

# Evaluating the perceived marketing channel effectiveness used by marketing agencies for South African SMEs: Integrating digital and traditional methods

Greyling, Leonie<sup>1\*</sup> Van Wyk, Divan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> WorkWell, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0003-2077-5690

<sup>2</sup> Orcid: 0000-0003-3585-9600

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## Abstract

In the rapidly evolving marketing landscape of South African SMEs, this study examines the perceived effectiveness of marketing channels employed by agencies integrating digital and traditional methods. Digital marketing's precision, real-time analytics, and cost-effectiveness are weighed against traditional marketing's broad reach and trustworthiness. The purpose and motivation of this study lie in providing empirical insights into how marketing agencies can optimise the use of these channels to enhance the effectiveness of their marketing efforts.

The study employs a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with marketing professionals from various agencies. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced strategies and perceptions regarding marketing channel integration.

The research underscores the strategic necessity of integrating digital and traditional marketing channels to optimise marketing investments. Effective integration enhances reach, engagement, and brand consistency, though it requires substantial resource allocation and diverse skills. The findings advocate for a symbiotic relationship between digital and traditional channels, proposing that a unified strategy can significantly boost marketing efficacy.

This research contributes valuable insights into the complexities of integrated marketing, while providing actionable insights for marketing agencies to enhance their strategies in a digital era.

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<sup>1</sup>\*Corresponding author

\* E-mail address: [Leonie.greyling@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Leonie.greyling@nwu.ac.za)

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

In the dynamic landscape of South African small and medium enterprise (SME) marketing, the interplay between digital and traditional marketing channels is of strategic importance. As SMEs manage the intricacies of a market driven by technology, it is vital to understand how to balance and integrate these different marketing avenues. Traditional marketing has historically been fundamental in reaching large audiences through extensive offline strategies such as print, radio, and television advertisements. However, the advent of the digital age introduced new marketing approaches, with online- and social media platforms enabling more targeted, interactive, and quantifiable campaigns (Deepa, 2022; Todor, 2016).

Despite the growing prominence of digital channels, traditional marketing continues to be of importance, especially when targeting demographic groups that are less active on digital platforms (Bhayani & Vachhani, 2014). The movement towards digital marketing does not diminish the value of traditional methods; rather, it underscores the necessity for a more cohesive strategy that capitalises on the distinct advantages of each channel to optimise marketing returns on investment (Moorman *et al.*, 2022).

The challenges of integrating digital and traditional marketing stem from their inherent differences in reach, cost-effectiveness, and measurability. Digital marketing offers advantages in terms of lower costs and enhanced targeting capabilities, while traditional marketing provides broader reach and potentially a greater impact on brand recognition (Lee & Cho, 2020). For SMEs, which frequently function within limited financial means, the strategic distribution of resources across these platforms is crucial to ensure both immediate effectiveness and enduring brand establishment (Reynolds, 2002).

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the significance of digital marketing, as consumer behaviours have progressively gravitated towards online channels. This shift has compelled SMEs to swiftly modify their marketing approaches to maintain customer interaction and drive sales within a predominantly digital marketplace (Altay *et al.*, 2022).

Businesses may opt to engage a third party to undertake marketing on their behalf so that their marketing budget is allocated to experts who have the expertise to optimise their return on marketing investment (ROMI). For marketing agencies working with South African SMEs, crafting strategies that effectively integrate digital and traditional marketing is of

crucial importance. These strategies must consider the distinctive attributes of the target markets of the SMEs, financial constraints, and the overall objectives of the marketing efforts (Bayazovna & Saidjonovich, 2021). The effectiveness of such integrated strategies is frequently assessed, not only on immediate sales, but also in terms of long-term brand loyalty and customer interaction, with these metrics reflecting the evolving standards for marketing efficacy in the digital era (Kehrer, 2013).

## **1.2. Problem Statement**

As the South African market continues to evolve within the digital age, marketing agencies face significant opportunities and challenges in serving SMEs. The core dilemma for marketing agencies lies in strategically integrating digital and traditional marketing channels to optimise ROMI, while catering to the specific requirements of SMEs. The efficacy of conventional marketing platforms, despite being validated, is progressively being questioned due to digital disparity, where younger, more technology-savvy customers favour online engagements (Deepa, 2022; Lee & Cho, 2020). Conversely, a portion of the consumer base still exhibits a stronger affinity towards traditional forms of media, underscoring the necessity for a well-rounded marketing strategy to navigate these intricacies (Moorman *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the transition to digital platforms, compelling SMEs to urgently revise their marketing approaches. This shift presents various hurdles, as SMEs often lack the necessary digital literacy and resources to effectively leverage these platforms (Altay *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the high failure rate of SMEs in South Africa, exacerbated by inadequate market insights and limited marketing expertise, underscores the urgency for marketing agencies to develop more integrated, effective, and flexible marketing strategies (Bayazovna & Saidjonovich, 2021).

