

E-Marketing and Customer Retention in Emerging Markets: Evidence from Zambia's ICT Sector

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of e-marketing strategies on customer retention, focusing on NECOR Zambia Limited within the Lusaka District. Drawing on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) theory, Relationship Marketing Theory, and the Resource-Based View (RBV), the study examines how digital marketing practices influence customer loyalty in an emerging market context. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were collected from 142 customers and 10 employees using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using regression analysis, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that e-marketing significantly enhances customer retention, with email marketing and personalized digital communication emerging as key drivers. Regression results confirm that alignment between digital marketing strategies and customer preferences positively influences retention, while misalignment negatively affects customer loyalty. However, challenges such as resource constraints, pricing competition, and digital resistance limit effectiveness. The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from a developing economy and highlighting the moderating role of contextual factors. It recommends integrated multi-channel strategies, investment in digital capabilities, and enhanced customer engagement to improve retention outcomes.

1. Introduction and Background

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way organizations interact with customers, shifting marketing from transactional exchanges to continuous, data-driven engagement. In contemporary markets, characterized by heightened competition and increased customer expectations, firms are under pressure to develop innovative strategies that not only attract but also retain customers. As a result, customer retention has emerged as a critical determinant of long-term organizational performance and profitability (Kotler, Keller, & Chernev, 2022; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

E-marketing—defined as the use of digital platforms such as social media, email, search engines, and websites to promote products and engage customers—has become a central tool in achieving customer retention. Recent studies highlight that digital marketing enhances customer experience through personalization, interactivity, and real-time communication, thereby strengthening customer relationships and loyalty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tuten & Solomon, 2021). Furthermore, advancements in data analytics have enabled firms to tailor marketing content to individual preferences, significantly improving engagement and retention outcomes (Wang et al., 2023; Kumar & Reinartz, 2018).

Customer retention remains more cost-effective than customer acquisition, with empirical evidence suggesting that a modest increase in retention rates can significantly boost profitability (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). In emerging markets such as Zambia, where firms operate under resource constraints and increasing competition, the strategic use of e-marketing is particularly important. The growth in internet penetration and mobile connectivity—evidenced by rising digital subscriptions—has expanded opportunities for firms to engage customers through digital channels. However, despite these developments, many organizations struggle to fully exploit e-marketing capabilities for sustained customer retention.

While global literature increasingly demonstrates the positive relationship between e-marketing and customer retention, empirical evidence from developing economies, particularly Zambia, remains limited. This gap underscores the need for context-specific studies that examine how digital marketing strategies influence customer loyalty, satisfaction, and repeat purchasing behaviour. This study therefore investigates the effects of e-marketing on customer retention, focusing on NECOR Zambia Limited as a case to provide insights into the practical application of digital marketing strategies in a developing economy context.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid growth of digital connectivity in Zambia, the effective use of e-marketing for customer retention remains limited. Internet subscriptions increased from approximately 10.4 million in 2021 to 11.1 million in 2022 (ZICTA, 2022), creating significant opportunities for digital customer engagement. However, evidence shows that about 58% of businesses are not fully utilizing digital marketing tools (PwC, 2021), suggesting a gap between digital adoption and effective implementation.

While global studies demonstrate that e-marketing enhances customer retention and loyalty, there is limited empirical evidence within the Zambian context, particularly in sectors such as ICT. Firms like NECOR Zambia Limited continue to face challenges in integrating e-marketing strategies, resulting in suboptimal customer engagement and potential loss of repeat business. Additionally, factors such as pricing competition, limited digital capabilities, and weak integration of marketing channels may further undermine retention efforts.

Therefore, there is a need to empirically examine the effect of e-marketing strategies on customer retention in Zambia. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing how digital marketing practices influence customer loyalty and retention at NECOR Zambia Limited.

2. Literature and Theoretical Review

2.1 Previous Studies

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed how organizations interact with customers, shifting marketing from transactional exchanges to more interactive, personalized, and relationship-driven approaches. In increasingly competitive environments, firms are compelled to adopt innovative strategies to maintain and strengthen their customer base. One such strategy is the development of long-term customer relationships, which has been widely recognized as critical for organizational sustainability (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Kotler et al., 2022).

