

The role of digital marketing in promoting sustainable tourism during COVID-19 in Lusaka, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the global tourism industry. This crisis has highlighted how dependent tourism businesses were on face-to-face interactions, physical travel arrangements, and conventional marketing methods. Because of these dependencies, the industry became highly vulnerable to sudden disruptions. In Zambia, the situation was extremely hard in Lusaka, which is the country's main center of administration, trade, urban tourism, and business travel. Measures such as restriction of movement, bans on gatherings, and social distancing severely reduced the visibility of the destination and the weakening of the relationship with potential tourists. Consequently, many tourism businesses ended up operating at reduced capacity, while some even closed down. This research, based on dynamic capabilities theory with the help of PESTEL analysis, examined how tourism companies digitally discover opportunities and change their marketing practices after COVID-19. It also looked at which digital marketing means are being used to motivate destinations and promote business resilience and continuity. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used, aiming at 230 stakeholders including tourism operators, digital marketers, policymakers, and domestic tourists. 119 materials were validly returned based on purposive and convenience sampling. Quantitative data was statistically analyzed by descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, correlation, and regression analysis in SPSS, whereas qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The results pointed out that during the pandemic, digital marketing turned out to be a critical survival and adaptation tool. Over 70% of the people surveyed reported using online platforms to keep up their visibility and customer interaction. Facebook was at the top of the list with 78%, then WhatsApp with 72%, and Instagram with 61%. Approximately 72% said that they communicated and engaged with the market better, and 68% stated that digital marketing helped to make their business more resilient during the crisis. But only 35% took advantage of advanced tools like analytics, influencer marketing, and virtual tours, which suggests limited digital proficiency. The share of those incorporating sustainability messages into their digital content was below 40%. The main problems were the expensive data, as indicated by 76% of the respondents; lack of digital skills, by 64%; and unstable internet connectivity, by 58%, among others. The article's final decision is that although digital marketing has played a major role in improving visibility, engagement, and short-term resilience, it is still not a sufficient gear for long-term, sustainable tourism development because of structural, financial, and skills-related barriers. It is also imperative to ensure better digital capacity, upgrade internet infrastructural facilities, and put in place sustainability strategies to meet the needs of a better tourism sector in Zambia and resilience-building outcomes.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Marketing, Lusaka, Sustainability, Tourism Promotion, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism continues to play a vital role in our national development. It generates employment, earns foreign exchange, boost businesses, and distributes economic activities in various regions. Its significance extends beyond what tourists spend directly. Tourism brings benefits to transport, accommodation, food services: cultural, entertainment and heritage conservation thereby providing even larger benefits to the economy (Boniface et al., 2016; Quintana, 2020). Until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was seen as a logical economic diversification move by numerous developing nations. Zambia followed this path. Wildlife tourism, cultural tourism, leisure travel and business tourism were putting the sector on a global visibility track. Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events (MICE) were also becoming an important part of the tourism economy (Andrew et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the world's growth in tourism, as it introduced several impediments such as travel bans and health concerns to the market, leading to low demand. As a result, many countries experienced important declines in their revenues. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2020), witnessed a sharp drop of 72% in international tourist arrivals due to the global health crisis. Hall et al., (2020) supported this with their report which highlighted that the sharp decline was also as a result of lockdowns, travel bans and social distancing measures, to minimize human interactions, spread of the virus, as well as to save lives.

In Zambia, the sector was also heavily affected as its contribution to GDP fell from 9.8% in 2019 to 5.8% in 2021. The number of tourist arrivals also decreased from 1.27 million in 2019 to 554,000 in 2021, according to the statistics made available from the Ministry of Tourism.

Lusaka, being the capital city of Zambia, has been considered the main destination for business trips, conferences, workshops and meetings. These were halted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to very low occupancy rates by hotels and lodges across the country, especially those located in Lusaka. This finally caused loss of revenue among event organisers, hotels, lodges and travel agencies. Also, during this period, these organisations did not know when they were going to resume full operations, forcing them to change the manner of how they communicated with potential clients.

Due to lockdown and travel bans, printed brochures, flyers and posters had no value as people stopped to go outside to seek information. Digital technologies such as phones, computers and social media were utilised to help communication and marketing of services. Therefore, the pandemic made digital technologies the best platform to deliver and receive information. Digital marketing has evolved from a tactical option to be used when resources allow to a needed medium for tourism businesses and destinations that seek visibility and reach their customers. The use of online platforms such as social media, websites, online advertising, digital content and influencer engagement has become key for marketing tourism in Africa. This was especially obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic, with tourism businesses and destinations relying on online marketing for effective communication and sharing safety information with potential tourists who planned to travel when restrictions were eased (Tsiakali, 2018). According to Sigala (2020) and the UNWTO (2020), the effectiveness of digital marketing depends on many factors, both internal and external to the enterprise. Examples of internal factors include enterprise's skills and availability of internet services, while external factors include the affordability of data bundles, presence of digital infrastructure and institutional support for entrepreneurship and innovation in tourism (Gretzel, 2018; Nyambo et al., 2024).

For enterprises in Lusaka, challenges in utilising digital marketing effectively include access to internet, cost of data bundles, limited digital skills in using advanced tools, such as analytics (Chicha & Phiri, 2024). Utilisation of digital marketing tools, such as Facebook and WhatsApp in sharing content and utilising data should not be confused with the presence of internet technology. Instead, the enterprises need a combination of tools, skills and support to transform digitally from the use of digital technologies to making sense of data collected to use to attract and retain customers for better results. However, digital adoption is not the same as digital transformation, especially among small tourism enterprises with limited resources.

This study relates to sustainable tourism, which can be achieved through the enhancement of economic benefits alongside cultural keeping, community involvement and ecological integrity (Quintana, 2020; Roblek et al., 2021). Digital marketing is often regarded as a tool that can sustain local culture while promoting responsible travel practices and community-based tourism initiatives, fostering tourist comprehension of a given destination (So et al., 2021; Stankov et al., 2020). Nevertheless, high levels of visibility, engagement (e.g., likes, shares) and conversions into customers do not necessarily translate into long-term sustainability. Instead, they seem to prioritize short-term metrics. The study explores this gap in setting of digital tourism marketers in Lusaka, where the ultimate goal has been survival amid COVID-19 but should extend to promoting sustainable tourism values. How has the implementation of digital marketing strategies benefited tourism enterprises in Lusaka both in terms of business continuity and the inculcation of sustainable tourism values?

Existing studies give useful insights into digital tourism marketing, crisis recovery, and tourism resilience. But much of this research comes from countries with stronger digital systems, better infrastructure, and better-organized tourism institutions (Hall et al., 2020; Christou et al., 2025). Not enough is known about how tourism businesses in Lusaka used digital marketing during the pandemic. It's also unclear which tools worked best under local conditions, or whether these tools helped with business resilience and sustainable tourism promotion. That creates both a practical and a theoretical gap. We need to understand how tourism firms in resource-limited settings adapt when they face sudden shocks and have little room to innovate.

