

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON CONSUMERS' BUYING BEHAVIOUR IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper intends to analyze the influence of digital marketing on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-Covid-19 era in South Africa. It focuses on questioning the effects of digital marketing on wholesalers, and retailers' businesses, as well as consumers' buying behaviour in the post-Covid-19 pandemic era. Traditional marketing, which mostly relies on getting direct contact with the target audience and makes use of newspapers, direct sales, live promotions, door-to-door, and so on, was practically irrelevant during the Covid-19 pandemic. The usage of digital marketing became more imperative, as many socio-economic activities were influenced by government measures and restrictions that required and forced people to work at home to reduce interactions between people in many social gatherings. The pandemic has become a driving force in the usage of digital marketing for promoting and selling products or services using the Internet. Covid-19 has influenced and increased the practice of digital marketing during the lockdown period.*

*Therefore, wholesalers and retailers have found an occasion to turn to digital marketing (originally known as electronic marketing or internet marketing) to keep and maintain the business running as little as they could, in an attempt to avoid a total shutdown of the business operating system. As currently, wholesalers and retailers have fully resumed using traditional marketing (getting direct contact with the target audience, making use of newspapers, direct sales, live promotions, TV, Radio, door-to-door, and so on), this paper aims to explore, review and analyze works of literature on the competing influence digital marketing could have on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-covid-19 era in South Africa. It seems to be essential to analyze and understand the competing usage of both traditional and digital marketing influence on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-Covid-19 era.*

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Wholesalers, Retailers, Post-Covid-19 Era, Consumers' Buying Behaviour.

## INTRODUCTION

In today's world, most socio-economic activities are operating effectively using the advantages of digital technology tools and channels. There is an adage that says "if a company cannot be found in Google, it does not exist" (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Therefore, digital technology tools and digital marketing through its various digital channels of communication are facilitating businesses and consumers around the world to connect and become co-decision-makers of products to be produced and used. According to Mahmud (2022), digital marketing

refers to all online marketing efforts, the kind of marketing campaign that appears on a computer, phone, tablet, or other electronic devices; where businesses are experiencing the advantages of online marketing over traditional marketing. Unlike conventional marketing, digital marketing involves channels and methods to understand the real-time scenario properly. It consists of the act of marketing goods and services via electronic devices and the internet using various channels such as social media, search engines, email, mobile apps, and other websites, for many reasons (Lincoln, 2020). Businesses can, therefore, analyze marketing campaigns and implement necessary steps accordingly. Regardless of what a company sells, digital marketing can work effectively for any industry. With digital marketing, one can see results much faster than one might with offline marketing (Moira et al., 2022). The interactive nature of digital marketing strategies helps companies to grow their client database in a short period (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). This paper explores and examines the influence of digital marketing on wholesalers' and retailers' businesses, as well as consumers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in South Africa. It intends to reveal and make understand the essential role digital marketing, also known as online marketing, internet marketing, e-marketing, etc., has played and continues to play in the promotion of brands before, during, and in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in South Africa. It also explores the way businesses are connecting with potential customers/consumers, using the internet and other forms of digital communication tools and channels.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Background of Digital Marketing

Traditional marketing, which mostly relies on getting direct contact with the target audience and makes use of newspapers, direct sales, live promotions, door-to-door, and so on (Mahmud, 2022), became practically irrelevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. The usage of digital marketing upraised quickly and it became more imperative, as many socio-economic activities were influenced by government measures and restrictions that required and forced people to work at home to reduce interactions between people in many social gatherings (South African Government, 2022). For that reason, suddenly, the pandemic converted most businesses and consumers from using traditional marketing to digital marketing and boosted the usage of channels like search engines, websites, social media, email, and mobile apps whether for market research or for promoting and selling products and services via Internet (Moira et al., 2022). Accordingly, the COVID-19 lockdown measures have influenced and increased strongly the practice of digital marketing. Businesses and consumers were required to learn and maximize the best practice of channels of digital marketing, including Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), Website, Social media marketing, Email marketing, Affiliate marketing, Content marketing, Digital PR, Native Advertising, Mobile Marketing, Influencer marketing, Pay-per-click (PPC), Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Video Marketing, Retargeting, and Inbound marketing (Saleem & Siddik, 2021).

However, the post-COVID-19 pandemic is another era that led most researchers to explore and examine businesses' and consumers' buying behaviour by building ground on the combination or mixing of both traditional and digital marketing. Nevertheless, both traditional and digital marketing involves the process that allows businesses to market their goods, services, and brands using various media channels illustrated in Table 1. In the post-COVID-19 era, while traditional marketing activities have fully resumed, digital marketing continues concurrently to

gain more ground and seems to strongly influence consumers' buying behaviour as it involves all categories of digital marketing channels, which are used to develop complex strategies and to reach and connect with prospects and customers. Consequently, wholesalers and retailers have found an opportunity to develop marketing strategies that allow them to remain omnipresent using both traditional and digital marketing (known as electronic marketing or internet marketing) to keep and maintain consumers on track (Moirira et al., 2022). Thus, this paper attempts to analyze and understand not only the influence of digital marketing on businesses and consumers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in South Africa but also the competing influence of both traditional and digital marketing on consumers' buying behaviour in post-COVID-19 era. This analysis is significant because, currently, consumers rely primarily on digital tools to conduct product research, while businesses use digital marketing as a promotional tool to advertise and support the sales of products/services via various forms of electronic media, mainly the internet.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Methods

