

The Synergistic Role of Leadership and Digital Marketing in Nigerian Traditional Open Market Systems Amidst the Global Health Pandemic (Covid-19)

Yaibimi Simon Ayogoi

University of Africa, Toru-Orua Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This research engineers the call for a digital marketing transformation of the retail and wholesale activities of the Nigerian Open markets' operations. In view of the COVID-19 Crisis which has had devastating effects on many businesses and health status of the populace, especially on wholesale and retail businesses and startups. Switching to digital marketing or a combined use of off-line and digital marketing strategies in the Open markets of Nigeria will solve the current question that has been begging for answer around the world which is, how to minimize/manage the spread of the Corona virus which is experiencing a spike in infections due to community spread, while avoiding economic collapse? The research used a descriptive survey design with an infinite population of respondents and Cochran formula at 95% confidence level was used to arrive at 385 respondents. However, only 350 responses were successfully retrieved. Using correlation analysis on SPSS version 25, the study revealed that there is a significant statistical relationship between digital marketing and business profitability and wealth creation of TOM operations during the lockdown. Leadership role has a significant but moderate correlation with digital marketing transformations in the open markets.

Keywords-(COVID-19, Digital marketing, marketing strategies, wealth creation, traditional open markets, leadership, entrepreneurship)

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had severe impacts on human health and global economies, necessitating rapid changes in many areas. Organizations that previously planned digital transformations over several years must now implement them within days or weeks (Blackburn et al, 2020). A European survey indicated that 70% of executives from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland anticipate the pandemic will hasten their digital transformations. This shift is evident across many sectors globally, with Asian banks transitioning to online operations, healthcare providers adopting telehealth and AI, insurers using self-service claims assessment, and retailers moving to digital marketplaces (Blackburn et al, 2010).

In contrast, Nigeria's traditional retail markets lag behind in digital adoption despite the modern retail markets' explorations of e-commerce (Ogbo et al, 2019). The Nigerian economy, heavily reliant on the oil and gas sector, has been hit hard by the pandemic, leading to a call for alternative revenue sources to mitigate rising poverty and reboot the economy. Traditional open retail markets can bridge this revenue gap and create wealth.

Nigeria's retail sector, especially informal markets, contributes significantly to GDP. Future growth is expected in this sector, with an estimated \$40 billion opportunity in food and consumer goods between 2008 and 2020 (Fiorini et al, 2013). However, the pandemic-induced lockdown and social distancing measures have severely impacted this sector, resulting in lost revenue, increased poverty, and stagnant economic growth.

Despite these challenges, the pandemic has accelerated digitization, making digital channels and automated processes key to productivity and supply chain stability (Blackburn et al, 2010). Digital marketing offers a fast e-commerce solution, allowing B2B and B2C transactions to thrive by leveraging traditional marketing models adapted to the digital medium (M.Shirisha, 2018).

From the statement of the problem and objectives of the study, the researchers focused on addressing the following core research questions:

- To what extent is digital marketing known within traditional open markets (TOM) in Nigeria?
- How did the Covid-19 lockdown affect business transactions in traditional open markets in Nigeria?
- Is there a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and TOM operations in Nigeria?
- Is there a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and the profitability of businesses in TOM during the lockdown period in Nigeria?
- Is there a statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and wealth creation in TOMs in Nigeria?
- How does leadership influence digital transformation among TOM operators in Nigeria?

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H01: There is no statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and traditional open market operations in Nigeria.

H02: There is no statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and the profitability of businesses in TOM during the lockdown period in Nigeria.

H03: There is no statistically significant relationship between digital marketing and wealth creation in TOMs in Nigeria.

H04: Leadership does not significantly affect digital transformation among TOM operators in Nigeria.

Traditional Open Markets (TOM) in Nigeria:

Trading is one of the most prevalent activities in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy. Market traders operate in open market squares and other lock-up stores across cities nationwide. These markets are bustling, either daily or on specific market days, attracting people from diverse cultures and backgrounds to buy, sell, or conduct various business activities (Ogbo et al., 2019; Ogeah & Omofonmwan, 2013). Aside from their crucial economic roles within communities, these markets contribute significantly to Nigeria's retail structure, making up approximately 70% (Ogbo et al., 2019). Regularly, lorries and heavy-duty trucks deliver a variety of goods from different parts of the country to these markets, resulting in high trade volumes and numerous ancillary activities such as transportation and goods carrying.