This study fills that gap. It refuses to treat digital marketing as merely a technical or promotional task. Instead, it frames digital marketing as a strategic reaction to crisis. Dynamic Capabilities Theory guides this work—it shows how organizations sense changes, seize new opportunities, and reshape their resources when times get hard. The PESTEL framework also supports the analysis by clarifying the political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal forces that shaped tourism during COVID-19. So the study digs into three core issues: which digital marketing tools tourism businesses in Lusaka adopted during the pandemic, how well those tools boosted visibility and business resilience, and whether digital marketing practices actually helped support sustainable tourism principles. This direction matches the attached dissertation, which builds the study around digital marketing, sustainable tourism promotion, COVID-19, and Lusaka.

1.1 Research Objectives

- i. To identify the digital marketing tools adopted by tourism businesses in Lusaka during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- ii. To evaluate the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in enhancing destination visibility and business resilience;
- iii. To assess the alignment between digital marketing practices and sustainable tourism principles within Lusaka.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

According to Teece (2018), Dynamic Capabilities Theory essentially involves a firm's skill in perceiving and then acting on opportunities, followed by the rearrangement of its internal and external resources. Therefore, in the context of this research, Dynamic Capabilities Theory provides insight into how Lusaka adjusted its marketing actions to accommodate the unprecedented COVID-19 situation. Specifically, the theory captures how these businesses adjusted to using digital marketing tools and communicating with customers in new ways. Traditional resource-based theories focus on the assets a firm possesses (Peteraf & Tsoukas, 2017). Dynamic Capabilities Theory is different because it focuses on how a firm deploys its resources and adapts them as changes occur in the environment (Teece, 2018; Peteraf & Tsoukas, 2017). Therefore, this theory was selected because COVID-19 brought about situations that no tourism business could have predicted or prepared for. Resources that were considered sufficient before, suddenly became inadequate when the pandemic hit. Businesses had to act fast, think outside of the box, and seek alternative ways of reaching their customers.

Sensing, seizing and reconfiguring are the three processes through which Dynamic Capabilities are used in this study. Sensing is the ability of a business to recognise changes that are occurring in the market. When COVID hit, many travelers became cautious. They needed fast communication, safety updates and reliable means of reaching their destination. Most consumers also took to digital platforms when considering traveling. Tourism businesses that sensed these changes were then able to cater for these new customer needs. Seizing is the ability to take advantage of changes that have been sensed. In this study, it is demonstrated by the use of social media tools like online contests, influencer marketing and the implementation of virtual tours.

It is not necessarily true that using digital platforms equals having effective digital marketing strategies. A lot of people who only used digital channels during the pandemic did it as a last resort. On the other hand, there are businesses that craft very strategically their use of social media to better interact with their customers, gain customer trust and keep their products visible in the market.

Refining or adjusting is the more intensive level of change. It demands changing the internal workings, upgrading staff abilities, redistributing resources, and discovering new methods of operation. In tourism marketing, for example, it could be using data to support decisions, digital content planning, online customer service enhancement, or digital campaign linking with sustainability message. As such, this is the most challenging phase because it does not only entail merely setting up a Facebook page or greeting people on WhatsApp but changes the entire organisation fundamentally. Literature review indicates that although many companies adopt digital tools, just a few turn their operations into a significant transformation (Gretzel, 2018).

This is a major concern for Lusaka, where, according to Nyambo et al. (2024), a number of tourism businesses suffer from very high cost of data, lack of digital skills, unreliable internet connection, and poor access to sophisticated digital tools. One of the manifestations of these challenges is the extent to which businesses limit their ability to sense, seize and reconfigure operations. In that case, Dynamic Capabilities Theory remains valuable, but only if it is applied with the utmost consideration. It can explain how a company can continue to function during a crisis, but it should not overlook the external barrier that smaller and medium-sized tourism enterprises face. Hence, to this end, the study also utilizes the PESTEL framework to focus on how broader political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors influenced digital marketing adoptions during the COVID-19 times.

2.1.2 Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal (PESTEL) Framework

PESTEL, which is an abbreviation for Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal, as described by Karadzhov and Yuleva-Chuchulayna (2024), is a model that helps explore the broader external environment wherein which organizations exist. Essentially, through the integration of the PESTEL analysis with Dynamic Capabilities Theory, this paper explains how the external factors influenced the adoption of digital marketing in Lusaka under the pandemic situation. A company is deeply linked with the environment around it and one of the variances in its decision making can be policies of the government, market conditions, consumer behavior, and advancements of technology, environmental concerns, and legal requirements that need to be met. With this view, PESTEL in this research facilitates looking beyond the internal capabilities of tourism and into a broader context of environmental factors that made these businesses operate.

The political factor looks at the role of government, the policies implemented, and the support given by institutions. The tourism industry was closely impacted by the government's measures during the COVID-19 period. Restrictions on travelling, closing large events and other health measures, all contributed to the decrease in tourist movement. They also tried to promote tourism in the country which helped the sector. Nevertheless, according to Chicha and Phiri (2024), these minor efforts were not enough to address the issue of lack of digital skills which was hindering

the tourism businesses. In fact, a number of tourism businesses were still not equipped for their digital transformation. Therefore, one could say that policy support had its place but it alone cannot create a strong and inclusive digital tourism environment.

From the economic perspective, the pandemic situation brought to the forefront the financial position of the tourism businesses. Many of them were facing a problem of lower revenues due to fewer travellers, event cancellation, low bookings and temporary closure of businesses. As a result, these businesses hardly found funds to make improvements or to purchase digital tools, to produce professional content, to do paid advertising online, to perform data analysis or to hire skilled personnel. This is why a part of the businesses still operating today, even after the lifting of the restrictions, only use simple digital platforms for their communication Facebook, WhatsApp and their websites.

Social factors also played a role. Consumer behavior took a turn during the pandemic. Besides, people's concerns over safety, affordability and their convenience have increased. Lusaka is a young city and furthermore the youth here are increasingly becoming digital hence this is an advantage for online engagement with the customers. On the other hand, many tourism messages being sent out were quite simple and were more about basic updates and offering reassurance rather than unveiling new strategic marketing content.

Technologically, this paper centers on digital marketing and that is a factor that cannot be considered separately from the other issues like internet accessibility, the cost of data, digital literacy and platform availability. For many, especially those in Lusaka, the high cost of data and connectivity that is less than reliable as well as the low level of digital skills were some of the reasons why the tourism businesses digitally marketing was still at its initial level of exploration only (Chicha & Phiri, 2024; Nyambo et al., 2024).

Environmental Considerations is about sustainable development, preservation and responsible tourism. If well used, digital platforms are a good means to spread the message of these values. However, most hear/news did not present sustainability as a topic to their audience through the digital channels.