E-marketing, defined as the use of digital platforms such as social media, email, websites, and search engines to engage customers, has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing customer retention. It enables firms to deliver targeted, real-time, and personalized communication that improves customer experience and fosters loyalty (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). The increasing reliance on digital technologies has further strengthened the role of e-marketing in facilitating continuous interaction and trust-building between firms and their customers (Tuten & Solomon, 2021).

Customer retention refers to a firm's ability to sustain ongoing relationships with its customers, encouraging repeat purchases and long-term engagement. Prior studies have consistently demonstrated that retaining customers is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, with small improvements in retention rates yielding substantial increases in profitability (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). In digital contexts, customer retention is influenced by factors such as service quality, personalization, responsiveness, and customer engagement across multiple touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The relationship between e-marketing and customer retention is supported by several theoretical perspectives. Relationship marketing theory emphasizes trust, commitment, and continuous interaction as key drivers of customer loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Similarly, the resource-based view suggests that firms that develop strong digital marketing capabilities can achieve sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). In addition, service-dominant logic highlights the importance of co-creating value with customers through interactive engagement, which is increasingly enabled by digital platforms (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Empirical studies provide substantial evidence on the effectiveness of e-marketing in enhancing customer retention. Digital marketing strategies such as email marketing, social media engagement, and search engine optimization have been shown to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty by enabling personalized and interactive communication (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, customer engagement through digital platforms has been identified as a key mediator between marketing efforts and retention outcomes (Hollebeek et al., 2022).

In emerging economies, including Zambia, the adoption of e-marketing has been driven by increased internet penetration and mobile connectivity. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is often constrained by infrastructural limitations, limited digital capabilities, and resource challenges. While businesses are increasingly adopting digital marketing tools, many struggle with their integration and strategic application for customer retention.

Recent studies in the Zambian context reinforce the importance of customer-centric strategies in driving retention outcomes. Sinkala (2023) demonstrates that customer retention in service-oriented organizations is significantly influenced by service quality, effective communication, and overall customer experience. The study further highlights that integrating digital marketing tools with traditional marketing approaches enhances customer engagement and strengthens loyalty. This aligns with global evidence that emphasizes the role of e-marketing in building sustainable customer relationships when effectively implemented.

Despite these insights, there remains limited empirical research examining the specific impact of e-marketing strategies on customer retention in Zambia, particularly at the firm level. Most existing studies are concentrated in developed economies, limiting their applicability to developing contexts. Additionally, there is insufficient understanding of how contextual factors such as competition, pricing pressures, and digital capability influence the effectiveness of e-marketing strategies.

This study addresses this gap by examining the effects of e-marketing on customer retention within the Zambian ICT sector, with a focus on NECOR Zambia Limited. By providing context-specific insights, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital marketing and customer retention in emerging markets.

2.2 Theoretical frameworks

This study is grounded in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Theory, Relationship Marketing Theory, and the Resource-Based View (RBV).

CRM theory emphasizes the strategic use of customer data and interactions to enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention (Payne & Frow, 2005). In the context of e-marketing, CRM enables firms to personalize communication, improve responsiveness, and strengthen long-term customer relationships.

Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) further supports this study by emphasizing trust, commitment, and continuous engagement as key drivers of customer retention. E-marketing platforms facilitate these interactions through real-time communication and personalized engagement.

The Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) suggests that firms that develop superior digital marketing capabilities can achieve sustained competitive advantage. In this study, e-marketing strategies represent strategic resources that enhance customer retention.

Together, these theories provide a strong foundation for understanding how e-marketing strategies influence customer retention through engagement, personalization, and strategic alignment.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the relationship between e-marketing strategies and customer retention.

Variables

Independent Variables (E-Marketing Strategies)

- Email marketing
- Social media marketing
- Digital content updates
- Platform integration

Dependent Variable

- Customer retention (loyalty, duration, repeat purchase)

Moderating Variables

- Customer preferences
- Digital literacy
- Pricing competition
- Organizational capacity



Figure 1: Relationship between E-Marketing Strategies and Customer Retention with Moderating Variables (Source: Author, 2026).

3 Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between e-marketing strategies and customer retention. The quantitative component enabled statistical testing of relationships between variables, while the qualitative component provided deeper insights into organizational challenges and customer perceptions.

A descriptive and explanatory research design was employed. The descriptive aspect facilitated the identification of existing e-marketing practices, while the explanatory component examined causal relationships between e-marketing strategies and customer retention outcomes.