Prominent markets in Nigeria include Idumota Market and Alaba International Market in Lagos, Aba International Market in Abia State, Kurmi Market in Kano, Zaki Biam Yam Market in Benue State, Bodija Market in Ibadan, Ogbete Market in Enugu, Computer Village in Ikeja, Onitsha Main Market, Oil Mill Market and Mile One Market in Port Harcourt, Ladipo Market in Mushin, Oba Market in Benin City, and Swali Market in Yenagoa, among others. These markets share common characteristics: lower costs, multiple retailers, various products, and bustling activity throughout the day. Customers enjoy the tangible shopping experience and price negotiations. However, the outbreak of the Coronavirus and subsequent safety protocols have rendered many of these features impractical. Ogbo et al. (2019) also highlighted the inconveniences associated with traditional markets, such as time-consuming and stressful shopping experiences. Digital marketing offers a modern solution amidst these challenges.

Leadership Role in Digital Transformation:

Today's digital transformation efforts are less cumbersome and risky compared to a decade ago (Douglas Karr, 2018), owing to more predictable consumer behavior and the continuous expansion of digital platforms. Businesses no longer require substantial capital investments to transition to digital operations (Douglas, 2018). Digital transformation is revolutionary, necessitating the adoption of digital technology across all business processes, facilitated by the integration of people, machines, and information (Swapnil Bhagwat, 2019).

Bhagwat noted that digital transformation is a delicate process for any organization, requiring leaders to clearly identify and decide on core business objectives before proceeding. Decision-makers play a crucial role in guiding firms through the digital transition. Sven Denecken emphasized that effective leadership can significantly advance digital transformation, citing Oliver Bierhoff's successful top-down approach with Germany's national football team. Waleed Afandi (2017) concluded that leadership greatly influences the success or failure of digital transformations in organizations, enabling vision alignment, employee mobilization, and advocating for new practices. Laurent-Pierre Baculard further supported this view, asserting that successful digital transformation relies as much on leadership as it does on technological expertise. Leadership's role in transforming digital marketing within Nigeria's traditional open markets is thus essential, urgent, and transformative.

Baculard proposed a three-step process for digital transformation: defining where change should begin, programming the change model, and empowering people to implement the change.

Marketing and Marketing Strategy Marketing is essential for the success of any business organization. For any business or entrepreneur to succeed, a carefully designed strategy and well-thought-out marketing program that fits the business are crucial to propel it to its desired niche (Julius O. Onah, 2008). According to Peter Drucker, as cited in Onah (2008), marketing is a fundamental business function necessary to create and sustain demand for an organization's products, whether goods or services. Despite various definitions of marketing, Onah (2008) emphasizes its role in adjusting organizational offerings to the ever-changing market needs. Given the current business environment amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, Nigerian open market operations must adapt their modus operandi and marketing strategies to align with present market needs and realities.

In this era of uncertainty and chaos caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, agile ways of working are essential to meet constantly evolving customer desires and behaviors. Margarita Isoraite (2009) suggests that in the information society era, market competition significantly influences an organization's long-term development, emphasizing strategic management, business process efficiency, and organizational capital. Companies operating in the modern market economy should continuously improve results by analyzing both internal and external business environments and competitor actions while investigating consumer needs and trends. These dynamic factors change over time, so businesses should continually examine their operations to anticipate events and opportunities, guiding themselves past barriers to achieve set objectives and maintain competitive advantage. Doyle (2000), as cited in Isoraite (2009), describes strategic marketing as the management process that maximizes shareholder return on investment by ensuring a competitive advantage in providing, communicating, and delivering value to customers, thus developing long-term relationships.

Digital Marketing as a Business Strategy One of the most significant innovations shaping human interactions is the spread of social media. Bizhanova et al. (2019) note that real social relationships have moved to the virtual world, creating online communities across physical and geographical boundaries. This interaction facilitates knowledge exchange, entertainment, and dialogue across different cultures (Tiago et al., 2014). The internet's penetration into all aspects of human endeavor necessitates transforming marketing policies and strategies towards digitalization. Digital marketing relies on online channels, using review, analysis, explanation, promotion processes, and fostering stronger brand-consumer relationships. It encompasses marketing products and services through digital channels and technology, mainly on the internet, including mobile phones and other digital mediums.

