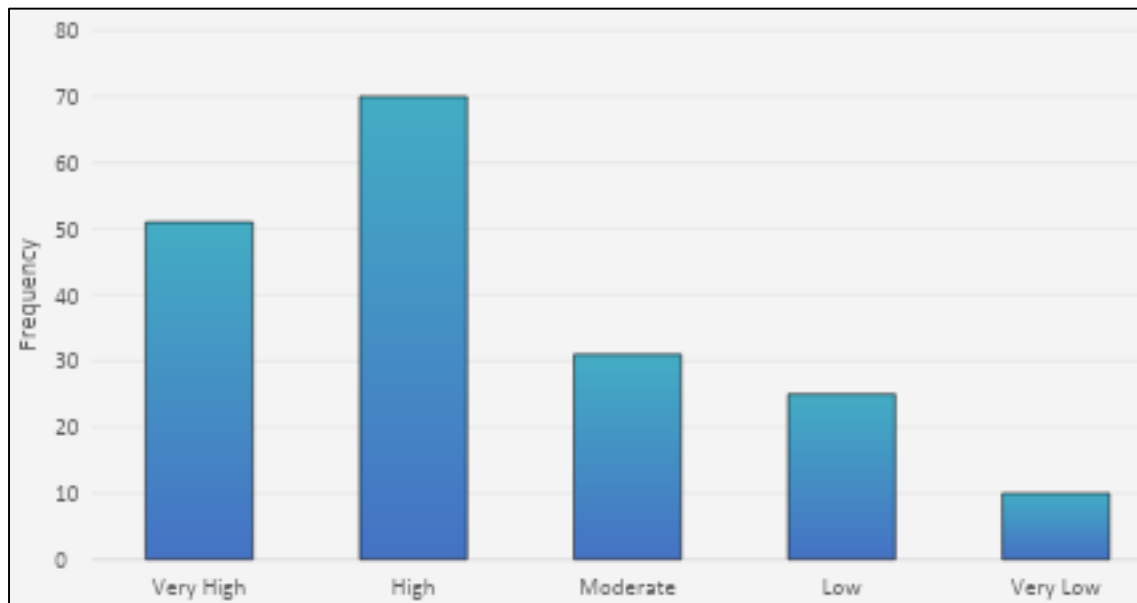
Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 9: Consumer Purchase Behaviour

Brand Awareness Post Digital Marketing

Brand awareness is the extent to which consumers are familiar with the qualities or image of a particular brand of goods or services [27]. In the context of the study, brand awareness refers to customers knowledge of multiple brands that are offered by National Milling outside the ones frequently purchased by them.

From the questionnaire, it was established that after the implementation of digital marketing 27.3% of the population had a very high brand awareness of National Milling brands, 37.4% had a high awareness, 16.6% had moderate awareness, 13.4% had low brand awareness and 5.3% had very low brand awareness. The chart below depicts the responses from the questionnaire.



Source: Author's Illustration

Fig 10: Brand Awareness After Digital Marketing Implementation

Digital marketing is important as it has a high impact on brand awareness. Customers and potential customers often engage with a company's marketing content and establish a reasonable sense of brand awareness. It is imperative to utilize digital marketing to raise brand awareness ^[28].

Digital Marketing Integration by National Milling

Findings from the interview revealed that 36% of respondents indicated that digital marketing has been implemented at National Milling Corporation for approximately five years. Additionally, 29% reported a duration of four years, while 28% cited three years. A smaller proportion, 7%, noted that digital marketing initiatives had been in place for two years. These variations suggest a progressive integration of digital marketing practices over time, reflecting differing levels of awareness or departmental involvement among employees.

Digital Marketing Tools Employed

The findings revealed that the primary digital marketing platforms utilized by National Milling Zambia are Facebook, WhatsApp, and, to a lesser extent, LinkedIn. Facebook emerged as the most dominant and widely used platform, consistently cited by respondents as highly effective for promotions, customer engagement, and gathering feedback. WhatsApp was also highlighted as a key tool, particularly valued for its ability to facilitate direct communication with customers, share promotional content, and respond to queries quickly and personally. While not as prevalent, LinkedIn was mentioned by a few participants, such as the bakery specialist and depot assistant, as a platform for professional outreach and business-to-business (B2B) engagement. These findings support the overarching theme of "Dominance of Social Media", with Facebook and WhatsApp forming the backbone of National Milling Zambia's digital marketing efforts due to their accessibility and widespread usage across the country. The finding has been illustrated in the chart below.

The effectiveness of Digital Marketing Tools in Influencing Purchase Decision

The findings of the study revealed several significant insights into the impact of digital marketing on consumer behavior at

National Milling Corporation.

Increased Sales and Online Traffic

A number of respondents observed a clear link between social media promotions such as price reductions and product launches and increased sales volumes. One Depot Supervisor noted, "Customers make buying decisions right after seeing our social media posts," highlighting the immediacy of consumer response to digital campaigns.

Customer Feedback and Engagement

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, were found to facilitate real-time feedback, thereby enhancing product visibility and responsiveness to consumer needs. As stated by a Sales Representative, "Customers share views and opinions, helping us refine offerings," underscoring the role of digital platforms in creating a continuous feedback loop.

Identified Challenges

Despite the noted benefits, the effectiveness of digital marketing efforts was hindered by several challenges. Technical barriers such as limited internet connectivity and a lack of internal digital marketing expertise affected consistency in campaign execution. Additionally, inadequate management support both in terms of financial resources and logistical capacity was cited as a limiting factor in scaling up digital marketing initiatives.