Legal Considerations can be guided by the regulatory framework under which tourism businesses operate, rules for digital communication, data protection laws and consumer protection legislation. If such systems are weak or vague, digital marketing may continue to be informal and inconsistent. Hence, differences come along when a study is made jointly by utilizing PESTEL with Dynamic Capabilities Theory it is both internal business adaptation and the external conditions that are shaping that adaptation that are taken into account. This kind of approach is quite fitting for a city like Lusaka where digital transformation, apart from willingness of the firms, largely hinges on the structural realities of the society at large.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Digital Marketing Adoption in Tourism

The literature shows that digital marketing has become an important part of tourism communication. It has changed the way destinations speak to their audiences. In the past, tourism promotion depended mainly on one-way communication, such as brochures, print adverts, radio, and exhibitions. Today, digital platforms allow faster and more direct interaction between tourism businesses and customers (Gretzel et al., 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media has played a major role in this change. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok allow destinations to share updates, promote experiences, and receive feedback in real time. They have also given tourists more power to shape destination image through reviews, photos, videos, and personal stories (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Matikiti et al., 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this shift became even more important. Since physical travel was restricted, many tourism enterprises turned to digital platforms to remain visible and connected to their customers (UNWTO, 2020; Sigala, 2020). However, the level of adoption was not the same for all businesses. Many used basic social media tools, while fewer businesses adopted more advanced tools such as analytics, virtual reality, and influencer marketing.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, digital marketing presents both opportunities and challenges. Mobile phones and social media have made online promotion more accessible to many tourism businesses. These platforms are easier to use and often cheaper than traditional advertising methods (Chicha & Phiri, 2024). However, several barriers still limit deeper digital transformation. These include high data costs, poor internet connectivity, limited digital skills, and weak access to advanced digital tools (Nyambo et al., 2024). Because of these challenges, many businesses adopt digital marketing as a quick response to pressure rather than as part of a clear long-term strategy. This means that being active online does not always lead to real transformation. A business may post regularly on social media but still lack proper planning, customer targeting, content strategy, or performance measurement. This raises an important issue for tourism research: digital adoption should not be confused with meaningful digital transformation.

2.2.2 Effectiveness of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is often linked to better visibility and stronger customer engagement. Studies by Tsiakali (2018) and So et al. (2021) show that online platforms help tourism businesses communicate faster and interact more directly with customers. However, its actual impact on tourism performance is still debated. More online engagement

does not always lead to more bookings, higher revenue, or long-term competitiveness. This became clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital marketing helped businesses stay in touch with customers, share safety information, and keep their services visible when travel was restricted (UNWTO, 2020). Even so, online visibility did not always lead to actual travel. Many people were still unable or unwilling to travel because of restrictions, health fears, and financial pressure.

This issue is especially important in developing contexts. When travel demand is already low because of economic hardship or movement restrictions, digital marketing may only help to keep people interested. It may not immediately produce sales or bookings. For this reason, digital marketing should not be viewed as a tool that automatically transforms tourism businesses. Its success depends on the situation in which it is used. It also depends on the resources, skills, and market conditions available to each business. This view provides a more balanced understanding. Digital marketing can support recovery, but it cannot solve every challenge facing the tourism sector during a crisis.

2.2.3 Digital Marketing and Sustainable Tourism

Digital marketing and sustainable tourism are connected in tourism research. Digital platforms can be used to promote conservation, local culture, and community-based tourism (Quintana, 2020). Stankov et al. (2020) states that they can also help tourists understand how to behave more responsibly when visiting a destination. This means, digital marketing is not only about selling tourism products, it can also shape the way destinations are presented and understood. However, this potential is not always fully used. Many tourism businesses mention sustainability in their marketing, but only at a surface level. In some cases, Dube and Ezech, (2025) says sustainability is used mainly as a promotional message. Cultural attractions are often highlighted because they are easy to market. More difficult issues, such as environmental protection, waste management, community benefit, and responsible tourist behaviour, receive less attention.

This gap is even more visible in places where tourism businesses operate with limited resources. In cities such as Lusaka, many tourism enterprises face financial pressure, high operating costs, and weak digital capacity. During COVID-19, survival became the main concern for many businesses. As a result, long-term sustainability goals were often pushed aside.

2.2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed shows that digital marketing has become important in tourism. It improves visibility, supports customer engagement, and helps businesses communicate during crises. This was especially clear during COVID-19, when physical travel and face-to-face promotion were restricted. However, the literature also reveals several gaps. First, there is a contextual gap. Much of the existing research comes from developed countries with stronger internet systems, better digital skills, and more organised tourism institutions. These conditions are different from Lusaka, where high data costs, uneven connectivity, limited skills, and resource constraints affect digital marketing practices.

Second, there is an empirical gap. There is still limited evidence on how tourism businesses in Lusaka actually used digital marketing during COVID-19. It is not enough to know that businesses used social media or websites. It is also important to understand whether these tools improved visibility, supported resilience, and produced useful business outcomes. Third, there is a theoretical gap. Dynamic Capabilities Theory explains how firms adapt during change, but it does not fully account for the realities of small and medium-sized businesses operating with limited resources. The link between digital marketing and sustainable tourism is also not fully explained in such contexts. This study addresses these gaps by examining digital marketing adoption, effectiveness, and sustainability alignment in Lusaka during the COVID-19 pandemic. It therefore provides a more grounded understanding of digital transformation in a developing tourism economy.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. The choice of this design was guided by the nature of the research problem, which required both numerical evidence and explanatory insight. On one hand, the study sought to establish measurable patterns relating to the adoption and use of digital marketing tools among tourism stakeholders in Lusaka. On the other, it was equally important to understand the experiences, perceptions, and practical realities that shaped those patterns during the COVID-19 period. The quantitative strand made it possible to examine the extent of digital marketing adoption, identify the most commonly used platforms and tools, and assess relationships between digital marketing practices and key outcomes such as visibility, resilience, and sustainability-related promotion. The qualitative strand complemented this by providing a more nuanced understanding of why particular tools were adopted, how stakeholders perceived their usefulness, and what constraints influenced actual implementation.

In line with the convergent parallel design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same general phase of the study, analysed independently, and later brought together at the interpretation stage. This approach allowed the researcher to compare statistical patterns with stakeholder accounts and to produce a fuller understanding of tourism adaptation during the pandemic. Given the complexity of digital marketing behaviour in a crisis setting, reliance on a single method would have provided only a partial picture. The mixed-methods approach therefore offered a more suitable basis for examining both breadth and depth within the study.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Lusaka City, the capital of Zambia and the country's principal administrative, commercial, and urban tourism centre. Lusaka was selected because of its strategic importance within the national tourism system. In addition to being a centre for government and business activity, the city plays a significant role in conference tourism, hospitality services, travel intermediation, and short-stay urban visitation. It hosts a wide range of tourism-related establishments, including hotels, lodges, travel agencies, restaurants, event venues, tourism promotion bodies, and other supporting service providers. Lusaka was also an appropriate setting for this study because it experienced substantial tourism disruption during the COVID-19 period while at the same time presenting relatively better access to digital infrastructure than many other parts of the country. This made it possible to examine not only the pressures that pushed tourism stakeholders toward digital marketing, but also the practical limitations that prevented deeper or more strategic forms of digital transformation.