In South Africa, most researchers have been involved in research activities, investigating and looking to understand more about the several aspects that influence consumers' buying behaviour through social media marketing. According to Moirira et al. (2022), the internet and social media are influencing significantly the lives of many world citizens, including South Africans. Statista (2019) revealed that millions of people in South Africa are on social media, and are mostly mobile internet users. Therefore, this paper intended to explore, review and analyse works of literature on the competing influence of digital marketing on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 era in South Africa. It seems to be imperative and very significant to examine and understand the simultaneous competing usage of both traditional and digital marketing influence on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 era in South Africa. Accordingly, as it is described in this paper, the review of literature disclosed that digital marketing is gaining extensive ground over traditional marketing, given that works of literature have demonstrated a massive traffic of companies using Google and other digital channels of communication to show their omnipresence or visibility and attract a competitive demand (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

### Materials

According to Schutte & Chauke (2022), digital marketing refers to the use of digital technology or social channels to promote brands or reach consumers. It is shaping the traditional methods and behaviours in which consumers and businesses interact with each other (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). This approach of marketing is mostly performed using the internet, social media, search engines, mobile devices, and other channels. It involves and provides new ways of advertising, promoting, and selling products or services to consumers and allows them to quickly understand the influence of their behaviour. Connecting with an audience at the right time and place was the essence of digital marketing during the COVID-19 era, given that sustaining and growing a successful business required intensive usage of digital marketing. This approach claims to transform consumers' behaviour (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). The concomitant usage of traditional and digital marketing approaches was still relevant to operate concurrently in

every part of the world before the COVID-19 era. But, digital marketing practice became more prevalent and commanding for businesses and consumers, as many socio-economic activities were influenced by government measures and restrictions that required and forced people to work at home to reduce interactions between people in many social gatherings. The pandemic has become a driving force in the usage of digital marketing for promoting and selling products or services using the Internet. This suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced and increased the practice of digital marketing during the lockdown period. In this era of the digital age, meeting customers online during the COVID-19 period became the most excellent cost-effective approach, because digital platforms increasingly integrated into marketing campaigns, and business owners were required to improve their products/services by implementing technology-focused practices in digital marketing (channels of digital marketing).

### **The Imperative Practice of Digital Marketing Channels during the Covid-19 Era in South Africa**

Digital marketing (digital channels of communication) is mostly practicable through the Internet and developed around websites as a working and display environment (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers were increasingly spending their time online using social media or online services for browsing, storing, and playing music, to email, to access Facebook, Twitter, and apps with various connected devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops (Taiminen & Karjaluto, 2015). According to Schutte & Chauke (2022), digital marketing is a form of marketing that harnesses the existence of technology by delivering content online through digital channels to connect with consumers. It provides an additional advantage over traditional marketing by offering the ability to reach targeted consumers using social media and search engines. Furthermore, digital marketing offers cost-effective (low-cost) benefits to businesses, compared to traditional marketing. Traditional marketing, which mostly relies on getting direct contact with the target audience and makes use of newspapers, direct sales, live promotions, door-to-door, and so on, was practically unconnected and became irrelevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Minculete & Olar (2018) and Omar & Atteya (2020), various channels of digital marketing were used during the pandemic, which led to key changes in business and consumer behaviour. Sinha et al. (2022) compared the influence of traditional and digital channels of communication on consumers' behaviour. He found that currently, digital channels of communication (88.8% of consumers are using at least one digital communication channel) are rapidly becoming an important mode of communication than traditional channels of communication (11.92% of consumers are still trusting traditional communication methods). In addition, literature related to digital channels of communication indicated that if a "*company cannot be found in Google, it does not exist*" (Taiminen & Karjaluto, 2015). This implies the intense utilisation of digital channels driving businesses and consumer behaviour today, which is important for brands. Therefore, it is clear those business operations, during and in the post-COVID-19 pandemic were/are forced to follow the progression of digital channels of communication if they have to grow and stay competitive. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital marketing channels provided an exclusive platform for businesses to identify and apprehend consumers' requirements to create opportunities for them based on time and place. These channels of digital marketing allowed companies to develop an online business and to create opportunities for costs-effective by eliminating unnecessary transactions, as the online business contributed to promoting a product or service or building a digital brand (Minculete & Olar, 2018). Therefore, different channels or specific components of

digital marketing were used by companies to display products and services during the pandemic. Omar & Atteya (2020); Minculete & Olar (2018) and Kotarba (2018) have disclosed and displayed significant digital marketing channels used for products and services promotion and sales before, during, and after the pandemic. Table 1 shows the most commonly used digital marketing channels.

<b>Table 1</b> <b>DIGITAL MARKETING CHANNELS</b>	
<b>Channels of digital marketing</b>	<b>Description and starring role</b>
Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)/Search engine results pages (SERP)	This refers to the website that needs to be improved to increase its visibility when customers use Google, Bing, and other search engines to look for goods or services related to the company. The more traffic a website receives and the greater the likelihood that businesses will draw in both new and existing customers, the better the page's ranking in search results.
Social media marketing	Social media is a computer-based technology that promotes the exchange of ideas, opinions, and information through the design of virtual networks and systems. Specifically, social media marketing is a powerful tool for connecting with customers and prospects. Social media is used by people to find, research, follow, and purchase from brands. Fans and followers can interact with the brand through its content by reacting (liking), commenting, sending direct messages, and publishing on official pages. This enables two-way communication. One can guarantee visibility on the platforms where customers are most active with social media marketing sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Instagram, etc., where businesses of all sizes share information naturally and through paid channels.
Email marketing	Email, also known as "electronic mail," is one of the most popular features of the Internet, right next to the web. It enables you to send and receive messages from anyone who has an email account worldwide. Email marketing is the process of maintaining a database of cold and warm contacts and sending them email alerts about corporate branding, products, and services. It's a great approach to routinely interact with the audience. Email marketing works well for increasing a company's subscriber base, bringing in new clients, keeping hold of current ones, promoting sales and deals, and dispersing content.
Affiliate marketing	This is the procedure for obtaining a commission by endorsing the goods of another person or business. The affiliate chooses a product they enjoy makes it available and is due a share of the revenue from each sale. Sales are tracked through affiliate links from one website to another. A great way to boost online sales and profits is through affiliate marketing. Companies and affiliate marketers have benefited from the trend toward less conventional marketing techniques.
Content marketing	Content marketing is the planning, creation, distribution, sharing, and production of content through a variety of channels, including social media, blogs, websites, podcasts, applications, press releases, and print publications. Reaching out to the target population will improve brand awareness, sales, engagement, and loyalty. By producing pertinent and useful material, content marketing is a tactic for capturing an audience's attention and expanding a company's clientele. This approach can draw in, hold the attention of, and benefit a brand's target market. This tactic enhances the consumer's impression of the brand and boosts sales.
Digital PR	Businesses use this strategy of online marketing to increase their online presence. An efficient way to improve a company's online exposure and presence is through digital PR. Companies can communicate with their target market directly at any time and from any location, and debates can be created from static information. Participating and sharing with your target audience can create a dialogue that sharpens your focus and spreads information and updates far more quickly than ever before.
	This is a form of sponsored advertising where the ads are made to look and behave