Consequently, this study explores the perceived effectiveness of integrated marketing strategies employed by South African marketing agencies for SMEs. By examining these perceptions, the study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on SME marketing effectiveness, particularly within a post-pandemic context where both digital and traditional marketing channels play pivotal roles.

### 1.3. Research objectives

As this study aims to determine the perceived effectiveness of integrated marketing strategies employed by South African marketing agencies for SMEs, the following research objectives are explored:

- **To assess the effectiveness of digital and traditional marketing channels:** Explore and assess the perceived effectiveness of digital and traditional marketing channels as used by marketing agencies for SMEs in South Africa. This objective aims to understand how these channels individually and collectively impact the marketing success of SMEs.
- **To analyse the integration of marketing channels by marketing agencies:** Explore how marketing agencies integrate digital and traditional marketing strategies to serve SMEs effectively. This includes examining the strategies that agencies believe to be the most effective in achieving optimal customer engagement.

## 2. Literature review

The literature review sets a foundation to understand the complex dynamics that influence marketing success for SMEs in South Africa.

### 2.1. Evolution of marketing strategies

A significant evolution of marketing strategies has occurred over the past 50 years (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Initially, marketing was defined by its role in creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings of value for customers, clients, partners, and society (American Marketing Association, 2017). Innovative approaches that fundamentally redefined marketing emerged with the introduction of new media and technologies, as highlighted by Lamberton and Stephen (2016). This evolution led to the recognition of its importance in the political, social, and nonprofit spheres (Gamble *et al.*, 2011).

### 2.2. Transition from traditional to digital marketing

The rapid advancement of technology is a driving force in the transition from traditional to digital marketing. Traditional methods, such as print media, billboards and television, have historically been the cornerstone of marketing strategies. However, the ability of social media, email, and online advertising to target specific audiences and provide measurable results led to an increase in the prominence of digital marketing (Taneja, 2021).



### **2.3. Traditional marketing channels**

Traditional marketing channels – including print media, direct mail, and face-to-face engagements – remain relevant, especially for SMEs targeting local markets. These channels could effectively aid in building brand awareness and customer loyalty. Consequently, traditional marketing mechanisms continue to play a crucial role in specific demographic segments, despite the increase in digital marketing (Geraghty & Conway, 2016).

### **2.4. Digital marketing channels**

The exponential growth of digital marketing offers cost-effective and measurable mechanisms for SMEs to reach target audiences. Key digital marketing strategies such as social media marketing, search engine optimisation (SEO), and email marketing allow for precise targeting and real-time performance tracking. For SMEs with limited marketing budgets, this is an attractive proposition (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

### **2.5. Challenges in measuring marketing impact for SMEs**

The effectiveness of SMEs' marketing efforts to achieve the intended economic or strategic goals can be ascertained through the measurement of a set of financial- and non-financial indicators, defined as (ROMI) (Solcansky & Simberova, 2010).

However, SMEs are faced with significant challenges in measuring marketing impact, such as limited resources, inadequate expertise, and poorly developed infrastructure, which hinder their ability to effectively gauge the economic value and brand equity generated by their marketing efforts. In addition, traditional management practices typically do not align with SMEs' unique operational realities, complicating their ability to adopt robust frameworks to effectively measure ROMI (Jovanov & Stojanovski, 2012; Mazzarol & Reboud, 2020). The diverse nature of marketing channels further complicates measurement. In contrast to the extensive metrics offered by digital marketing, less tangible data is provided by traditional methods, making the comparison of different strategies and the effective allocation of resources challenging. Additionally, the fast-paced evolution of digital marketing demands continuous adaptation and specialised technical expertise, which many SMEs lack. Furthermore, timely adjustments are hindered by traditional marketing methods' reliance on slower and less precise indicators. Consequently, simplified measurement tools, targeted training, and strategic guidance tailored to the unique circumstances of SMEs are required to address these challenges (Paşcalău & Urziceanu, 2020; Swani *et al.*, 2021; Taneja, 2021).

## **2.6. Marketing within the South African context**

Marketing strategies in South Africa face unique challenges and opportunities. Kallier (2017) explored the usage of different marketing communication tools among South African SMEs, revealing a predominant reliance on digital channels such as websites and email communications; however, traditional methods, such as business cards, still hold value. Interestingly, tools such as multimedia messaging services (MMS) and website-based articles (blogs) are used less frequently. Kallier's study highlighted the importance of an omnichannel approach, combining both traditional and digital strategies to maximise marketing effectiveness.

## **2.7. Integration of marketing channels by marketing agencies**

Integrating digital and traditional marketing is a complex but rewarding strategy for marketing agencies serving SMEs. According to Lee and Cho (2020), successful integration requires a strategic approach to capitalise on the strengths of each channel to create a cohesive and impactful marketing strategy. This not only involves using both digital and traditional methods concurrently, but also ensuring that they complement each other.