3.3 Target Population

The target population for the study consisted of 230 stakeholders who were directly involved in, or affected by, digital tourism marketing in Lusaka during the COVID-19 period. This population included tourism business owners and managers, tourism marketing professionals, selected digital content actors, relevant institutional or policy-related participants, and domestic tourists or other digital users who interacted with tourism-related online content. The inclusion of these groups was deliberate. The study did not focus only on those producing tourism-related digital content, but also on those receiving, interpreting, and responding to it. In this way, the population captured both the supply side and the audience side of digital tourism communication. This was important for understanding not only what tourism enterprises were doing online, but also how those efforts were experienced and perceived by intended users.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The sample size was initially estimated using Slovin's formula, based on a known target population of 230 and a margin of error of 0.05. This produced an ideal sample size of approximately 146 respondents. However, the final number of valid responses obtained was 119. Although this figure fell below the ideal estimate, it was considered sufficient for the purposes of the study, particularly in light of practical field limitations such as restricted access, time constraints, and uneven respondent availability. The study employed a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who had direct relevance to the study, especially tourism operators, tourism marketing professionals, digital actors, and key informants with knowledge of tourism promotion during the pandemic. These participants were selected because they were likely to provide informed and experience-based responses.

Convenience sampling was used primarily where accessibility and willingness to participate were important considerations, particularly among domestic tourists and digitally engaged users. This approach made it possible to reach respondents who were available and able to contribute within the time and logistical realities of the study. The combination of these sampling techniques was appropriate for a mixed-methods inquiry of this nature, which required both knowledgeable participants and accessible audience perspectives.

3.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Two main instruments were used to collect data: structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used to generate quantitative data on the digital marketing tools employed by tourism stakeholders, their frequency of use, perceived effectiveness, the extent of sustainability-related content, and the main barriers affecting digital adoption. Most of the questionnaire items were closed-ended, including Likert-scale items and multiple-response questions, in order to support systematic coding and statistical analysis. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data from selected participants with relevant experience in tourism promotion, digital marketing, or tourism operations. The interview format allowed the researcher to go beyond surface-level responses and explore issues that could not be fully captured through the questionnaire. These included the reasoning behind platform choices, the operational realities of digital adaptation, the constraints faced by firms, and stakeholder perceptions regarding the integration of sustainability into marketing practice.

The instruments were developed in line with the study objectives, research questions, and key themes emerging from the literature. Before the main data collection exercise, both tools were piloted to assess clarity, relevance, and

sequencing. Feedback from the pilot stage informed revisions to improve the quality and usability of the instruments. Data collection took place in stages. The first stage involved preparing and refining the research tools. The second stage consisted of the main fieldwork, which combined face-to-face and online data collection methods. Face-to-face administration was useful in reaching some tourism stakeholders within Lusaka, while online distribution helped to access respondents who were digitally active or more easily reached through remote channels. In the final stage, completed questionnaires were checked for completeness, coded, and entered for analysis, while interview responses were organised and prepared for thematic examination.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondent characteristics and to identify dominant digital marketing tools and patterns of use. Cross-tabulations were applied to examine selected relationships across variables. In addition, correlation analysis was used to determine the direction and strength of associations between digital marketing practices and selected tourism outcomes. Regression analysis was further employed to assess the extent to which digital marketing strategies influenced sustainable tourism promotion and business resilience. Statistical significance was tested at the 0.05 level.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Interview responses were first reviewed and organised in a systematic manner. The researcher then coded recurring ideas and grouped related codes into broader themes. These themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and the theoretical perspective guiding the research. At the final stage of analysis, the quantitative and qualitative findings were brought together so that the statistical results could be interpreted alongside stakeholder explanations. This integrative process strengthened the overall analysis by ensuring that numerical trends were not presented in isolation from lived experience and contextual meaning.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research before taking part, and participation was entirely voluntary. Respondents were free to decline participation or to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequence.

Confidentiality was maintained by avoiding unnecessary disclosure of personal identities and by handling all collected information responsibly. The study also adhered to principles of academic integrity through the proper acknowledgement of sources and the careful, honest treatment of both primary and secondary data. These measures were important in safeguarding the rights of participants and ensuring the credibility of the research process.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Profile

A total of 119 valid responses were analysed. The respondent profile provides an essential analytical foundation because the independent variable (digital marketing strategies) and the dependent variables (visibility, resilience, and sustainable tourism promotion) are influenced by the characteristics of the actors implementing and interacting with these strategies. The sample captured a balanced representation of both supply-side actors with a representation of 31.1% of tourism businesses and 32.8% of professionals and demand-side actors represented by 31.9% of domestic tourists and 4.2% of digital users as shown in table 1, thereby strengthening the interpretive validity of the findings.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 119)

No.	Stakeholder Role Sub-Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Tourism Professionals	39	32.8%
2	Business Owners/Managers	37	31.1%
3	Domestic Tourists	38	31.9%
4	Influencers/Digital Actors	5	4.2%
	Total	119	100%

The near-balanced stakeholder distribution enhances the robustness of the findings, as it allows the analysis to capture both production and consumption dimensions of digital marketing. It emphasises co-creation of destination narratives.

Table 2
Gender Distribution and Implications for Digital Engagement

Gender	Percentage	Interpretation
Female	58%	Strong participation in communication and customer-facing roles
Male	42%	Balanced representation ensuring reduced gender bias

The predominance of female respondents which shows 58% of the respondents reflects patterns observed in tourism service roles, particularly in marketing and customer engagement functions. This shows that digital marketing effectiveness is closely tied to responsiveness and relational communication, which are central to service-oriented roles. Importantly, the gender balance strengthens the reliability of findings, ensuring that results are not skewed toward a single demographic perspective.

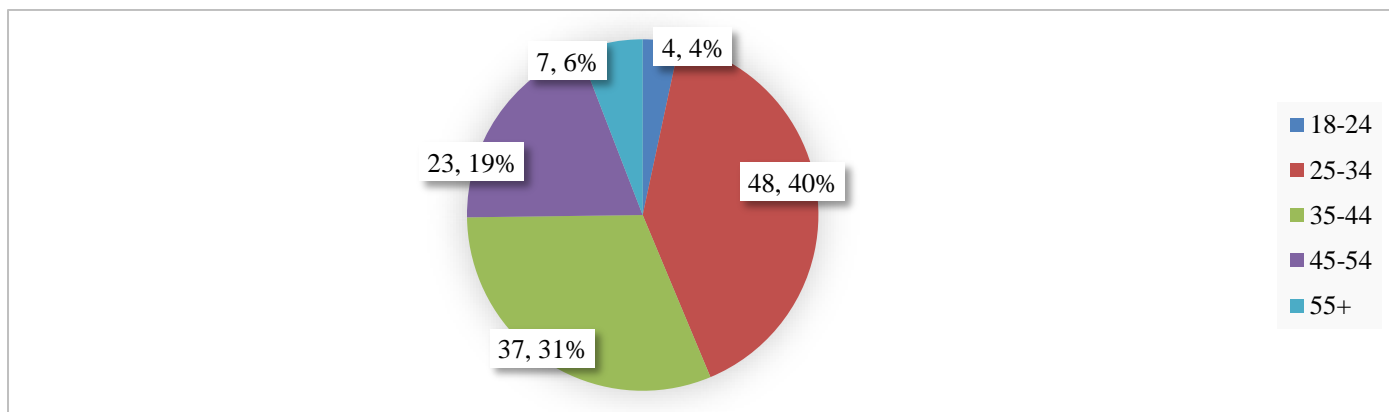


Figure 1
Age Group Distribution

As shown in figure 1, 40% of respondents were between the age of 25 to 34 while 31% was between 35 and 44. The dominance of the 25–44 age group indicates a workforce with high digital exposure and adaptability, suggesting that human readiness was not the primary constraint to digital marketing adoption. These finding challenges assumptions that attribute limited digital transformation to demographic resistance. Instead, it supports the argument that structural and organisational factors play a more decisive role in shaping digital outcomes.