Native Advertising	exactly like the medium they are presented on. Ads that "fit in" with a publication, an app, or a website. It is a non-intrusive advertising format that involves blending an advertisement into the natural content style of a website or news platform. They look to be actual material and fit in with the page or platform.
Mobile Marketing / Smartphones and tablets:	It is a multi-channel digital marketing strategy with the goal of connecting with a target audience through websites, email, SMS and MMS, social media, and applications on their smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices. In recent years, customers have started to focus more on mobile. Mobile marketing refers to any advertising done on smartphones and other mobile devices, such as tablets and other cell phones. Through strategies including mobile-optimized ads, push notifications, and mobile apps, mobile marketing aims to reach a mobile audience. Tablets and smartphones are two examples of mobile devices that are utilized for marketing. Top marketers include Google Apps, Apple Apps, and Samsung Apps. Mobile advertising has developed into a potent platform for advertising globally. Many app developers earn millions of dollars from their apps and actively market them. To be successful, a firm needs to be able to communicate its goods and services to motorists.
Influencer marketing	Influencers are individuals with a sizable social following who are regarded as authorities in their field. Influencer marketing is a social media marketing strategy that focuses on endorsements and product mentions from influencers. Because social media influencers have a high level of trust in their followers, their endorsements serve as social evidence to potential clients of your company.
Pay-per-click (PPC)	PPC advertising is a form of online marketing in which advertisers are paid each time a user clicks on one of their ads. It's a form of online promotion that enables businesses to use search engines to increase traffic and conversions. Cost Per Click PPC stands for the pay-per-click online business concept. Each time one of its promotions is clicked, its sponsors are charged a fee. In essence, it's a technique for buying visitors to your website rather than trying to "earn" them naturally.
Search Engine Marketing (SEM)	This is a strategy for online marketing a website to boost its visibility in search engine results pages (SERPs). SEM and search engine optimization (SEO) are related in that both might involve strategies like modifying a website's architecture and content to boost rankings. It is a very effective method for increasing your website's rating on search engines like Google and attracting high-quality visitors. A great way to increase brand awareness and revenue is by investing in search engine marketing (SEM).
Video Marketing/Video advertising	Video marketing is defined as the use of video to increase awareness, foster engagement, and boost sales. It's a crucial component of digital marketing that touches on content marketing. Planning, creating, editing, posting, and promoting video content to advertise a company, service, or good are all considered to be aspects of video marketing. Among the platforms used by firms for video marketing include YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Vimeo, and Instagram. Video advertising is the practice of displaying commercials either as individual adverts or as pre-roll, mid-roll, or post-roll segments that appear before, during, or after a video stream.
Retargeting	Retargeting often referred to as remarketing, is a form of online advertising that enables you to continue promoting your brand to visitors who have been routed to other websites after they leave yours. On average, only 2% of web traffic converts during a first visit. Retargeting is a marketing tactic that gives companies access to 98% of consumers who do not convert right away. A cookie or pixel is loaded on the user's computer when they visit the website, making your advertisements visible to them wherever they go online. One of the reasons why retargeting can have such a high return on investment is that you'll have a better chance of converting them if you can reach them frequently.
Inbound Marketing	A key component of inbound marketing is the creation of content and social media strategies that raise brand recognition. As a result, people become aware of your company, visit your website to learn more, express interest in your products, and possibly make a purchase. With the help of social media or content creation,

	businesses may increase brand recognition and encourage customers to learn more about them, visit their websites for more details, express interest in their products, and even make purchases.
Paid Advertisement	The term "paid advertising" is used to describe a wide range of online activities. Sometimes PPC, or pay-per-click advertising, is used to describe all of them. In other words, the kind of advertisement where you only get paid when customers click on it after viewing it online.
Websites:	A website is a collection of freely accessible, connected Web pages with a common domain name. Websites can be created and maintained by an individual, group, business, or organisation to meet a variety of needs and purposes.
Display Ads	A display ad, commonly referred to as a banner ad, is a type of paid web advertising that usually consists of a professionally produced picture or a photo and words. When viewers click on the promotional image, they are subsequently directed to the associated landing page.
Blogging	The term "blog" is a condensed version of the phrase "weblog," which is used to describe websites that maintain an ongoing record of content. A blog typically introduces its journal-style analysis and links to content on other websites with a breakdown of excerpts presented in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be personal or political, and they can concentrate on a wide range of topics or a single, specific one.
Linked In:	Professionals can establish and share profiles on LinkedIn. LinkedIn connects these two dots of businesses and professions. The social media site LinkedIn is widely seen as a resource only dedicated to job hunting and expanding one's professional networks. However, it is also an extremely effective tool for generating new company leads and cultivating referral partnerships.
Facebook:	The most widely used social network is it. Promote your goods and services on Facebook. Using Page Insights, it is possible to monitor both free and paid postings on Facebook. Facebook gathers data on page visits in order to better understand your target demographic and establish best practices.
Twitter:	Its objectives are to raise brand exposure and revenue, attract new followers, and turn leads into customers. Twitter is used by many people, including potential customers. A specific audience can be reached by using hashtags. Customer communication is two-way thanks to the platform. Because it's a public event, a successful performance benefits your business.
Pinterest:	Users can share and save images on this visual social media platform. There are various justifications for why companies ought to adopt Pinterest. It will enable you to connect with a new audience. One pin can result in ten additional pins and so forth.