Emerging Themes

Two dominant themes emerged from the analysis. First, although digital marketing tools demonstrated high impact, their potential remains underutilized due to infrastructural and organizational constraints. There was a clear shift from passive, one-directional communication characteristic of traditional media, to active, two-way engagement enabled by digital platforms. Second, promotional content, especially time-sensitive offers like discounts, proved particularly effective in prompting consumer action. The adoption of digital tools contributed to the geographical expansion of marketing reach, allowing the company to connect with consumers beyond urban centers, including those in

previously underserved regions.

Comparison of Consumer Behaviour Pre Vs Post-Digital Marketing

A comparative analysis of the marketing landscape at National Milling Corporation before and after the adoption of digital marketing pre-vs. post reveals a significant transformation in customer engagement and communication dynamics.

Pre-Digital Era

During this period, the company primarily relied on traditional media channels such as television, radio, and print advertisements. While these platforms offered some level of visibility, they fostered limited consumer interaction and often failed to provide sufficient product awareness. One marketing staff member remarked, "Coverage wasn't

Discussion

This study examined consumer behavior towards National Milling Corporation (NMC) products before and after the adoption of digital marketing strategies. The results demonstrate a clear shift in consumer engagement, purchasing behavior, and brand awareness facilitated by digital marketing interventions.

Pre-Digital Marketing Consumer Behavior

Before the implementation of digital marketing, consumer engagement with NMC was predominantly through traditional media channels. Radio emerged as the most influential medium, reaching 31% of consumers, reflecting its continued relevance in areas with lower internet access and among lower-income populations. This supports Kotler and Keller's (2016) assertion on radio's mass communication effectiveness, particularly in peri-urban and rural contexts. Additionally, word-of-mouth (WOM) and in-store promotions played significant roles, underscoring the importance of peer recommendations and point-of-sale.

However, traditional advertising had limitations. Brand awareness was moderate, with only 10.7% of respondents having very high awareness levels, indicating that traditional media's one-way communication and limited reach constrained comprehensive brand knowledge. Consumer purchasing was somewhat variable, with a notable portion only occasionally engaging with the brand, illustrating moderate brand loyalty but potential for deeper market penetration.

Post-Digital Marketing Consumer Behavior

Following the adoption of digital marketing, especially leveraging platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, consumer engagement markedly increased. Results revealed that 71.1% of respondents engaged with digital content at least occasionally, demonstrating that digital media platforms enable more dynamic, personalized, and interactive consumer-brand interactions. This aligns with Tiago and Veríssimo^[4] and Kaplan and Haenlein^[29], who emphasize digital marketing's capacity to foster two-way communication and enhance emotional and behavioral brand investment.

Brand awareness also improved significantly post-digital adoption. Very high awareness nearly tripled to 27.3%, reflecting the amplified brand visibility afforded by repeated, targeted digital content exposures in social media

environments. This substantiates Bilgin's^[28] argument on the role of digital marketing in strengthening brand equity through enhanced recall and brand association. Regarding purchasing behavior, 66.8% acknowledged digital content influenced their buying decisions, highlighting digital marketing's effectiveness in shaping FMCG consumer choices through immediacy, visual appeal, and interactivity, corroborating Duffett^[26]. This evidence illustrates a positive transformation in consumer responsiveness facilitated by digital platforms.

Post-Digital Era

Following the integration of digital marketing platforms, the company experienced a marked improvement in real-time communication and customer outreach. Social media channels, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, enabled instant responses to customer queries and facilitated broader dissemination of product information. A respondent in the marketing department noted, "Coverage widened; customers learned product functions quickly." Additionally, customer engagement became more dynamic, with increased interaction through comments, shares, and user-generated content, signifying a shift towards participatory marketing

environments. This substantiates Bilgin's^[28] argument on the role of digital marketing in strengthening brand equity through enhanced recall and brand association.

Regarding purchasing behavior, 66.8% acknowledged digital content influenced their buying decisions, highlighting digital marketing's effectiveness in shaping FMCG consumer choices through immediacy, visual appeal, and interactivity, corroborating Duffett^[26]. This evidence illustrates a positive transformation in consumer responsiveness facilitated by digital platforms.

Significance of the Study

This study provides crucial empirical evidence on the impact of digital marketing on consumer behavior within Zambia's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, a rapidly evolving and competitive market. The insights gained are valuable for National Milling Zambia in optimizing digital marketing strategies and improving return on investment. Additionally, the findings offer practical guidance for marketing professionals, policymakers, and educators in Zambia and similar developing economies. The study supports key United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by promoting digital innovation, economic growth, and responsible consumption. Academically, it addresses a significant gap by exploring consumer engagement before and after digital marketing adoption, thereby enriching marketing theory in a developing country context.

Limitations

This study's focus on a single company, National Milling Zambia, may limit the generalizability of findings across the broader FMCG sector due to firm-specific factors. The reliance on self-reported consumer data introduces potential recall and social desirability biases, which may affect the accuracy of responses. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures consumer behavior at one point in time, restricting insights into long-term effects and evolving trends related to digital marketing adoption.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this research, it can be concluded that digital marketing is an effective and strategic tool for enhancing consumer engagement, brand visibility, and sales growth in the FMCG sector, making its integration essential for sustained competitiveness.

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