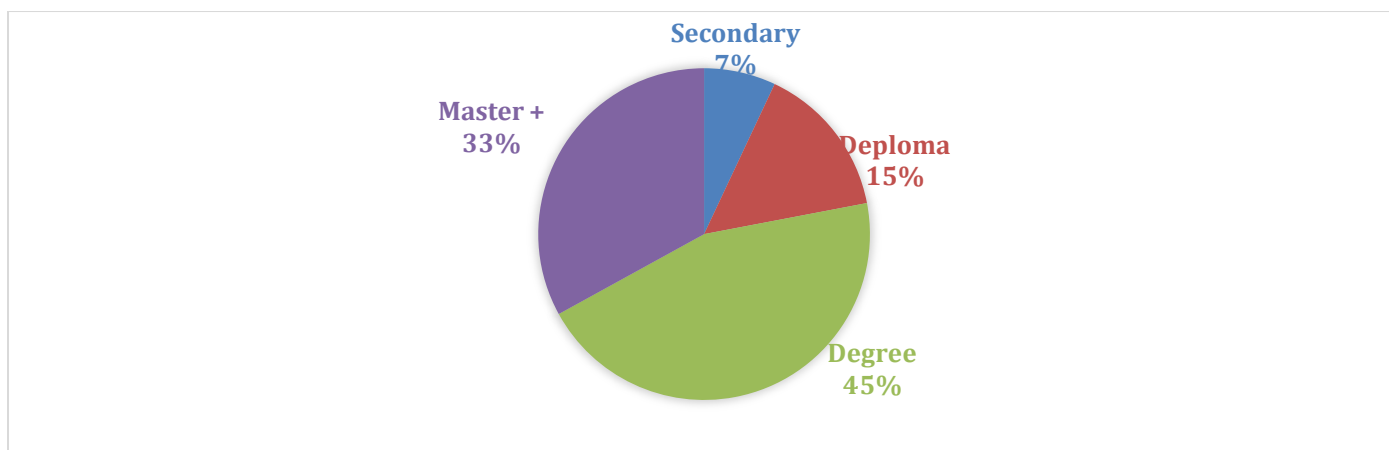


Figure 2
Level of Education

Despite a highly educated sample, the study found limited adoption of advanced digital tools. Figure 2 shows that the majority of the respondents were degree holders 45% and master’s degree holders 33%. This reveals a capability gap between general education and applied digital competence, reinforcing findings by Chicha and Phiri (2024) and Nyambo et al. (2024) that digital transformation in developing contexts is constrained more by technical skills, infrastructure, and strategic orientation than by formal education.

4.1.1 Digital Marketing Tools Adopted

The first objective examined the extent and nature of digital marketing adoption among tourism enterprises in Lusaka, conceptualised as the independent variable influencing tourism outcomes.

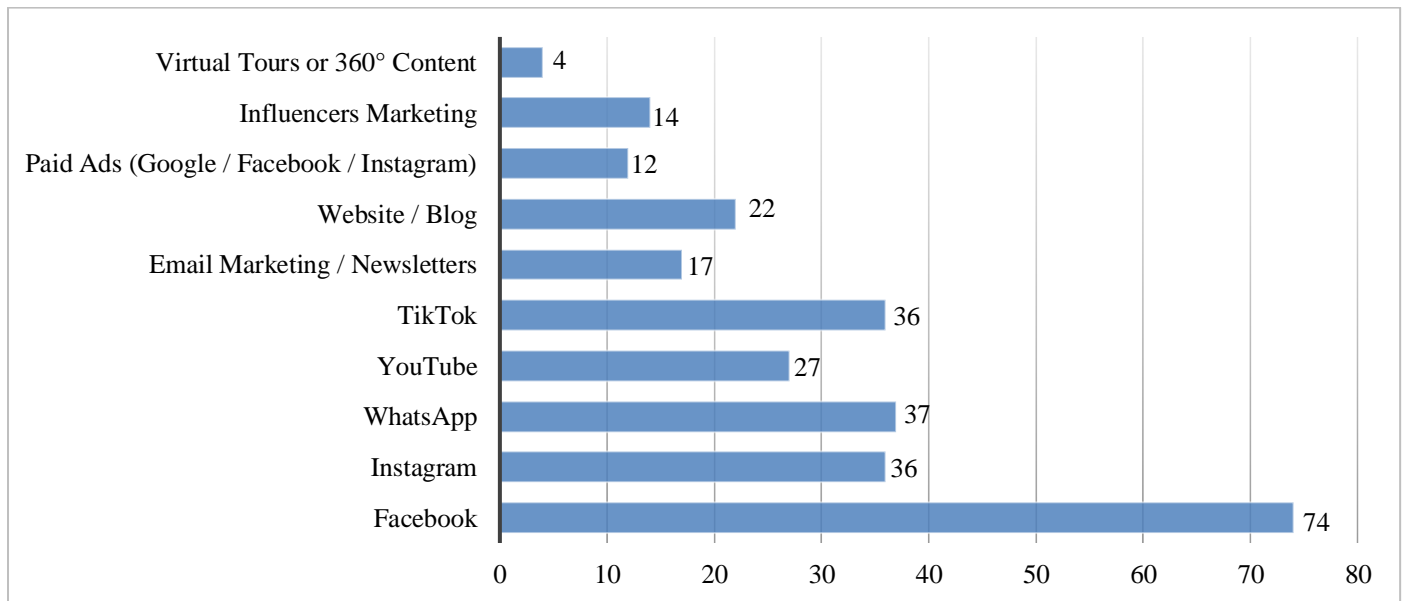


Figure 3

Adoption of Digital Marketing Tools (Multiple Responses, n = 87)

The results show that using digital marketing was a popular move during the pandemic but the level and complexity of digital marketing varied a lot. The platforms mostly used were Facebook (78%), WhatsApp (72%), and Instagram (61%), showing that businesses relied on easily accessible and cheap communication tools. These platforms were mainly chosen because of their simple usage, customers' familiarity with them, and the fact that they could very quickly interact with customers in the time of a crisis. This is also the case with the findings of Chicha and Phiri (2024) from a developing country setting, where companies usually go for technologies that are easy to use and at the same time require the least financial and technical investment.