Source: Adapted from Omar & Atteya (2020); Chaudhuri (2020); Minculete & Olar (2018) and Kotarba (2018).

According to Schutte & Chauke (2022), digital marketing channels, which also refer to as e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) are a variety of channels that marketers use to interact with consumers. These channels illustrated in Table 1 are strategically used by businesses to enhance communication with consumers, which in turn enhances consumers' relationships in terms of supporting sales and creating awareness among customers (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). Therefore, Table 1 enumerates the most common channels of digital marketing and their related description such as those employed by marketers to communicate products or services to consumers since the emergence of digital technology. Therefore, during and in the post-COVID-19 era, digital marketing appears to be useful to consumers by granting them the opportunity for better deals on the products and services they are intending to acquire. According to Minculete & Olar (2018), the uniqueness of digital marketing is given by some specific and relational features included in seven operational functions, namely: personality; confidentiality; customer service; the community; security; and sales promotion. The section that follows discusses the influence of

digital marketing on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in South Africa.

## **The Influence of Digital Marketing on Consumers' Buying Behaviour in the Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Era in South Africa**

Several studies displayed that social media marketing has a substantial outcome on consumer buying behaviour in terms of making a buying decision (Moira et al., 2022). Schutte & Chauke (2022) defined consumer behaviour as the dynamic interaction of effect and cognition, manner or habit, and the environment by which human beings conduct the exchange aspects of their lives. Therefore, Schutte & Chauke (2022) and Moira et al. (2022) emphasized that there are a diversity of factors that determine the way consumers react to a specific marketing or advertising campaign. These factors may include customer perceived value, ethics, customer engagement, and behavioural economics. In digital marketing, these factors contribute to the complexity of using this medium. However, in South Africa, digital marketing has rapidly emerged at a speedy pace and influenced many South Africans' buying behaviour. This development in digital marketing is mainly supported by the increase in the number of people gaining access to the internet in South Africa. Furthermore, studies showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa has experienced an increase reaching around 31.18 million internet users which represented about 68% of the population (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). Statistics South Africa (2020) stated that 28.99 million people in South Africa are mostly mobile internet users. In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, the use of mobile internet was expected to increase and the increase was estimated to reach 80% of the total population by the year 2023 and behind.

Currently, it is predictable that each consumer could be exposed to view nearly Ten thousand advertisements daily via social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, email marketing, and many others, which have seen a speedy intensification in the online advertisement (Schutte & Chauke, 2022 and Moira et al., 2022). According to Statistics SA (2020), advertisement revenue through digital marketing has been valued at U.S 39, 9 billion dollars in recent years, compared to the year 2010, when digital marketing revenue was calculated at U.S 1, 9 billion dollars. This shows sufficiently that in South Africa, digital marketing uses intensely digital technology such as the internet, mobile phones, display advertising, and other digital mediums to promote products or services (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). It also facilitates brands to sustainably remain relevant by making themselves visible across several platforms and touch points of digital marketing. Thus, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic generated several opportunities for businesses to adapt their operations to technological change. During the pandemic, it became evident that businesses that quickly embraced and migrated to digital technology were less obstructed by lockdown measures, compared to businesses that had not fully swung to digitally integrate their operations. Throughout the lockdown period, consumers as well were forced to swing and shift their buying behaviour through efforts towards learning the practice of social and digital media for various reasons, from seeking information to making purchases decision (Omar & Atteya, 2020).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has inclined most South Africans to social media in terms of their purchasing behaviour. It became a culture today that South Africans and many other world citizens are easily influenced by digital marketing trends as they love connection and recognition (Moira et al., 2022). It also became a habit or interest for many South Africans to share their best and worst purchases online. Therefore, digital technology facilitates businesses to



analyze market demands and increase brand recognition, as consumers are more convenient to stay connected. This makes social media equally beneficial for both consumers and businesses. As a result of this trend, companies have been allocating significant portions of their advertising budget to digital marketing (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). Therefore, before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic era, the emergence of digital marketing has influenced consumers' buying behaviour in a certain direction. In this post-COVID-19 era, most companies find it gainful to adapt and modify business models, occasioned by the dynamic pace of technological progress and innovation that trigger changes in consumer and social behaviours (Kotarba, 2018). Thus, the influence of digital marketing on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in South Africa, presents both opportunities and challenges for businesses and consumers to operate in the new ventures of constant technological innovation (Anitha & Vijai, 2021).

### **Opportunities Created by Digital Marketing during and in the Post COVID-19 Era in South Africa**

According to Anitha & Vijai (2021) and Taiminen & Karjaluo (2015), digital marketing in its various forms presents several benefits or opportunities and is positively linked to small business growth, performance and competitiveness. Digital channels of communication provide opportunities for small businesses to attract new customers and reach existing customers more efficiently. According to Omar & Atteya (2020), the influence of digital marketing on business and consumers, and especially marketing techniques, has been significant during and in the post-COVID-19 era in South Africa. Moira et al. (2022) postulates that social media marketing has created opportunities for small businesses to grow and reduce costs and it became easier for small businesses to connect with their customers and influence their buying decision. Therefore, there are dynamic trends displayed or observed from ancient techniques of marketing (Traditional marketing) to new approaches (digital marketing), where digital channels at this time play a vital role. Also, a considerable shift from outbound marketing strategies to inbound marketing methods has taken place in South Africa, as digital marketing is seen as an innovative or groundbreaking approach to marketing that offers businesses new opportunities for meeting and communicating with customers (Chaudhuri, 2020).