The integration of marketing channels can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour, blending the immediate responsiveness of digital marketing with the depth and emotive power of traditional media. This dual approach ensures that SMEs can engage with various consumer segments on multiple fronts, enhancing brand recall and improving conversion rates by consistently reinforcing messages across all platforms (Bayazovna & Saidjonovich, 2021).

Identifying and implementing best practices in the integration of digital and traditional marketing channels is crucial for optimising the effectiveness of SME marketing strategies. Deepa (2022) suggests that one of the best practices includes utilising digital analytics to inform decisions on traditional media placements, which could lead to more precise and impactful broad media campaigns. Digital analytics could involve using insights from online consumer behaviour to target television ads more effectively or align radio broadcasting times with peak online engagement periods, for instance.

Additionally, integrating online and offline data provides a comprehensive perspective on customer interactions, which supports a unified marketing approach that utilises the unique strengths of both digital and traditional approaches. Maintaining consistent messaging across all channels is also a critical best practice; it guarantees that the brand's narrative remains

consistent, whether it is presented on social media or a billboard (Bayazovna & Saidjonovich, 2021).

Another best practice is the effective communication and coordination between digital and traditional marketing teams to ensure that strategies are not only aligned but also mutually reinforcing. This entails holding regular meetings, setting shared objectives, and conducting integrated planning sessions to ensure that team members are aligned with a unified marketing goal, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their collective efforts (Lee & Cho, 2020).

Considering the evolving dynamics between digital and traditional marketing channels, it becomes crucial to investigate the perceived effectiveness of the integrated marketing strategies used by South African marketing agencies for SMEs. The literature highlights that while each channel offers unique benefits, combining them could enhance the precision and measurability of digital marketing alongside the broad reach and deep engagement of traditional marketing, thereby boosting overall marketing efficacy. However, the complexity of effectively merging these strategies suggests that not all integrations may result in optimal outcomes. Therefore, understanding how these integrated strategies are perceived by industry professionals can provide valuable insights into their actual effectiveness, identify potential gaps, and suggest actionable improvements.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### **3.1. Research approach and design**

An interpretivist philosophy was adopted to develop an understanding of the perceptions of marketing agencies with respect to the integration of digital and traditional marketing strategies for SMEs in South Africa. This approach allowed for the exploration of complex issues to develop an understanding of marketing professionals' subjective meanings and experiences. The design was exploratory, aiming to uncover detailed insights into the strategies, challenges, and effectiveness of different marketing channels. The exploratory nature of this study is vital to navigate the relatively uncharted nuances of how digital and traditional marketing strategies are synthesised in practice.

#### **3.2. Data collection and analysis techniques**

Data was collected through a qualitative lens, using semi-structured interviews consisting of specific themes with open-ended questions to focus on participants' subjective experiences.



This technique was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for deeper exploration of topics as they arose during interviews. This flexibility was instrumental in uncovering nuanced perspectives on the integration of marketing strategies, allowing respondents to diverge into significant but unforeseen topics relevant to the research objectives. The semi-structured format provided a balance between maintaining the focus of the interview on pre-determined questions while allowing for the exploration of additional insights that the respondents might offer.

The interviews, conducted via an online platform, consisted of a set of guiding questions that explored aspects such as the advantages and challenges of both digital and traditional marketing, as well as the integration of these two marketing mediums, the perceived effectiveness of these strategies, and the specific tactics believed to be most successful within the South African SME context. The guiding questions were developed through a preliminary review of literature and validated by industry experts to ensure that they comprehensively address the key aspects of marketing integration. The interview format was also designed to elicit contrasting viewpoints, enabling a richer understanding of the diverse marketing strategies adopted by marketing agencies for SMEs. This method ensured that the information gathered was both relevant and rich in detail, reflecting the complexities and realities of integrative marketing strategy development and implementation.

The ATLAS.ti™ software package was used to code and analyse the qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interviews. Deductive codes were generated and assigned in the first round of analysis, based on the literature review, while inductive codes were incorporated in a second round of analysis, based on theories and concepts formulated from participants' interview responses. Code groups were then created by utilising literature review insights and the respective themes and sub-themes that emerged during the coding process.

### **3.3. Sample and sampling method**

The population for this study was widespread across South Africa and ranged from smaller marketing agencies to large-scale agencies that serve small to medium businesses. The sample consisted of marketing professionals from various marketing agencies across South Africa who have substantial experience in serving SMEs.

The sampling method was purposive to allow for targeting individuals who have a deep understanding and play an active role in the marketing decision-making process within their respective agencies. Consequently, participants were selected based on their extensive

experience in managing SME marketing campaigns, ensuring that the data collected is grounded in practical expertise.