On the other hand, if one looks deeper, it appears that most of the adoption was at the simple end of digital mainly. Advanced tool usage levels data analytics (14%), virtual tours (18%), and influencer marketing (29%) were very low. This difference means that although firms managed to go digital, they did not go for a complete and integrated digital marketing system that is strategically driven. In fact, the level of usage was at an operational level and not a transformative one. Using Dynamic Capabilities Theory, one could say that tourism companies in this study were able to understand the change in environment and get hold of digital tools that they could use immediately, however, they did not have the ability to change their internal processes and capabilities so that they could support a continuous digital transformation (Teece, 2018). This observation is at odds with the main narratives in the global tourism literature that crises are the main reasons for the speedy digital transformation (Hall et al., 2020). The Lusaka evidence, however, shows that crises do not necessarily bring about transformation but, instead, are more likely to result in the reinforcement of the limitations of the existing structures. Thus, what happens is not the systemic change but the adaptive continuity where the main purpose of digital tool adoption becomes survival rather than strategic repositioning for the long term.

In addition, the extreme focus on digital marketing in a limited range of social media platforms is a sign of platform dependency. Even though these platforms gave short-term visibility and engagement opportunities, they restricted strategic flexibility because of factors such as limitation of data ownership, loss of control over customer relationships, and restriction in the development of customised digital ecosystems. This notion is in line with Gretzel (2018) who views dependence on externally controlled digital infrastructures as something that can stand in the way of the evolution of organisational capabilities.

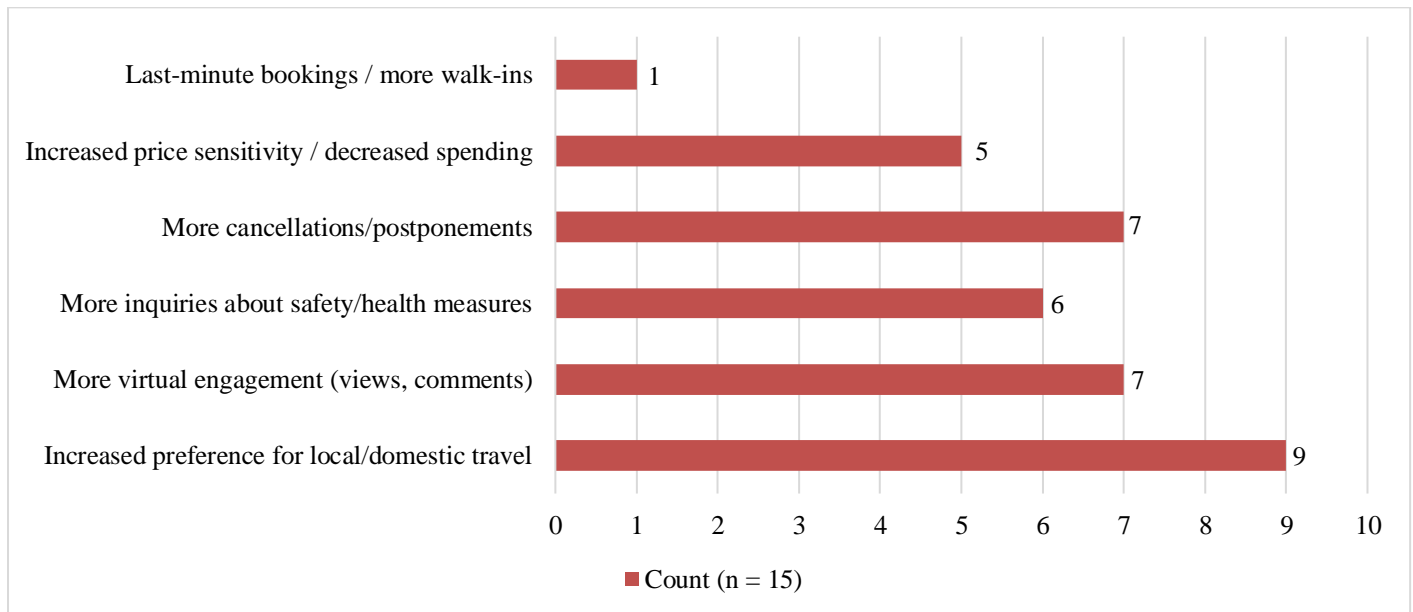


Figure 4
Observed changes in customer online behaviour during crises

The findings also reveal significant heterogeneity in digital adaptation. Nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) reported no substantial strategic change during the pandemic, indicating that digital transformation was not a uniform sectorial response. Instead, it varied according to firm-level factors such as leadership, resource availability, and organisational readiness. This supports the argument that digital transformation is a differentiated process shaped by both internal capabilities and contextual constraints (Christou et al., 2025). Overall, the results confirm that while digital marketing tools were widely adopted, the nature of adoption remained largely superficial, reflecting limited progression toward integrated digital capability.

4.1.2 Effectiveness of Digital Marketing

Results revealed that even though a large number of businesses in the sector were able to switch to digital during the lockdowns, levels of adoption and degrees of sophistication varied greatly between companies. The three most widely used channels were Facebook (78%), WhatsApp (72%), and Instagram (61%). These tools are highly accessible and low in cost, simple to use and familiar to users. Their greatest strength during a time of a crisis is ability to quickly communicate with customers. Chicha and Phiri (2024) also found in their study of firms from a variety of developing countries that such companies are likely to utilize technology that is of low cost and simple to use and requires little in financial terms and in terms of required technical skills.

While initial digital marketing tools were widely used by tourism enterprises, more complex digital marketing instruments were not frequently applied. Only 14% of survey participants used data analysis, 18% virtual tours and 29% influencer marketing. So, while companies have switched to digital platforms, they have not moved on to a more integrated and strategic digital marketing system yet. Their digital marketing activities are on an operational level and not on a transformative level yet. From a theoretical perspective, this finding can be explained by Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, 2018). In the given context, tourism companies have recognized the change in the environment and have taken the basic digital tools to conduct business. However, companies lack the internal reconfiguration of processes and capabilities to continue digital transformation. This finding is contrary to most of the global tourism literature that considers crises as drivers of rapid digital transformation of tourism enterprises (Hall et al., 2020). It appears that in the Lusaka case, crises do not automatically result in transformation; on the contrary, they often make visible the pre-existing structural weaknesses. Therefore, instead of systemic change, what is observed is adaptive continuity where firms mainly consider digital tool adoption as a survival tactic rather than a strategic long-term repositioning.

Besides that, the intensively focused digital presence on only a few social media platforms signals the problem of platform dependency that is rising. Although these platforms allowed for getting short-term exposure and interaction, they at the same time restricted strategic flexibility through factors such as limiting data ownership, decreasing the control over the customer relationships, and lessening the capacity to develop customised digital ecosystems. This is in line with the view of Gretzel (2018) who postulates that the dependence on externally controlled digital infrastructures might curb the building of deeper organisational capabilities.