Therefore, similar to traditional marketing channels, which involves Pull marketing and Push marketing, digital marketing also makes use of Push marketing by getting a business brand name to many potential customers via social media posts, tweets, feeds, email and newsletter in this category; and Pull marketing where digital marketing allows customers/consumers to make their decision based on what they need, while they start searching or looking for using social media, search engine, blogs, websites or specialist online directory (Chaudhuri, 2020). This implies that marketing activities carried out through digital channels enabled marketers to intensify and improve communication in a straight line with potential customers, regardless of their geographic location. Digital technology usage has shaped a universal school of learning and understanding the way to use digital channels by each individual, whether as a marketer, customer, or consumer. Marketers and consumers are currently using various channels of digital marketing such as the web, e-mail, mobile phones, digital T.V., etc., for several functions (Chaudhuri, 2020). Mostly, they are used for promoting brands (products and services), and for instance, some use them for getting new customers, whereas some specialize in serving customers. For businesses, digital marketing influences consumers via the provision of communication or information regarding merchandise, advertising online, and marketing via the

most preferred channels of communication such as websites, social media, YouTube, Twitter, e-mails, Smartphones, LinkedIn, and other digital channels (Sinha et al., 2022).

In the post-COVID-19 era, there is an affirmative impression that the channels of digital marketing are having a progressive influence on consumers' buying decisions, as it is still developing. Channels of digital marketing illustrated in Table 1 continue to be seen as a good marketing strategy and platform for businesses and consumers to exchange information. According to Omar & Atteya (2020), the emergence of digital technology has led to the creation and occurrence of Small business development, and consequently, Job creation. In South Africa, for example, Small businesses like Uber Eat, Uber Taxi, and many others have emerged quickly via the intense use of the Internet and through the application of digital technology. Schutte & Chauke (2022) and Taiminen & Karjaluo (2015) emphasized that channels of digital marketing have offered and still offering the following opportunities to consumers:

- Digital advertisements assist in getting the best possible deals and provide a real-time exchange of information through the help of the internet.
- Products are advertised at an acceptable price.
- Consumers are able to shop from the comfort of their homes and products are getting delivered on time.
- It is convenient to do shopping from the comfort of your home without having to go out to the shops and have it delivered at no extra cost.
- Shopping online makes it easier for consumers to get the products they want as they don't have to move from store to store looking for a particular product.
- Digital marketing appears to be a smooth process where consumers are able to shop for whatever product they intend to buy and get it delivered securely to their homes.
- Digital adverts simplified their shopping experience. These advertisements make it easier for consumers to get the products that they want to purchase as they normally send through specials, which save their time.
- Digital marketing provides information on the products that consumers sometimes like and they are mostly at a cheaper price than what people will normally find in big retail shops etc.
- According to Tandon & Kaur (2018), digital marketing offers the following opportunities to businesses:
- It builds a good image of enterprise as technologies are key for competitiveness.
- Facilitates both internal and external communication: positive relationship between utilization and outcomes.
- Improve efficiency and enhance internal and external communication.
- Digital channels of communication have been found to be one of the key factors of successful marketing in SMEs
- It reduces the wear and tear of products as they are not handled frequently.
- It saves time and reduces costs which will be beneficial for both customers and sellers.
- It ensures the quality of the product and reduces fraudulent activities as there is transparency.
- It improves business processes and strengthens competitive advantage.
- It facilitates access to information anywhere at any time of the day.
- It provides the ability to increase the productivity of the organization as the market is broadly scattered, etc.

According to Prasanna (2022), there are various advantages and disadvantages occasioned by the use of digital technology tools. In light of the above description of opportunities offered by digital marketing to consumers and businesses, Table 2 shows other momentous and multiplied benefits of digital marketing experienced by consumers during and in the post-COVID-19 era. According to Tandon & Kaur (2018), digital marketing allows the building of brand loyalty and impression in the eye of consumers, trapping new customers,

establishing the product as per the industry standard, technology leadership, control strategies, and scarce resources.