Three main methods were employed to reach the target population: existing professional networks were leveraged to ensure a quick and trusted entry into the community of practice, while engagement with local business chambers helped to ensure a broader geographical and sectoral representation. Finally, the snowball method was deployed to obtain referrals from interviewees to other potential participants.

Demographic indicators such as age, ethnicity, education levels, and business location were considered to prevent convenience sampling and to ensure that the findings reflect diverse marketing perspectives and practices. This was supported by equally dividing participants based on heterogeneous characteristics such as the size of the agency, geographic location, and client industry.

### **3.4. Sample size**

Considering the qualitative nature of the study, the sample size was highly dependent on the research questions and the point at which sufficient data had been recorded to meet the research objectives. This approach is typical in qualitative research, where the depth of information is more significant than the breadth. Typically, a sample size of five to 25 participants is recommended, depending on the diversity of the participants and the complexity of the research questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

Given the focused scope of the research questions and the homogeneity within the field of marketing professionals, a sample size of ten was deemed sufficient to explore the nuances of integrated marketing strategies effectively. Consequently, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten marketing professionals, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of integrated marketing strategies, ensuring that each participant could provide detailed insights relevant to the distinct objectives of the study. Data saturation occurred after the ninth interview, at which point it was determined that further interviews would yield no substantially new themes or insights. This confirms the comprehensiveness of the collected responses, with the validated sample size falling within the recommended range.

### **3.5. Ethics**

Adhering to the guidelines set by Marshall and Rossman (2011), the study maintained a high level of ethical rigour, not just fulfilling the requirements of informed consent and anonymity of participants, but also actively addressing potential ethical issues throughout the research

process. Participants voluntarily participated in the study after being adequately informed of its purpose and scope. The use of non-probability and snowball sampling techniques ensured equitable selection of participants, promoting fairness. A detailed risk-benefit assessment demonstrated that the advantages of the research far exceed any potential risks, presenting no imminent adversity to participants. Privacy of data was rigorously upheld by using secure cloud storage for recordings and transcripts, and findings are reported without disclosing identifiable details, thereby preserving participant and organisational confidentiality.

## 4. Research findings

### 4.1. Introduction to findings

The study explored the perceived effectiveness and integration of digital and traditional marketing strategies employed by marketing agencies for SMEs in South Africa. This section outlines the key themes that emerged from the analysis, by drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with marketing professionals.

### 4.2. Demographic information

Table 1, which provides details of the demographic indicators of the study sample, reflects the fact that participants were experienced marketing agency professionals, well-positioned to provide insightful responses to the questions posed.

**Table 1: Participant demographics**

<b>Participant number</b>	<b>Title/role</b>	<b>Years' experience</b>
P1	Marketing manager	5 Years
P2	Account manager	4 Years
P3	Marketing strategist lead	5 Years
P4	Chief marketing officer	10 Years
P5	Account and project manager	6 Years
P6	Account manager	4 Years
P7	Account manager	4 Years

Participant number	Title/role	Years' experience
P8	Agency owner	15 Years
P9	Agency owner	17 Years
P10	Agency owner	14 Years

Source: Own compilation

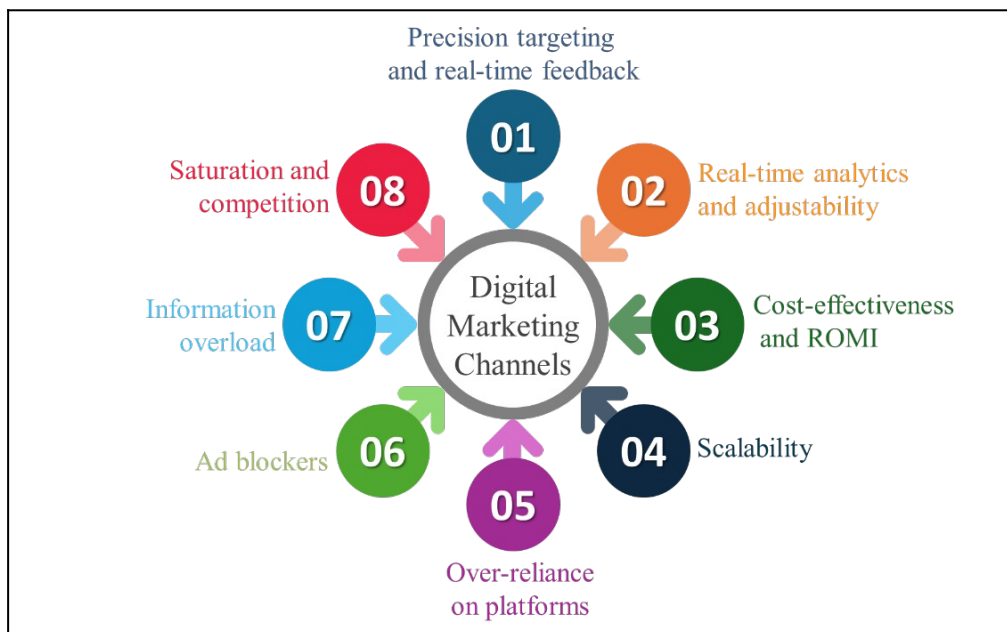
### 4.3. Findings

Marketing professionals working with South African SMEs acknowledged the unique benefits and challenges associated with each channel and emphasised the importance of their integration, with the study revealing the perceived effectiveness of both digital and traditional marketing channels, as detailed in this section.