The study focused on NECOR Zambia Limited, an ICT firm operating in Lusaka. The target population comprised two groups: customers of NECOR and employees involved in e-marketing strategy implementation.

A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was used. Purposive sampling was applied to select marketing personnel with relevant expertise, while simple random sampling ensured representativeness among customers. The final sample consisted of 142 customers and 10 employees.

Model Specification

The study estimated the following regression model:

$$CR = \beta_0 + \beta_1 DM + \beta_2 DP + \epsilon$$

Where:

- CR = Customer Retention (duration/loyalty)
- DM = Digital marketing effectiveness
- DP = Digital platform preference alignment
- ϵ = Error term

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires captured quantitative data on customer perceptions and engagement, while interviews explored organizational challenges and implementation practices.

Validity and Reliability

The instrument was pre-tested to ensure clarity and consistency. Reliability was assessed using internal consistency measures, while content validity was ensured through alignment with existing literature and expert review.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of respondents.

4 Findings

4.1 E-Marketing Strategies Used by NECOR Zambia Limited

The study examined the types of e-marketing strategies employed by NECOR Zambia Limited. The results indicate that email marketing is the most dominant strategy, reported by 90% of respondents. Other practices include regular digital content updates (60%) and decentralized management of e-marketing activities (80%).

Table 1: E-Marketing Strategies Utilized

| Strategy | Frequency (n=10) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Email Marketing | 9 | 90% |
| Regular Digital Updates | 6 | 60% |
| Decentralized Marketing Approach | 8 | 80% |

4.2 Influence of E-Marketing on Customer Retention

Findings show that 90% of respondents believe e-marketing significantly influences customer retention, while 80% confirmed that NECOR personalizes its digital marketing efforts. Additionally, customer engagement is primarily monitored using email metrics (60%) and social media metrics (40%).

Table 2: Perceived Impact of E-Marketing on Retention

| Indicator | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| E-marketing improves retention | 9 | 90% |
| Personalization of marketing | 8 | 80% |
| Email metrics used | 6 | 60% |
| Social media metrics used | 4 | 40% |

4.3 Challenges in E-Marketing Implementation

The findings reveal several constraints affecting e-marketing effectiveness. Pricing competition (60%) emerged as the most significant challenge, followed by customer engagement difficulties (30%) and resource limitations.

Table 3: Challenges Affecting E-Marketing Effectiveness

| Challenge | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Pricing Competition | 6 | 60% |
| Customer Engagement Issues | 3 | 30% |
| Budget Constraints | Not quantified | Noted |
| Employee Resistance | Not quantified | Noted |
| Customer Resistance | Not quantified | Noted |

4.4 Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to determine the effect of digital marketing effectiveness and customer preferences on customer retention (measured by duration of customer relationship).

Table 4: ANOVA Results

| Source | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|---------|-------|
| Regression | 151.944 | 2 | 75.972 | 564.378 | 0.000 |
| Residual | 18.711 | 139 | 0.135 | | |
| Total | 170.655 | 141 | | | |

The model is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the independent variables significantly predict customer retention.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients (Bayesian Estimates)

| Variable | Coefficient | 95% CI Lower | 95% CI Upper |
|--|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Intercept | 4.436 | 4.280 | 4.592 |
| Digital Marketing Meets Customer Needs | 0.146 | 0.015 | 0.276 |
| Digital Tool Preference Misalignment | -0.756 | -0.803 | -0.709 |

4.5 Thematic Analysis

The qualitative component of the study sought to explore the challenges affecting the effectiveness of e-marketing strategies in enhancing customer retention at NECOR Zambia Limited. Thematic analysis generated three dominant themes: resource constraints, organizational resistance, and customer-related barriers. These themes provide deeper insights into the structural and behavioural factors that influence the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies.

Theme 1: Resource Constraints and Limited Digital Capacity

The findings reveal that limited financial resources significantly constrain the effectiveness of e-marketing strategies at NECOR Zambia Limited. Respondents indicated that budget limitations restrict access to advanced digital tools, data analytics platforms, and targeted advertising capabilities. As a result, the organization relies on basic digital approaches such as email campaigns and generic social media posts, which offer limited personalization and scalability.