<b>Table 2</b> <b>BENEFITS OF DIGITAL MARKETING EXPERIENCED DURING AND IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA</b>	
<b>Benefits of digital marketing during and in the post-COVID-19 era</b>	<b>Related understanding of the benefits of digital marketing experienced during and in the post-COVID-19 era</b>
Global Reach and Visibility	Utilizing online platforms, digital marketing raises customer awareness of goods and services all around the world. By granting them equal client access, this strategy (digital marketing) helps small firms join in and compete with major corporations in the traditional market. Traditional marketing is geographically limited, and starting a global marketing campaign may be challenging, expensive, and time-consuming. On the other hand, because digital marketing occurs online, it has a far wider audience that you may contact. With an online store, even a small local business owner may connect with customers around the world. This would be impossible for traditional marketing to accomplish or would be too expensive. Businesses can now benefit from numerous new growth opportunities as a result of accessibility to the internet. Any business can profit from the combination of global visibility and reach; for a small outlay, a website enables you to explore new markets and do international business.
Local Reach	While having a global reach, digital marketing also increases local awareness, which is crucial if your business depends on local clientele. For businesses trying to draw in more customers, local SEO and marketing that are specific to the area may be beneficial. Think about the reach you can have with digital marketing compared to the reach you would get by printing and handing out pamphlets in your neighborhood.
Affordability	Digital marketing provides affordable options for promoting your company both locally and internationally. It makes it possible for even tiny businesses to compete with bigger ones by using more focused strategies. First off, the majority of these strategies will be free (such as SEO, social media, and content marketing). The popularity of digital marketing may be due to the fact that it is an economical way to run a business. Digital marketing is far less expensive than traditional marketing strategies. The digital marketing methodology is simpler to implement with a limited budget and infrastructure, which is favorable for small businesses.
Easy to Start	Although there are many aspects of digital marketing to learn, getting started is rather easy. The complexity is increased by the type of objectives and the magnitude of the campaigns. It is simply a matter of choosing and implementing the optimal strategy for your business.
Niche Targeting	Even if you do not have a clear understanding of your target audience, digital marketing enables you to extract data to determine which audiences would perform best for you and optimize your campaign around them. Targeting can be done in a number of ways, such as employing keywords for SEO, pay-per-click advertising, or demographic information from social media. With so many possibilities for targeting, you can make sure that every campaign reaches the right audience. Additionally, it helps with the analysis of shifting customer behavior and the adaptation of ads in light of such changes. Any organization can succeed if it has the ability to quickly recognize shifting customer demands.
Multiple Digital Marketing Strategies	For different types of organizations, there are several digital marketing strategies available. A B2B company seeking global leads might employ a totally different approach than a B2C business selling clothing locally. Conversion-based ad campaigns may be more beneficial, even though content marketing and SEO may be more profitable for some firms. The goal is to continuously assess business performance and adjust strategies and practices throughout time to the needs of the company. A really effective digital marketing plan changes and adapts quickly as the needs of the organization change.

Multiple Content Types	The variety of content that is used to market your company online is another important advantage of digital marketing. You can select from a number of content types for different platforms to maintain the freshness of your brand and create effective online campaigns. Contrary to traditional marketing, it is simpler to alter one piece of content to fit a variety of platforms.
Higher Engagement	One of the most important advantages of digital marketing is increased engagement. Fundamentally, digital marketing is meant to be very engaging. Users can interact with your website by clicking on a paid advertisement, sharing a blog post like a photo, or bookmarking a video. The fact that each and every one of these acts can be tracked is the best feature. This enables companies to produce engaging content to increase brand awareness and revenue. Online interaction between businesses and consumers will increase client loyalty. Businesses that employ captivating formats in their online activities stand a better chance of converting indifferent visitors into devoted customers. A brand can raise consumer awareness and become more well-known by using digital marketing. A good marketing plan that incorporates blogs, social media content, and marketing offers to enable the company to draw clients' attention and build trust.
Results that are tractable and measurable	To assess a marketing campaign's success in terms of consumer reach and retention, digital analytics tools and other online indicators can be employed. It provides vital information on user engagement with and reaction to your website and advertising.
Analytics and Optimization	Another important advantage of digital marketing is web analytics, which assesses the outcomes of activities in real time. This makes it simpler to enhance subsequent campaigns and quickly fix any potential mistakes. Analyzing your digital marketing tactics also enables you to identify every source of traffic and get total command over your sales funnels.
24/7 Available service	No longer are customers required to wait for your store to open before making a purchase. They can now visit your website or app whenever they want thanks to internet marketing. This enables you to increase brand recognition among your target market.
Improved conversion rates	With just a few quick clicks on your website, the digital marketing process creates a rapid and seamless engagement with potential clients. As a result, marketing initiatives enhance consumers' likelihood of purchasing.
Brand Development	Building a brand image for the product or service through marketing is crucial if you want customers to think of you as a reliable brand. Through a range of targeted strategies and direct campaigning, digital marketing helped a brand develop. This method increases customer engagement, which enables customers to sense the brand's unique selling proposition and value. Customers' perceptions of the business are improved as a result.
Accessibility	Customers and businesses can access marketing strategies built on digital platforms instantly and from any location. The availability of services and products is disclosed, giving potential customers the impression that they are in a virtual store. Customers can rate products and make suggestions to businesses to aid in decision-making.
Personalisation	Digital marketing is more successful when there is feedback from customers and communication with prospects. Building brand loyalty and reputation involves engaging the target market with a product that meets their wants and becoming closer to them. Digital marketing provides a platform for individualized marketing by producing original material for customers. The objective is to give customers the impression that the business is attentive to their needs. Through the digital market, consumer needs are met effectively and efficiently. Additionally, faster and easier customer engagement promotes customer satisfaction with products because customers can compare items with ease and make informed purchases.
Social currency	With the use of content marketing techniques and social currency, digital marketing enables you to create compelling campaigns. By being shared and going viral, this content (photos, videos, and articles) can earn social currency.
Growth opportunities for	One of the most significant benefits of digital marketing is the ability to choose any marketing strategy depending on the budget and to easily reach a huge audience for less

small business	money. Launching any new product in the market is a highly challenging undertaking in traditional marketing.
Convenience for the customers	Marketing the goods online is simple and does not need setting up a local outlet, therefore distance obstacles are removed. Nowadays, one can easily expand their business internationally without having to invest in distributor channels in other nations.
Less cost	Compared to online marketing, the cost of selling products at retail stores is very expensive. Since one may place orders based on product demand, one shouldn't have to spend money on store maintenance and product display.
Build good relationships with the customers	Because it enhances customer retention, the internet aids in the development of positive relationships between consumers and marketers. It fosters open lines of communication with customers from the moment they make a purchase until they provide product-related feedback, and it also addresses any questions that customers may have.
Instant Comparison between the products	Customers may quickly compare the products, decide the one they want to buy, and proceed from there. Customers can choose a product at their own discretion through online marketing, and they can then decide based on their pleasure.
Clear Information available for the product	In digital marketing, all the material is readily accessible and publicly published online so that any customer may review it and make an informed decision. The availability of every piece of information in depth on the Internet contrasts with the retailer's ability to supply only a small amount of information in physical stores.