Most clients interact with the internet; thus, firms must also engage online. Although digital marketing has evolved and entrepreneurs have gradually transitioned to full digitalization, the global health pandemic has accelerated this transformation. Fader (2012) notes that while the 1990s were a decade of e-commerce, the 21st century began an era of social commerce. Blackburn et al. (2020) agree that while companies can pilot new digital initiatives during "normal" times, few can do so at the scale and speed required by the Covid-19 crisis. Like the rest of Africa, Nigerians benefit from e-commerce for buying, selling, and obtaining information. Ogbo et al. (2019) report over ninety-eight million internet users in Nigeria as of 2018, indicating a multi-million client base e-market. Globally, companies, including government functions, are turning digital as meetings and other engagements, including academic conferences, religious services, and sports activities, are transmitted digitally due to the Covid-19 crisis. According to Blackburn et al. (2020), "As the Covid-19 crisis

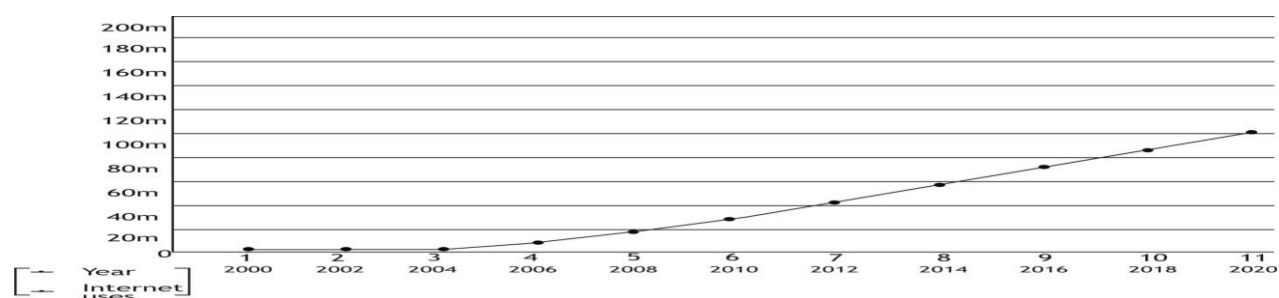
forces your customers, employees, and supply chains into digital channels and new ways of working, now is the time to ask yourself: What are the bold digital actions we've hesitated to pursue in the past, even as we've known they would eventually be required? Strange as it may seem, right now, in a moment of crisis, is precisely the time to boldly advance your digital agenda." As organizations seek new ways to serve clients following global guidelines on social distancing and minimal contact, virtual replacements and reduced physical interaction become standard. Therefore, traditional open markets in Nigeria must adopt digital marketing methods and redesign business practices to satisfy customers and maximize profits, maintaining sales volumes even during lockdowns through digital platforms. Various forms of digital marketing include search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), content marketing, influencer marketing, content automation, email direct marketing, e-books, campaign marketing, social media marketing, display advertisement, social media advertisement, optical disks, and games. Additionally, mobile phone marketing includes SMS and MMS, call back, and mobile ringtones.

Digital Penetration in Nigeria and Shopping Destinations The Nielsen Nigeria shopper trends report in 2017 revealed that Nigerian retail is dominated by traditional trade formats like open markets and kiosks in terms of absolute store numbers and patronage. Customers frequently visit these places for their shopping needs, with about 26% of shoppers visiting supermarkets and hypermarkets, while a significant 76% of customers shop in open markets, visiting these destinations almost ten times a month or bi-weekly for various shopping experiences.

Fiorini et al. (2013) predict a 40 billion US dollar growth opportunity in food and consumer goods in Nigeria between 2008 and 2020, the highest of any African country. They emphasize the growth in the middle class, generating a positive trend towards a more prosperous consumer class. Retail is vital in Nigeria and must not slump due to the Coronavirus. As a shopping destination, traditional retail in Nigeria, according to Ogbo et al. (2019), must continuously strive to attract, win, and retain customers to sustain and increase sales volume. Betty Kibaava at the Rockefeller Foundation concurs that the Covid-19 Pandemic reveals that while markets are critical components of a sustainable food system, they are not built for crises. African open markets lack adequate infrastructure, leading to overcrowding, waste of perishable goods, and low hygiene standards among customers and suppliers, breaking disease prevention protocols.