#### 4.3.1. Digital marketing channels

This section explores participants' views on the key benefits and challenges of digital marketing, with Figure 1 reflecting the key themes that emerged.

Figure 1: Digital marketing: Benefits and challenges



Source: Own compilation

Digital marketing was widely appreciated for its **precision in targeting** and **real-time feedback** capabilities, as noted by participants:

*"With digital, we can target particular demographics. We can run a campaign aimed just at women in their 30s who are interested in fitness." (P2)*

*"The analytics we get from our digital campaigns are invaluable. We can see what worked and what didn't and adjust accordingly." (P6)*

Additionally, digital marketing's ability to provide **real-time analytics** and **adjustability** through customer feedback mechanisms was highlighted as a transformative capability:

*"Online marketing allows us to track customer engagement and adapt our strategies quickly". (P3)*

**Cost-effectiveness and ROMI** are a significant concern for many SMEs, with digital marketing offering a compelling proposition:

*"The pay-per-click model on Google Ads is brilliant for SMEs. You're essentially only paying for tangible results." (P9)*

A further benefit is the **scalability** of online campaigns, which allows SMEs to start small, test what works for them, and then ramp up their efforts based on performance.

Regardless of these benefits, digital marketing comes with numerous challenges. One of these is a potential **over-reliance on a specific online platform**, such as Facebook, Google, or Instagram:

*"We had optimised our entire campaign based on the old Facebook algorithm. When they changed it, our visibility dropped drastically." (P5)*

Consequently, participants underscored the importance of diversifying digital marketing efforts across multiple platforms, so that unexpected algorithm updates do not affect a marketing campaign's visibility too drastically.

The rise of **ad-blockers** (computer programmes or 'plugins' that prevent advertisements from displaying on a user's screen) presents challenges for marketers in reaching their target audience. Participants noted this as a growing concern, especially among younger demographics who are more comfortable and skilled in the use of technology, resulting in a need for agility to quickly respond to continuous algorithm updates by social media platforms:

*"With platforms frequently changing their algorithms, we're constantly adapting. What worked last month may not yield the same results now." (P9)*

*"A significant portion of our target audience for one campaign used ad-blockers. It was a stark reminder that we can't just rely on one channel." (P7)*

**Information overload**, with consumers constantly being bombarded by information-push from multiple platforms, makes it difficult to stand out. Participants referred to the 'scroll culture' on social media platforms, with users rapidly scrolling through their feeds without assimilating accurate information.

*"On platforms like Instagram, you have a split second to grab attention. It's challenging when people are rapidly scrolling through." (P1)*

**Saturation and competition**, resulting from numerous brands vying for the same audience's attention, are a further challenge:

*"Every brand, big or small, is on the digital platforms. Breaking through the clutter and ensuring our campaigns are noticeable is a significant challenge." (P5)*

These findings indicate that digital platforms hold unique benefits, albeit that the dynamic nature of these platforms can result in having to overcome numerous hurdles when marketing agencies design and run media campaigns for SMEs.

#### 4.3.2. Traditional marketing effectiveness

This section explores participants' views on the key benefits and challenges of digital marketing, with the key themes reflected in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Traditional marketing: Benefits and challenges



Source: Own compilation

A key strength of traditional marketing is its **broad audience reach**. Traditional marketing channels such as radio, television, and print offer an invaluable way to reach audiences who may otherwise be unreachable, particularly in areas where digital penetration remains low or where campaigns are targeted at more mature individuals who are less active digitally. It also allows marketers to reach geographical areas that are reflective of lower-income audiences who do not have consistent, stable internet access. Participants acknowledged traditional marketing channels for its broad reach and ability to touch the lives of countless individuals, irrespective of their digital connectivity or -prowess:

*"Radio and TV still have a massive reach, especially in areas where digital penetration is low." (P1)*

*"Local newspapers still hold a lot of sway in certain communities. People trust what they read there." (P3)*

Participants reminisced about the **historical familiarity and trustworthiness** of traditional advertising, emphasising that iconic television advertisements are still remembered and spoken about:

*"Remember those iconic ads from the 90s? People still talk about them. That's the power of traditional channels." (P10)*

*"For many older folks, seeing a product on TV or reading about it in a reputed newspaper gives it credibility." (P9)*

This historical connection and the shared memories associated with certain ads or jingles add a layer of trustworthiness to the advertising medium, according to participants.