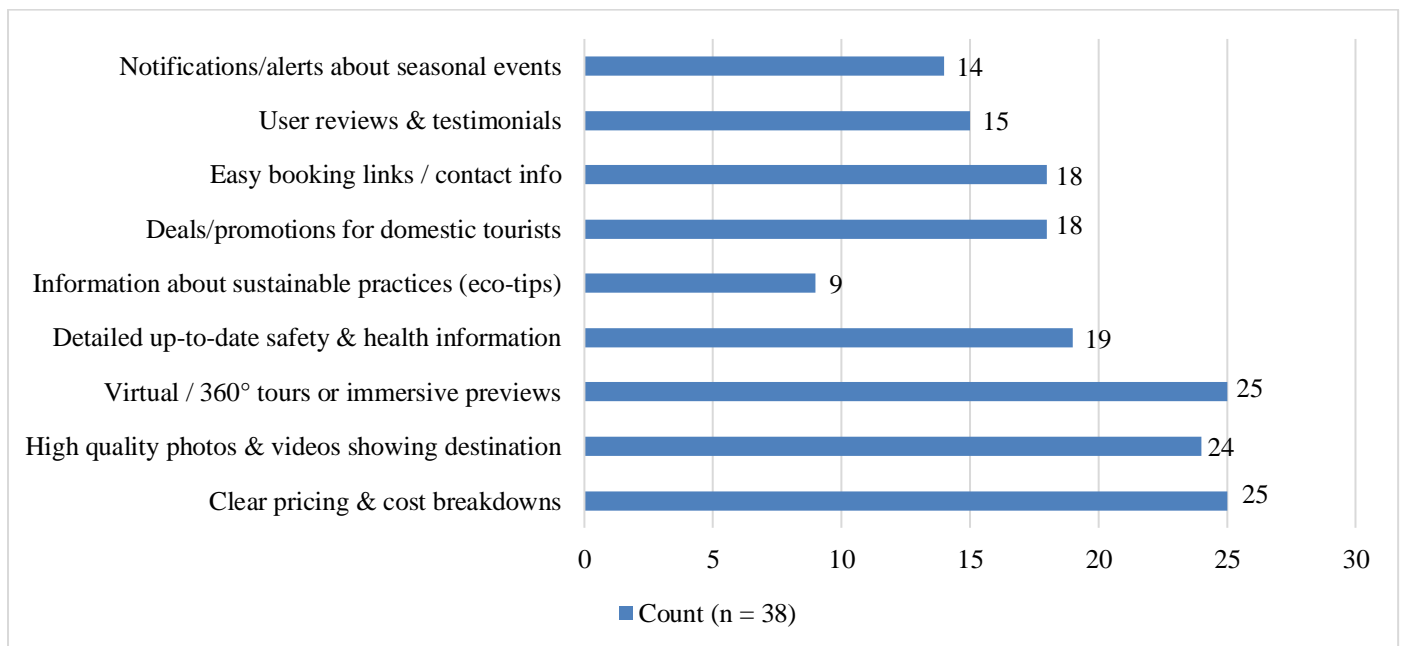


Figure 5
What domestic tourists say makes digital tourism content more useful

However, there is limited evidence that it contributed to strategic resilience, which involves innovation, business model transformation, and the creation of new value propositions. Most firms used digital tools to sustain existing practices rather than to fundamentally reconfigure their operations. From a Dynamic Capabilities perspective, this indicates partial capability development, with stronger sensing and seizing but limited reconfiguring capacity (Teece, 2018). Thus, digital marketing functioned more as a stabilisation mechanism than as a driver of transformation.

4.1.3 Alignment with Sustainable Tourism Principles

The third objective assessed the extent to which digital marketing practices aligned with sustainable tourism principles. The findings indicate that this alignment was limited, uneven, and largely non-strategic. Only 34% of respondents reported actively incorporating sustainability into their digital marketing, suggesting that sustainability was not a central organising principle in most firms’ communication strategies. A more detailed analysis reveals that sustainability integration was highly selective. Cultural heritage (61%) and community-based tourism (54%) were relatively prominent, while environmental conservation (27%) and responsible tourism behaviour (19%) received significantly less attention.

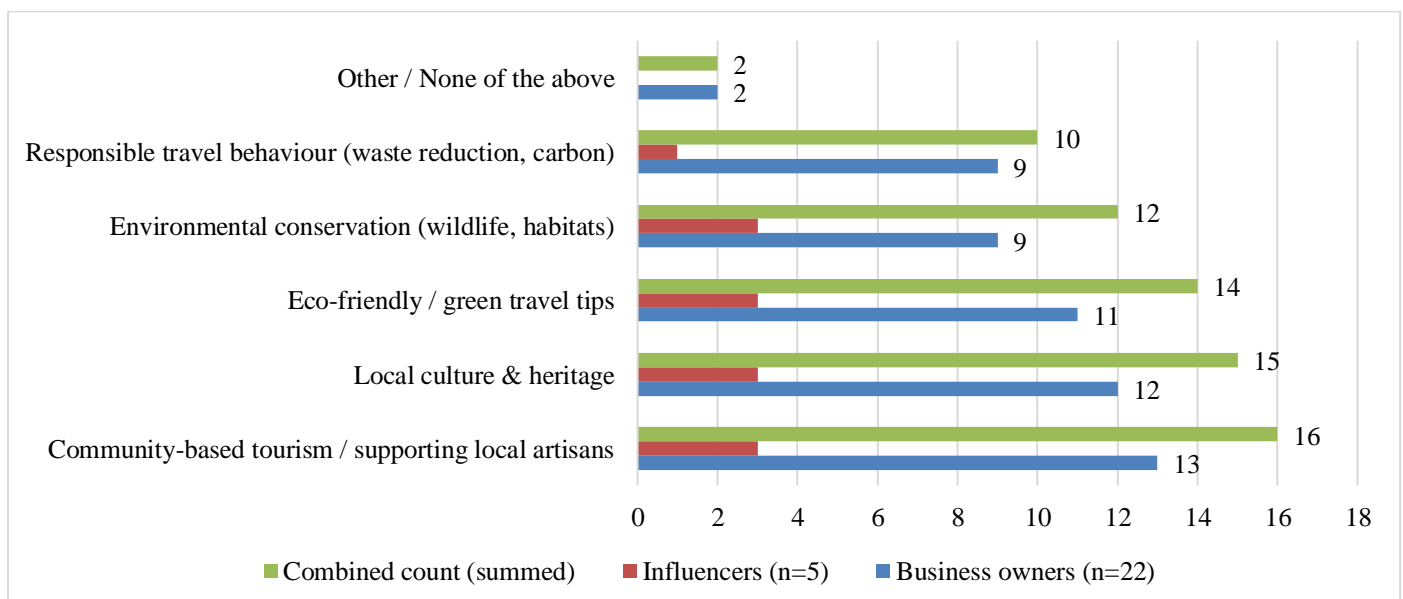


Figure 6
Selection of Sustainability Themes

This imbalance suggests that sustainability was framed primarily in terms of socially and culturally marketable narratives, rather than as a comprehensive framework encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions. This pattern is consistent with Roblek et al. (2021), who highlight the prevalence of symbolic or fragmented sustainability communication in tourism marketing. The prominence of cultural content can be attributed to its immediate appeal and ease of integration into digital storytelling. In contrast, environmental and behavioural dimensions are more complex to communicate and may not yield immediate commercial returns. However, this selective approach undermines the holistic nature of sustainable tourism, which requires a balanced integration of all dimensions (Quintana, 2020).