There is significant potential in digital marketing given the available data on digital penetration in Nigeria. As of January 2020, there were 169.2 million mobile connections in Nigeria, an increase of 12 million (+7.7%) from January 2019. Social media users numbered about 27 million, increasing by 3.4 million users (+14%) from April 2019 to January 2020, with a social media penetration rate of 13%. There were 85.49 million internet users as of January 2020, an increase of 2.2 million (+2.6%) from 2019 to 2020 (Source: Digital 2020 report for Nigeria – <https://www.statista.com/statistics>).

As of March 2019, most of the web traffic in leading digital markets in Africa originated from mobile devices in Nigeria. Seventy-four percent of web traffic was generated through smartphones, while only twenty-four percent came via PC devices. It is postulated that internet users in Nigeria have grown to 187.8 million by 2023. The rate of internet penetration was 47.1 percent of the population in 2018 and is expected to reach 84.5 percent in 2023 (Source – Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats). These statistics indicate significant potential for transforming open markets into digital marketing opportunities.



Despite this obvious prospect and projected growth of internet penetration in Nigeria, businesses are yet to fully take advantage of the huge markets and fully benefit from it.

Barriers to retail digital transformation are eminent and to overcome these challenges, there is need to carry out re-orientation, advocacy campaigns, systematic training and leadership inducement to address cultural, literacy and infrastructural issues which are peculiar to Nigerians and other third world countries in the world.

Government and Digital strategy in a time crisis

Looking critically at the projections on digital penetration in Nigeria and the palpable tension it generates in the mind of an average retailer due to perceived encumbrances and barriers,

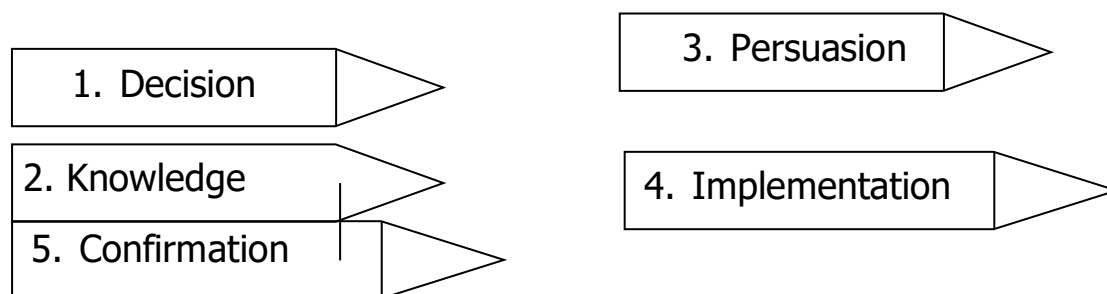
The government has a duty to establish and implement policies that encourage digital marketing. Ogbo et al. (2019) emphasize the need for a functional e-commerce policy supported by advanced technologies. The Nigerian Government has taken significant steps towards digitizing the economy, but further efforts are needed. Providing affordable internet services, enacting supportive laws, and enhancing social infrastructure will help address challenges.

Trust and security remain major barriers to e-commerce adoption, as highlighted in Ogbo et al. (2019). The rapid shift to digital platforms during COVID-19 has accelerated e-commerce growth, with notable changes observed in the USA and China's recovery efforts, as per Leung et al. (2020). This shift highlights the importance of digital transformation for Nigeria and other developing countries.

The research is grounded on five theories: creative destruction, innovation diffusion, charismatic leadership, social cognitive theory, and The Health Belief Model.

Theory of Diffusion of Innovations: Developed by Everest Rogers, this theory explains how new technologies are introduced and adopted over time within a social system. Innovation is perceived as new regardless of its actual novelty. Rogers identified that innovations spread through mass media and interpersonal channels within a social system, which may include individuals, groups, organizations, or subsystems. The process involves awareness, acceptance, implementation, and confirmation of innovation, aiming to reduce uncertainty. Time plays a crucial role in this diffusion process.

This study focuses on market retailers, union leaders, government officials, and consumers, emphasizing the role of leadership in advocating for and re-orienting towards digital marketing.