A further unique advantage is the **tangibility and physical presence** of specific traditional marketing tools: a thoughtfully designed, tangible advertisement can help marketing campaigns stand out in an age of digital overload. The tactile nature of holding, reading, and sharing a brochure, for instance, can yield unexpectedly good results:

*"We had a client for whom we did a flyer campaign, and it was surprising how much response they got. People still like to hold something tangible." (P5)*

Like digital marketing, traditional marketing is not without its challenges. While the broad reach of traditional marketing is a strength, it can also be a double-edged sword. Today's data-driven world demands metrics, analytics, and measurable return on investment (ROI) (Järvinen, 2016), but participants noted that traditional marketing campaigns yield **limited metrics and tracking**:

*"It's hard sometimes to show the direct ROI of a billboard or a radio spot. With digital, you have numbers. With traditional, it's often about belief." (P2)*

*"TV ads can be expensive, and without a direct way to measure impact, it becomes a gamble."(P8)*

Strongly associated with the limited tracking ability of traditional marketing, is marketers' inability to gauge the success of a campaign:

*"It's hard to gauge how many people saw our billboard or read our magazine ad." (P7)*

*"With traditional [marketing], you often rely on post-campaign surveys or market research to gauge effectiveness. It's less direct than seeing click-through rates or engagement metrics." (P6)*

A further shortcoming of traditional marketing is the **difficulty in precise targeting** to reach niche segments:

*"It's a bit of a scattergun approach with traditional methods. You're broadcasting to a wide audience, hoping your target demographic gets the message." (P2)*

Additionally, as traditional marketing campaigns are typically planned and executed well in advance, **the longer lead times** make them less adaptable to real-time changes:

*"Once you've committed to a billboard or print ad, it's out there. There's no tweaking based on immediate feedback, unlike digital platforms." (P3)*

This rigidity and inability to tailor campaigns for specific demographics mean the message can sometimes miss the mark, leading to wasted resources and opportunities.

A boon and a bane of traditional marketing channels is the sheer volume of advertisements, resulting in **saturation and clutter**. Having an impact when the audience is bombarded with advertisements, is challenging:

*"The challenge with newspapers is the sheer volume of ads. Unless you're on the front page, you're just one among many." (P6)*

This means that marketing agencies must resort to unconventional and innovative approaches, such as using guerrilla marketing tactics to solicit wonder and shock, for their message to rise above the clutter.

Finally, the **high costs** associated with traditional marketing is a stumbling block when determining how to allocate marketing funds. For instance, securing a prime billboard spot in a busy area or a prime-time television timeslot can stretch SMEs' budgets, leading them to explore other options:

*"We wanted to do a TV spot for one of our SME clients, but the costs were too much. Digital gave us more flexibility in that regard." (P4)*



The tangible nature of traditional marketing mediums tends to drive costs up, resulting in them being significantly higher than digital campaigns:

*"The cost per reach with traditional methods, especially if you're targeting a smaller demographic, is usually substantially higher than digital." (P7)*

It is evident that traditional marketing remains a powerful tool to build brand awareness and reach broad audiences, although it does come with challenges that marketing agencies and the SMEs who they work with should be mindful of.

### 4.3.3. Integration of marketing channels

Essentially, both digital and traditional marketing channels have their distinct advantages when considering how to attain optimal customer engagement, with digital marketing offering immediacy and adaptability, while conventional methods bring credibility and emotional resonance. The challenge lies in harnessing the strengths of each approach to craft campaigns that resonate with the target audience to achieve the desired objectives. This section explores the benefits and challenges of integration, with the key themes depicted in Figure 3, while also offering insight into the perceived effectiveness of integrating digital and traditional marketing channels.

Figure 3: Integrated marketing: Benefits and challenges



Source: Own compilation

Integrating digital and traditional marketing channels contributes to **wider audience reach**, while ensuring that potential customers are not accidentally excluded:

*"We tried a campaign where we combined our [the client's] radio ads with targeted social media boosts. The results showed that we managed to reach both our older audience through the radio and a younger demographic online." (P1)*

*"Our campaign [for the client] for a local event was a mix of posters around town and targeted Instagram ads. The turnout was beyond our expectations." (P5)*

Additionally, enhancing recall and strengthening brand identity can be achieved by presenting **unified brand messaging** across platforms:

*"We always ensure that our billboards and online banners have the same visuals and messaging. It helps in creating a consistent brand image." (P4)*

*"Our [customer's] brand's jingle is consistent across radio and YouTube ads. People recognise it immediately, irrespective of where they hear it." (P9)*