This limitation reduces the firm's ability to implement data-driven marketing strategies, such as customer segmentation, automation, and A/B testing, which are critical for enhancing customer engagement and retention. The findings support existing literature which suggests that inadequate investment in digital infrastructure reduces the effectiveness of e-marketing in developing economies (Eze & Ndubisi, 2020). From a Resource-Based View perspective, limited digital capabilities weaken the firm's ability to leverage strategic resources for competitive advantage (Barney, 1991).

Theme 2: Organizational Resistance to Digital Transformation

The study identified employee resistance to change as a significant barrier to effective e-marketing implementation. Respondents highlighted that resistance is driven by factors such as lack of digital skills, fear of technological displacement, and insufficient training. This resistance delays the adoption of digital tools and undermines the effectiveness of e-marketing initiatives.

The findings suggest that without proper change management strategies, employees may disengage from digital transformation efforts, leading to inefficiencies in execution and reduced impact on customer retention. This aligns with CRM theory, which emphasizes the importance of internal alignment and organizational readiness in delivering effective customer engagement strategies (Payne & Frow, 2005). Furthermore, Sinkala (2023) highlights that organizational commitment and employee capability are critical determinants of successful customer retention strategies in service firms.

Theme 3: Customer Resistance and Digital Engagement Barriers

Customer resistance to digital platforms emerged as a key external challenge affecting e-marketing effectiveness. Respondents indicated that some customers prefer traditional communication methods due to limited digital literacy, privacy concerns, or lack of trust in digital systems. This resistance limits customer engagement and reduces the effectiveness of digital marketing campaigns.

The findings suggest that customer reluctance to adopt digital channels weakens the potential of e-marketing to enhance retention, particularly in markets where digital adoption is uneven. This is consistent with studies indicating that digital fatigue and trust concerns can reduce customer responsiveness to online marketing (Tuten & Solomon, 2021).

Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of trust and data security in influencing customer engagement. Measures such as compliance with regulatory frameworks, including the Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (2021), and the use of confidentiality practices such as non-disclosure agreements, were identified as critical in building customer trust. These practices align with relationship marketing theory, which emphasizes trust as a key driver of long-term customer relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Integrated Interpretation of Themes

The thematic findings collectively demonstrate that the effectiveness of e-marketing strategies in enhancing customer retention is not solely dependent on the availability of digital tools, but also on organizational readiness, resource capacity, and customer acceptance. While e-marketing provides significant opportunities for improving customer engagement, its impact is moderated by internal and external constraints.

These findings reinforce the conceptual framework of the study, which posits that e-marketing strategies influence customer retention, but their effectiveness is shaped by moderating variables such as digital literacy, organizational capacity, and market conditions.

Table 6: Summary of Thematic Findings

| Theme | Key Issue | Impact on Retention | Supporting Theory |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Resource Constraints | Limited budget & tools | Reduces personalization | RBV (Barney, 1991) |
| Organizational Resistance | Skills gaps, change resistance | Weakens execution | CRM Theory |
| Customer Resistance | Low digital trust/literacy | Limits engagement | Relationship Marketing |

4.6 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that e-marketing plays a significant role in enhancing customer retention at NECOR Zambia Limited. The dominance of email marketing (90%) suggests that the organization prioritizes cost-effective and direct communication channels. This finding is consistent with Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), who argue that email marketing remains a highly effective retention tool due to its personalization capabilities. However, reliance on a single dominant channel may limit the effectiveness of multi-channel engagement strategies, which are critical for sustained customer loyalty (Kumar & Shah, 2021).

The high level of perceived impact of e-marketing on customer retention (90%) confirms the strategic importance of digital marketing in building long-term customer relationships. The finding that 80% of respondents indicated personalized marketing aligns with existing literature emphasizing personalization as a key driver of customer loyalty (Wang et al., 2023). This also supports Customer Relationship Management (CRM) theory, which highlights the importance of tailoring marketing efforts to customer needs (Payne & Frow, 2005).

The regression results further reinforce these findings by demonstrating that digital marketing effectiveness significantly predicts customer retention (F

= 564.378, $p < 0.001$). The positive coefficient (0.146) indicates that aligning digital marketing with customer needs enhances retention. Conversely, the negative coefficient (-0.756) for digital tool misalignment suggests that failure to use customer-preferred platforms reduces retention. This highlights the importance of strategic alignment between marketing tools and customer expectations.