(The Innovation decision process for individuals according to Rogers)

Using the average time of adoption for a population and an individual's time-based factors, Rogers created the following five adopter categories (Leif Singer at life.me).

1. **Innovators:** This group consists of curious individuals who are keen on exploring new ideas. They maintain more cosmopolitan relationships with outside innovators rather than their local peers, allowing them to introduce new concepts into their communities. Innovators are rare, comprising only 2.5% of the population.
2. **Early Adopters:** These individuals influence opinions within their localities and serve as role models within their social systems. Once they adopt an innovation, they communicate it to their peers. Early adopters make up about 13.5% of the population.

3. **Early Majority:** Representing approximately 34% of the population, the early majority adopts new ideas earlier than the average member of society.
4. **Late Majority:** Also accounting for about 34% of the population, these individuals are skeptical of change and typically adopt innovations only after the majority have done so.

Charismatic Leadership Theory

Charismatic Leadership Theory is derived from 'charisma', a term used in political science and sociology to describe leaders who significantly influence their followers through their personal capabilities (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Followers view these leaders as possessing superhuman qualities, accepting their missions and directives unconditionally (Willner, 1984, as cited in Conger & Kanungo, 1987). House and Baetz (1979) noted that charismatic leaders drive revolutionary social changes. Consequently, the digital transformation of the TOM in Nigeria requires such leaders.

The Theory of Creative Destruction

Creative destruction, coined by Joseph Schumpeter (1942), refers to the ongoing process where new innovations replace outdated processes or products. This restructuring is crucial for macroeconomic performance and structural adjustments (Caballero, 2006). Schumpeter argued that long-term economic development arises from innovative solutions, raising living standards. Creative destruction can, however, bring significant economic consequences in the short and long run. For instance, Netflix exemplifies creative destruction by replacing traditional media with modern streaming services. This theory is particularly relevant to digital marketing, which aims to transform traditional retail business, fostering economic growth and innovation.

The Health Belief Model

This model was developed in the early 1950s by social scientists at the U.S. Public Health Service to understand why individuals fail to adopt disease prevention strategies or undergo screening tests for early detection of diseases (LaMorte, 2019). HBM suggests that an individual's belief in the personal threat of an illness, combined with their belief in the effectiveness of the recommended health actions, predicts the likelihood of adopting the behavior. HBM is based on psychology and behavioral theory, focusing on two components: (1) the desire to avoid illness or recover if already ill, and (2) the belief that specific health actions can prevent or cure illness. An individual's actions often depend on their perceptions of the benefits and barriers related to health behaviors. There are six constructs of the HBM, four original and two added later as research evolved (Wayne LaMorte, 2019):

- **Perceived Susceptibility:** A person's perception of the risk of getting disease or illness.
- **Perceived Severity:** An individual's feelings on the seriousness of contracting an illness or disease.
- **Perceived Benefits:** The perceived effectiveness of actions taken to prevent or cure a disease.
- **Perceived Barriers:** A person's feelings about the obstacles to performing a recommended health action, including cost-benefit analysis.
- **Cue to Action:** Motivation needed to stimulate the acceptance of recommended health measures, influenced by personal experiences or external sources.
- **Self-Efficacy:** The level of confidence in one's ability to successfully perform a behavior.

This model is relevant to this study in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, where preventive measures are critical in the absence of a known cure or vaccine. The benefits of following health protocols, such as avoiding crowded areas, maintaining social distance, washing hands, and wearing facemasks, outweigh the perceived barriers. Government leadership is essential to encourage adherence to these protocols.

The Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), originally called the Social Learning Theory (SLT), was developed by Albert Bandura in the 1960s and evolved into SCT in 1986. It posits that learning occurs in a social context

through dynamic interactions between the person, environment, and behavior (LaMorte, 2019). SCT emphasizes social behavior and influence, considering both external and internal social reinforcement. It accounts for past experiences that influence reinforcements, expectations, and beliefs about behavior. The goal of SCT is to explain how individuals control their behaviors through reinforcement to achieve sustained, goal-directed behavior. The theory includes six constructs (LaMorte, 2019; Bandura, 1989):

- **Reciprocal Determinism:** Interaction between an individual's learned experiences, environment, and behavior.
- **Behavioral Capability:** Ability to perform a behavior based on knowledge and skills.
- **Observational Learning:** Learning by observing and imitating others' behaviors.
- **Reinforcements:** Internal or external stimuli affecting behavior adoption or rejection.
- **Expectations:** Anticipated outcomes of behavior influencing decision-making.
- **Self-Efficacy:** Confidence in the ability to perform a behavior, influenced by personal traits and environmental factors (Gallagher, 2012).