Supplementary to this is **maximised engagement**, with marketing agencies blending the tangibility of traditional marketing with the interactivity of digital platforms. For instance, the omnichannel approach of using quick response (QR) codes in print ads merges traditional and digital marketing channels, effectively providing a best-of-both-worlds scenario:

*"One of our most successful campaigns was using QR codes in our print ads, leading to an interactive website. The response was overwhelming." (P6)*

*"We once ran a print ad campaign [for a client] where scanning the image with our app would give an augmented reality experience. It was a hit!" (P2)*

Integration offers numerous benefits, but maintaining **consistency** across varied platforms can be problematic, as the respective channels – which each has a unique format and audience – require a tailored approach:

*"It's challenging to adapt a single message across different platforms without losing its essence. Especially when transitioning from a print advertisement to a tweet (a post on platform X, formerly known as Twitter), the character limitations can be restrictive." (P3)*

*"We had to redesign a campaign because the visuals that worked for billboards were not impactful in digital banner ads." (P7)*

Deciding how to allocate funds becomes complicated, especially for SMEs operating with limited marketing funds and having to carefully consider **budget allocation**. Strategic foresight is required to strike the right balance between traditional and digital spending, while ensuring optimal return on investment:

*"Deciding where to put the money, especially with limited funds, is always challenging. You don't want to spread too thin but also don't want to miss out on potential platforms."*  
(P5)

*"Our challenge is always ROI. We need to justify every penny we spend, be it on a radio spot or a Google ad."* (P8)

Navigating the nuances of digital and traditional marketing channels demands a **diverse skill set**, often requiring expensive resources and intensive time allocation:

*"We had to hire two teams for our traditional and digital campaigns. The expertise required for both is vastly different."* (P9)

*"Training our team to think traditionally and digitally was an investment. But it was necessary."* (P2)

Participants generally acknowledged a symbiotic relationship between digital and traditional marketing channels. Businesses can create comprehensive campaigns that resonate with a wide range of consumers by striking a balance between the extensive reach of traditional media and the accuracy of digital platforms.

To amplify a campaign's impact, the strengths of both traditional and digital channels can be blended to optimise the **power of integration**:

*"There's immense power in integration. A TV commercial that drives viewers to a digital platform for an immersive experience, or a social media campaign complemented by print ads, can have a compounded effect."* (P6)

By utilising each platform's distinct advantages, these integrated campaigns contribute to consistent brand messaging across platforms.

Regardless of the channel a customer engages with, an **omnichannel approach** guarantees a uniform and cohesive experience. It is more than just multi-channel marketing; it is about interconnecting these channels to complement and reinforce each other (Hossain *et al.*, 2020), as highlighted by a participant:

*"Today's consumers are channel-agnostic. They might start their journey online and complete it offline or vice versa. An omnichannel approach ensures we're present at every touchpoint, offering a seamless transition between them."* (P8)

Nonetheless, one participant cautioned that executing a successful omnichannel strategy requires a deep understanding of the customer journey, robust data analytics, and cohesive brand messaging (Hossain *et al.*, 2020):

*"While the omnichannel approach is the ideal, it's challenging. It requires synchronisation across teams, platforms, and even external partners." (P5)*

Evidently, the gold standard in modern marketing is the integration of traditional and digital marketing methods, with the adoption of an omnichannel approach. It goes beyond being present on multiple platforms by ensuring that platforms are interconnected to offer customers a unified and enriching brand experience.

The findings offer a comprehensive picture of how marketing agencies in South Africa view and make use of online and traditional marketing channels for SMEs. The insights emphasise the intricate interactions among various marketing techniques and underscore the significance of a well-rounded integration strategy that makes use of the distinct advantages of both digital and traditional marketing to maximise overall marketing efficacy for South African SMEs.

## **5. Implications and recommendations**

This section provides actionable insights for marketing professionals and SMEs by synthesising the research findings into managerial- and practical implications as well as recommendations.

### **5.1. Managerial implications**

**Balanced marketing investment:** SMEs should balance their investment between digital and traditional marketing channels to optimise overall marketing effectiveness to allow marketing agencies to leverage the immediate and measurable benefits of digital strategies while maintaining the broader reach and deeper consumer trust associated with traditional media.

**Developing digital competencies:** There is a crucial need for marketing agencies to continually develop their digital skills, given the rapidly evolving nature of digital marketing. Investing in ongoing training and professional development to build a team that is proficient in both digital and traditional techniques can contribute to the marketing team remaining adaptable and responsive to market changes.

**Emphasis on consumer engagement and trust:** Managers should ensure that traditional marketing methods are not entirely overshadowed by digital tactics, since traditional

marketing channels remain effective in building consumer trust, engagement and long-term brand loyalty. Instead, strategies should focus on leveraging the unique strengths of both channels to reach the target audience.