The study also identifies several challenges affecting e-marketing effectiveness. Pricing competition emerged as the most significant constraint, reflecting the highly competitive nature of the ICT sector. This finding aligns with Eze and Ndubisi (2020), who note that market competition and resource limitations hinder the effectiveness of digital marketing in African contexts. Additionally, customer resistance to digital platforms and limited organizational resources further constrain engagement, supporting findings by Tuten and Solomon (2021) on digital fatigue and adoption barriers.

The qualitative findings provide deeper insights into these challenges, highlighting issues such as budget constraints, employee resistance, and customer reluctance to adopt digital channels. These factors collectively undermine the effectiveness of e-marketing strategies and limit their potential to enhance customer retention.

Overall, the findings support the conceptual framework of the study, confirming that e-marketing strategies significantly influence customer retention, but their effectiveness is moderated by organizational and market-related factors. The results also align with the work of Sinkala (2023), which emphasizes the importance of service quality, communication, and customer-centric strategies in enhancing retention within the Zambian context.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study examined the effects of e-marketing strategies on customer retention at NECOR Zambia Limited within the Lusaka District. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that e-marketing plays a significant role in enhancing customer retention, primarily through improved communication, personalization, and customer engagement.

The study established that email marketing is the most dominant digital strategy employed by NECOR, reflecting its cost-effectiveness and direct communication advantages. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that personalized e-marketing efforts significantly contribute to customer loyalty and retention, reinforcing the importance of customer-centric marketing approaches. The regression results confirm that alignment between digital marketing strategies and customer needs is a key determinant of retention, while misalignment negatively affects customer loyalty.

However, the study also identified several constraints that limit the effectiveness of e-marketing strategies. These include intense pricing competition, limited financial resources, employee resistance to digital transformation, and customer reluctance to adopt digital platforms. These challenges highlight that while e-marketing is a critical tool for customer retention, its effectiveness depends on organizational readiness, strategic integration, and market conditions.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital marketing in emerging economies by providing context-specific evidence from Zambia. It confirms that e-marketing enhances customer retention, but its success is contingent upon effective implementation, technological alignment, and continuous customer engagement.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Managerial Recommendations

- Adopt an Integrated Multi-Channel E-Marketing Strategy
- NECOR Zambia Limited should diversify beyond email marketing by integrating social media, mobile platforms, and search engine marketing. A coordinated multi-channel approach will enhance customer reach, engagement, and retention.
- Strengthen Personalization through Data Analytics
- The company should invest in advanced customer data analytics tools to better understand customer preferences and tailor marketing content accordingly. Personalized communication has been shown to significantly improve customer loyalty.
- Align Digital Marketing Tools with Customer Preferences
- Given the negative impact of tool misalignment, NECOR should adopt customer-preferred platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to enhance engagement and retention.
- Enhance Customer Engagement Mechanisms

NECOR should improve responsiveness to customer feedback, increase interactive content, and implement loyalty programs to strengthen long-term relationships.

Organizational Recommendations

- Invest in Digital Capacity and Infrastructure: The company should allocate adequate resources toward digital marketing technologies, including automation tools, CRM systems, and analytics platforms.
- Address Employee Resistance through Training and Change Management: Management should implement continuous training programmes to enhance employees' digital competencies and reduce resistance to technological change.
- Develop a Clear Digital Marketing Strategy Framework: A structured and organization-wide digital marketing strategy should be developed to ensure consistency, integration, and alignment with business objectives.

Policy and Industry Recommendations

- Promote Digital Literacy and Customer Awareness: Organizations and policymakers should invest in digital literacy programmes to encourage

customer adoption of e-marketing platforms.

- Enhance Regulatory Support for Digital Marketing Practices: Compliance with data protection laws such as the Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (2021) should be strengthened to build customer trust and confidence in digital platforms.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Expand to Other Sectors and Firms: Future studies should examine the effects of e-marketing on customer retention across different industries in Zambia to improve generalizability.
- Incorporate Longitudinal Research Designs: Further research should adopt longitudinal approaches to assess the long-term impact of e-marketing strategies on customer retention.
- Examine Moderating Variables: Future studies should explore factors such as digital literacy, customer trust, and technological infrastructure as moderating variables influencing e-marketing effectiveness.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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