Source: Adapted from Omar & Atteya (2020) and Taiminen & Karjaluoto (2015)

Table 2 discusses the advantages or benefits of digital marketing over traditional marketing during and in the post-COVID-19 era. It explains that as a result of a long period of lockdown measures, there was increased use of digital marketing as a technology for sales in digital environments, which has led to a series of research findings during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It also shows that there was a significant intensification usage of digital technology in the way that human interactions were modified considerably as a result of engagement on social networks. However, the ascent of net platforms has expedited behavioural changes associated with activities, habitats, and interactions (Omar & Atteya, 2020). Therefore, during and in the post-COVID-19 era, consumers' behaviour has influenced and changed the need for organizations to re-strategize their marketing activities within the digital space (Omar & Atteya, 2020). Furthermore, organizations have perceived that digital and social media marketing have positive impacts on consumers' buying decision processes (Sinha et al., 2022). Consequently, during and in the post-COVID-19 era, with the increase in the use of social media, most organizations (marketing departments) have technologically advanced a wide range of options on the market for branding their product, such as advertising, brand-name business enterprise content, social network contribution, and rising customer engagement prospects to engage with the brand (Moira et al., 2022). Moreover, apps or material for digital marketing were most often erected to communicate with the user at anytime and anywhere, with the intention of informing, engaging entertaining, or offering feedback for the product (Saleem & Siddik, 2021).

Currently, via digital technology tools support, consumers make purchase decisions daily and many variables affect any decision made by the buyer. Various applications of the internet, social networks, smartphone apps, and other digital communication tools have turned out to be part of the daily life of many users around the world (Tandon & Kaur, 2018). These days, in most countries worldwide, including South Africa, consumers are becoming more involved in the creation of the product and services they purchase, and that has changed the control from manufacturer to customer. Web users are significantly rising due to better access to mobile devices, which indeed occupy a majority of their time (Sinha et al., 2022). While Table 2 discussed the benefits of digital marketing experienced during and in the post-COVID-19 era,

Table 3 shows some critical challenges or disadvantages of digital marketing experienced by businesses and consumers during and in the post-COVID-19 era.

<b>Table 3</b> <b>DISADVANTAGES/CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL MARKETING EXPERIENCED DURING AND IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA</b>	
<b>Disadvantages of the digital marketing experienced during and in the post - COVID-19 era</b>	<b>Related understanding of the disadvantages of digital marketing experienced during and in the post-COVID-19 era</b>
Skill and training requirements	It is vital to amass the necessary knowledge and competence on the digital platform in order to successfully carry out marketing operations. With the rapid pace of technological advancement, being up to date with tools, media, and procedures is essential if you want to be able to respond promptly to any changes. Knowledge of how SMEs utilize digital channels in their marketing requires more in-depth knowledge. The skills of the employees to utilize the channels have been identified as a significant enabler of (or barrier to) adoption of digital channels in SMEs.
Time-consuming	It can take a lot of time to optimize online advertising campaigns and create content. It's crucial to analyze results, measure your progress, and make necessary plan adjustments to ensure a return on investment. It can take a while to plan and carry out the many tasks involved in optimizing online advertising and creating relevant material for promotions.
High competition and intense rivalry	Internet marketing gives you the opportunity to connect with a global audience, but it also puts you in contact with foreign rivals. It might be challenging to stand out from the crowd and attract attention among the different messages directed at consumers online. Your marketing strategy can be duplicated instantly. Competitors have been charged with theft. Defend your marketing plan and campaign from competitors.
Complaints and feedback	Anyone can remark on products or services using digital platforms, and those comments or criticisms can be shared with the company audience through social media networks and review sites. Any unfavorable review can have a detrimental impact on customers unless the company has established a strong foundation through brand loyalty and efficient customer service. It's a challenge to keep the brand's reputation by effectively handling criticism.
Technology Dependence	Digital technology and internet connectivity are the only things that digital marketing depends on. There may be periods when the website is unavailable, the links don't work, or user access is restricted. Potential clients may become unhappy as a result and look for alternative providers. To stay up with the constantly evolving technical environment, a website review or maintenance is necessary on a regular basis.
Negative Publicity	Positive feedback takes longer to propagate than negative input. Even one unfavorable review about the business could harm its reputation. Additionally, online social media marketing is riskier. Unfavorable comments thus gain prominence and are widely shared.
Issues of Security and Privacy	The rising use of online platforms calls for better website protection and security. A digital marketer should constantly use firewalls and powerful antivirus to secure and defend network connections. The legal criteria for protecting and using customer data in digital marketing efforts must be followed in order to allay worries about data breaches. The gathering and use of client data for digital marketing goals are subject to a number of legal considerations. Ensure that you abide by all privacy and data protection laws.
Highly reliant on the Internet	The internet is incredibly important to digital marketing. Only strong internet connections enable access to the internet. Our reliance on the Internet for necessities to continue living our daily lives has grown. We might not be able to survive as easily without the Internet if this tendency keeps going, as most people