Consumer behaviour further reinforces this pattern. Only 23.7% of respondents indicated that sustainability influenced their travel decisions, suggesting that firms prioritised factors such as affordability, safety, and convenience. While this reflects a pragmatic response to market conditions, it also indicates a reactive orientation, where firms respond to existing demand rather than actively shaping it. This represents a missed opportunity, as digital marketing has the potential not only to reflect but also to influence consumer behaviour. From a Dynamic Capabilities perspective, the limited integration of sustainability reflects incomplete capability development. While some firms demonstrated an awareness of sustainability trends, their ability to translate this awareness into strategic action remained weak. The processes of seizing and reconfiguring sustainability opportunities were largely underdeveloped, resulting in superficial and fragmented integration. This finding underscores that digital capability does not automatically translate into sustainability capability, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings

When the findings are considered collectively across all three objectives, a clear and consistent pattern begins to emerge. Digital marketing was widely adopted among tourism stakeholders in Lusaka during the COVID-19 period, indicating that firms were able to respond quickly to the immediate pressures of the crisis. However, this strong level of adoption did not translate proportionately into outcomes of similar strength. While digital engagement contributed to improved visibility and supported a degree of operational resilience, its overall effectiveness remained moderate. Even more notably, the integration of sustainable tourism principles within digital marketing practices was limited and uneven.

This progression suggests the presence of a capability gradient within the sector. At the most basic level, adoption was largely achieved, as many firms successfully incorporated digital platforms into their day-to-day operations. Moving beyond this, effectiveness was only partially realised, with firms experiencing some benefits in terms of communication and market presence, but without consistent conversion into tangible business outcomes. At the highest level, sustainability integration, progress was considerably more constrained, with relatively few enterprises embedding sustainability in a deliberate or strategic manner within their digital content.

Taken together, these findings support a broader argument within the literature: while digital marketing is an essential component of modern tourism practice, it does not, on its own, guarantee transformation. Its contribution depends heavily on the conditions under which it is deployed. In the case of Lusaka, the impact of digital marketing appears to be shaped by the interplay between internal organisational capabilities and external structural realities. Firm-level factors, as explained by Dynamic Capabilities Theory, influence how effectively enterprises are able to adopt, utilise, and evolve digital practices. At the same time, broader environmental conditions—captured through the PESTEL framework—either enable or constrain the extent to which these capabilities can be developed and sustained.

Understanding this interaction is critical. It shifts the focus away from digital adoption as an end in itself and toward the broader ecosystem within which digital transformation takes place.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This research focused on the influence of digital marketing for the promotion of sustainable tourism in Lusaka during the epidemic of COVID-19. Results show that a lot of tourism businesses changed to digital marketing quickly because at that time they simply had no other option. When there was a ban on movement and face-to-face meeting, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram were the easiest means of contacting customers. So, digital marketing had not been only an advantage. It was a condition of existence.

However, in fact, the great majority of businesses used digital platforms more for practical than strategic purposes. Mainly, they used them to communicate with customers, advertise offers, and keep their name in the market. Very few were deepening their digital usage, e.g. studying customer behaviour, planning data-driven campaigns, or developing long-term customer relationships. This shows that digital marketing was keeping businesses in the game, but it was not always considered a complete marketing system.

The results also indicate that digital marketing had a positive and at the same time, limited effect on the performance of businesses. The quantitative data, which are, for the most part, based on the correlation between

engagement and visibility, indicate that it contributed to the resilience of the businesses. Nevertheless, it didn't result in a significant rise in bookings or revenues each time. This was quite logical since the pandemic was a major factor in lowering the demand for travel. People were uncertain, many had their incomes affected, and it was not easy to travel due to the restrictions.

Thus, digital marketing enabled companies to stay connected to their customers but at the same time that the business activity could not be restored fully. The research also revealed that digital uptake did not result in major organizational change. A lot of businesses identified market changes and responded by making use of the available platforms online, but the evidence of changing how they planned, managed, and measured their marketing activities was very limited. Most companies don't use analytics, structured content calendars, or performance tracking. The costs of data were high, digital skills were limited, and the internet was not always good enough. Therefore digital marketing remained more of a short-term response than a developed capability.

Regarding sustainable tourism, the results demonstrate both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, some tourism businesses gave prominence to the cultural heritage, local communities, and domestic tourism aspects through their digital contents. Environmental protection, responsible travel behaviour and conservation, on the other hand, were given little or no attention at all. This indicates that sustainability was present albeit not fully integrated. Lots of enterprises were more focused on content that would catch the eye quickly and direct commercial interest. Sustainability therefore remained a secondary message rather than the very core of the digital marketing strategy.

This article ends by saying that digital marketing was a significant but limited factor in Lusaka's tourism industry at the time of COVID-19. It assisted enterprises in staying visible, maintaining contact with clients and overcoming the crisis. However, the highest side is that it did not bring about the deep changes or the strong connection with the principles of sustainable tourism. It was only when the skills, resources, strategy and the wider business environment were also present that digital marketing turned out to be useful and valuable. This research therefore contributes to the Dynamic Capabilities Theory by demonstrating that in some cases, adaptation may be only partial, such as in resource-limited environments. On a practical note, it reveals that there is a stark contrast between just having an online presence and consciously, strategically, and purposefully employing digital tools.

5.2 Recommendations

Tourism businesses require more help learning how to use digital marketing practically and effectively. Though many operators already have an online presence, there is still a lack of understanding about how digital platforms can be strategically used to attract and retain customers. Associations like the Zambia Institute of Tourism and Hospitality Studies (ZITHS), the Zambia Institute of Marketing, and other training organizations should contribute significantly to improving digital marketing skills through practical sessions. Besides teaching the 'knowing' of digital marketing, these sessions should also guide businesses in finding their target audiences, content planning, and figuring out the most successful campaigns or posts through metrics.

Meanwhile, tourism companies should not be satisfied with just having a website or social media account to increase their visibility. They need to start treating their digital platforms as a tool to get leads, turn interest into actual sales, and nurture customer relationships. This transformation is crucial for making digital marketing a direct helper in business growth and resilience.

Moreover, government and industry players must work together more closely to help break down the structural barriers that are hampering digital tourism development. The high price of data and poor internet connectivity are two major factors that prevent numerous small tourism businesses from doing more online. Lacking both affordable and stable internet access, many operators will still be limited to basic digital activities, and as a result, transformation will be much harder to achieve.

With regard to sustainable tourism, companies should change the way they promote destinations online and give more emphasis to a balanced approach. They almost always present cultural experiences and local attractions but rarely focus on environmental protection, conservation efforts and responsible tourism. If these were integrated regularly, it would not only enhance the awareness of sustainability among tourists but also raise the dignity of the tourism industry in the eyes of the public for a long time.

Sector-wide improved coordination is equally necessary. Tourism promotion should not be considered the responsibility of only one organisation, namely the Zambia Tourism Agency. Tourism businesses, public institutions, and local communities must intensify their collaboration through joint campaigns, shared digital platforms, and coordinated destination branding efforts. Such collaboration can help create a clearer and more attractive image of Lusaka and Zambia as tourism destinations.

Innovation in digital promotion is something that stakeholders should be doing quite literally starting from today. New forms of immersive and interactive virtual tours, digital storytelling, and various online engaging experiences could be launched in small pilot projects that would serve for determining the most communicative ways, which is also good for the local context, while at the same time, the means of tourism marketing would be diversified even during tourism downturns.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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