## 5.2. Practical implications

**Leverage analytics for targeted campaigns:** Utilising analytics from digital marketing can inform and optimise traditional marketing strategies. By analysing consumer behaviour online, offline campaigns can be tailored more precisely to enhance both reach and customer engagement across channels.

**Cost-efficiency through digital innovation:** SMEs with limited marketing budgets can benefit from the cost-efficient solutions offered by digital channels. Harnessing innovative digital marketing tools such as social media, SEO, and content marketing to drive awareness and engagement at a lower cost compared to traditional methods, should be prioritised.

**Holistic measurement of marketing success:** Adopting comprehensive metrics that capture the quantitative and qualitative results of marketing initiatives is crucial for marketing managers. This covers not only immediate sales effects, but also long-term relationships, client loyalty, and brand perception, all of which are frequently greatly impacted by conventional marketing strategies.

## 5.3. Recommendations

**Integrated marketing campaigns:** It is advisable for marketing agencies to develop integrated marketing campaigns to effectively leverage the strengths of both digital and traditional media. This integration should be strategically planned to ensure consistent messaging across all channels to maximise the impact of marketing efforts.

**Customer engagement and localised marketing:** Focused marketing efforts are crucial when developing marketing campaigns for customer segments that cannot be fully reached through digital means. Marketing agencies should engage directly with these communities through traditional channels to build a strong local presence and support digital efforts.

**Continuous market and consumer behaviour research:** To keep marketing strategies relevant and effective, ongoing research into market trends and consumer behaviour is essential. Maintaining a current awareness of media consumption patterns, consumer preferences, and technology developments is essential for marketing agencies to remain competitive.

These managerial implications and recommendations provide a structured approach to effectively integrate digital and traditional marketing, with the goal of improving marketing agencies' strategic decision-making processes to enhance the overall success of marketing campaigns for SMEs.

## **6. Conclusions, limitations and future research**

This section draws final, synthesised conclusions from the study, explicates the study limitations and highlights future research avenues.

### **6.1. Conclusions**

The marketing landscape has been irrevocably altered by digital marketing channels. The inherent precision of targeted marketing and real-time feedback and analytics, cost-effectiveness and measurable ROMI, together with the scalability of online marketing, position digital marketing as holding tremendous advantages. Nonetheless, perceptions are tempered by the challenges of an over-reliance on platforms, limitations due to ad blockers, information overload, marketing saturation and intense competition. These factors contribute to marketing agencies' perceptions that digital marketing is a dynamic, yet volatile channel, requiring continuous adoption of strategies to keep pace with rapid market changes.

The findings highlight that traditional marketing channels continue to be recognised for its broad audience reach, familiarity and trustworthiness derived from their historical prevalence in the marketing mix, as well as its innate tangibility and physical presence. However, marketing agencies are also acutely aware of the drawbacks, including the difficulty in precise targeting, longer lead times, marketing saturation and clutter, and the generally higher costs associated with traditional marketing. These factors lead to the perception that traditional marketing channels are reliable, yet inflexible and costly.

The integration of digital and traditional channels is seen as essential for optimal marketing effectiveness, as it contributes to wider audience reach, unified brand messaging and maximised customer engagement. Conversely, inconsistency, complex budget allocations and the requirements for a diverse skill set pose challenges when integrating marketing channels and aligning strategies. Nonetheless, the power of integrating marketing channels and adopting an omnichannel approach guarantees campaign impact, with a uniform and cohesive customer experience. While it is both an art and a science to craft an integrated marketing strategy, the fact that the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages is a compelling value

proposition for marketing professionals to pay careful attention to balancing their investment between digital and traditional marketing channels to optimise overall marketing effectiveness.

## **6.2. Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the perceived effectiveness of integrated marketing strategies for South African SMEs, several limitations must be acknowledged.

The qualitative approach, relying on semi-structured interviews, suggests the potential for inherent subjective interpretations, which may introduce bias despite efforts to maintain rigour and neutrality. The sample size, limited to ten marketing professionals, may not fully represent the diverse perspectives across different regions and sectors within South Africa. Additionally, the focus on South African SMEs may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts or countries.

These limitations suggest that the results should be interpreted with caution, recognising that the insights may not fully capture the broader spectrum of marketing practices or challenges faced by all SMEs. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a larger, more diverse sample and combining qualitative insights with quantitative data to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

## **6.3. Future research**

Future research could expand the geographical scope to include comparisons between different countries or economic contexts to develop a greater understanding of the impact of regional variations on marketing strategy effectiveness.

Longitudinal studies could examine how the impact of marketing strategies evolves over time, particularly in response to technological advancements and changing consumer behaviours.

Finally, further studies could explore the influence of cultural factors on the effectiveness of different marketing channels to offer deeper insights into targeted marketing strategies for diverse consumer bases.

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