	anticipate it will.
Lack of trust	Customers don't trust online advertisements; some even think they're fraudulent. One of the main problems of the digital market is that when clients look for a certain product made by a specific company, other comparable competitor products also made by the same market tactics emerge on the front page. Because there are so many options available to them, shoppers become perplexed and end up purchasing a higher-quality, less expensive item.
Harm the image of the brand	Due to the abundance of identical products in digital marketing, product duplication rises. As a result, consumers disregard branded products in favor of less expensive ones.
Beneficial for only consumer goods:	The inability to advertise industrial and medicinal products through digital channels is one of the practical disadvantages of digital marketing.
Lack of Digital literacy in the world	Many portions of the nation lack understanding and residents of distant places are still unaware of digitization. Finding the right person to take care of digital marketing within the company has been the main obstacle.
Unaffordable smartphones:	The first thing that comes to mind when discussing the digital market is the need for cell phones. The use of digital market technology is a result of the absence of reasonably priced cell phones.
Increase in cybercrime in Africa	In Africa, there is no defined mechanism of security against cybercrime. Cybercrime is more prevalent in Africa.
The problem of connectivity:	Africa contains tens of thousands of villages, but without a reliable electrical source, digitization is not yet a reality there. The digital market is still inaccessible to these villages.
The problem of a down server/ Low internet speed	Both pre-and post-digital in South Africa have the issue of down servers. Today, the issue of slow internet speed is increasingly prevalent due to the rise in internet usage. With the introduction of 4G internet speed and a rise in internet consumption, internet speed slowed down.
Human resources, financial resources, and technological resources.	Whereas human and financial resources were strong determinants of adoption, technological resources played a minor role for micro firms. SMEs lacked sufficient human resources, capital, and knowledge to adopt digital channels fully. The lack of human resources, time, and expertise are the largest barriers to digital marketing usage in the industrial context among both SMEs and larger corporations. A lack of financial resources/capital is typically considered a barrier to the growth of SMEs and thus also acts as a barrier to the adoption and use of digital channels.

Source: Adapted from Omar & Atteya (2020); Tandon & Kaur (2018); Taiminen & Karjaluo (2015)

As seen in Table 3, digital marketing has given rise to some challenges during and in the post-COVID-19 era. The influence of digital marketing on the decision-making process for businesses and consumers encountered critical issues, such as requirements for skill and training programmes, technology dependence, issues of security and privacy, etc., (Omar & Atteya, 2020; Tandon & Kaur, 2018; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Various studies have been done with regard to digital marketing on how it affects businesses' and consumers' decisions. However, it is understandable from the review of literature that, due to the rise of Internet user involvement, actions and decision-making have intensely shifted. Businesses and consumers, therefore, need to consider these changes and adapt themselves to progressive technology in the way marketing activities are done in different markets. Challenges of digital marketing are therefore an opportunity for businesses to review, adapt, change and adjust appropriately their marketing activities in various markets. Other opportunities are for both businesses and consumers to sustainably learn and adapt to trends of technological and innovative change. However, despite these challenges, digital technology, and digital marketing channels are currently important networks of jobs creations and advertisement. In this post-COVID-19 pandemic era, many

companies that are developing and adapting their businesses to a digital platform are in quest of people with skills and knowledge in the following capacities: Influencer Manager, Digital marketer, Digital Marketing Coordinator, Digital Marketing Strategist, Marketing Copywriter, Digital Marketing Manager/Specialist, Digital Content writer, SEO/SEM Marketing specialist, Fashion-Ecommerce Digital Marketing Manager, Head Digital Marketing and strategy, Digital assistant (brand, fashion, and retail), Digital Media Marketer, etc. (Glassdoor, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed and examined literature aligned to the influence of digital marketing on consumers' buying behaviour in the post-Covid-19 era in South Africa. As a matter of fact, literature shows that South Africans rank the highest in the most time spent online in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. Due to emerging market trends and technological advancement, online platforms had evolved to become business and marketing channels. Furthermore, because of economic changes, many traditional businesses have been shifting and adapting their operations to e-commerce and social media marketing for them to remain competitive. Digital marketers are becoming more and more essential due to the rise in internet usage. In reaction to the expansion of mobile technology, businesses are investing in their digital capabilities. South Africa, like many other nations throughout the world, is exhibiting a significant need for qualified digital marketers. However, the industry's skill pool is still fairly small. Content strategy, data and analytics, brand management, SEO, social media, website design and development, and e-commerce are all necessary required skills in digital marketing. Interesting job opportunities in digital marketing are made possible by the industry's constant evolution. As a result, in the post-COVID-19 era, organisations continue to prefer using virtual conferences, seminars, and webinars to connect with their stakeholders. This implies that businesses will continue to employ smart marketers to improve their chances of creating innovative, captivating content and attracting leads. Therefore, the literature demonstrates that social media has a profound effect on people's lives and buying behaviour. It plays a significant role, as many people spend vast amounts of time using social media in every aspect of their lives. Currently, the use of social media has steadily increased in South Africa, as South Africans usually use various internet platforms in order to evaluate potential purchases and make a final decision.

Consequently, digital marketing advertisements are enhancing consumers' shopping experience by providing convenience and savings opportunities. It is a useful tool for saving time to browse through specials and look for products as these are sent to them through digital advertisements. Thus, digital technology tools have brought a positive change in the behaviour of consumers during and in the post-COVID-19 era in South Africa. However, traditional marketing still influences consumers and SMEs that are poorly connected to digital technology tools. Also, channels of digital marketing appear to be less profitable/costly to consumers and businesses that are lacking appropriate digital technology skills. It may also be observed similar impacts from other countries around the world. But, the greater change can be seen in big cities and among working people due to lack of time, it appears convenient for them to do buying and payments at any time anywhere, using digital technology. The literature suggests that digital marketing (advertisements), especially social media, is the most common tool marketers use to promote their brands and by encouraging interaction through social media platforms, social media enhances consumer behaviour towards the brands. In addition, the literature also indicates how social media communication positively influences consumer attitudes. Accordingly, business needs to continuously adapt their strategies to ensure that they are geared to meet and



satisfy the needs of consumers. As it does, it exposes businesses to both risks and opportunities. That is why digital marketing using social media, influences consumers' buying behaviour and remains a vital strategy for every business as it gives a distinct perspective of a profound impact on society than traditional marketing.

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