This theory is relevant because it addresses behavior change and health promotion, emphasizing the role of the individual and environment. This research aims to raise public health awareness regarding COVID-19 and promote sustained wealth creation among entrepreneurs and retailers in Nigeria.

Review of Empirical Literature

- Ogbo et al. (2019) explored E-commerce as a value creation strategy among traditional Open Market retailers in Enugu State, concluding that full E-commerce implementation enhances sales, reduces costs, and fosters sustainability.
- Bizhanova et al. (2019) examined the impact of digital marketing on entrepreneurship, highlighting its role in increasing sales and adapting strategies based on competition feedback.
- Ogeah and Omofonmwan (2013) studied Urban Markets' employment generation in Benin City, noting the markets provide income despite challenges like low financial resources and management issues, recommending infrastructure upgrades and better waste disposal systems.
- M. Shirisha (2018) examined the significance of digital marketing in contemporary times. Using a descriptive research approach that relied solely on secondary data, the study identified digital marketing as a highly efficient e-commerce solution. The study noted that digital marketing offers substantial promises and benefits to practitioners and stakeholders and is considered more cost-effective compared to traditional markets. Digital marketing also eliminates the need for expensive customer research, as relevant marketing data can be readily analyzed.

While studies have identified and explored the benefits of E-commerce and market infrastructures upgrade as a means of wealth creation to stakeholders in the TOMs and entrepreneurs, this studies identifies a gap in the area of policies and governmental structures providing the needed leadership to drive the digital revolution in these markets.

Considering the ongoing spread of COVID-19 and the importance of adhering to social distancing guidelines and other measures, it is now pertinent to reassess digital initiatives. This study aims to guide business owners and stakeholders in mitigating the negative impacts of lock-downs and social distancing regulations while sustaining their business operations. The study will also offer sustainable guidelines to help entrepreneurs, customers, and other stakeholders adapt and prepare for post-crisis recovery. Given the limited research in this area, this work seeks to fill that gap and contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Additionally, it will inform policymakers about their role in promoting digital transformation in Nigeria's open market sector.

METHODS

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted traditional business practices, particularly in Nigeria's open markets, where adherence to lockdowns, social distancing, hygiene protocols, and contactless transactions have become crucial. Traditional open markets in sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigeria, often

involve close interactions among traders and customers, which poses challenges to maintaining health protocols. Consequently, government-imposed lockdowns have adversely affected revenue streams for market operators and other critical stakeholder's dependent on these markets. Companies' ability to quickly learn from and adapt to the current crisis is likely to influence their performance and survival both now and in the future. Digital marketing emerges as a critical strategy, and its adoption is imperative for success during and beyond the recovery period. However, traditional open markets in Nigeria have been slow to embrace this change.

This research was conducted to raise awareness among policymakers and market practitioners about the importance of adopting digital marketing in traditional open markets (TOM) and to bridge the knowledge gap in existing literature. The study also explored the loss of income to household retailers and government revenue due to COVID-19-related lockdowns in Nigeria's traditional open markets. The focus was on the potential of digital marketing as a survival strategy for sustainable wealth creation and the leadership roles necessary to drive the digitization of open market operations.

The study was conducted in Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State in South-South Nigeria, primarily focusing on Swali Market and three other smaller markets. Due to time and financial constraints, the research was limited to these markets. A descriptive survey design was employed, with raw data collected from respondents selected using cluster or quota sampling techniques. Structured questionnaires, interviews, and personal observations were utilized. Secondary data sources included journals, seminar papers, news reports, organizational reports, online commentaries, blog posts, and institutional reports.

The population of the study was considered infinite, so Cochran's formula was used to determine sample size of 385 respondents. The respondents were divided into three segments: 60% retailers, 30% customers, and 10% market and government officials, yielding a total of 231 retailers, 115 customers, and 39 officials. Data collection occurred over three months through literature reviews, statistical reports, interviews, and questionnaires.

A total of 350 responses were obtained from the sample population. Leadership roles (independent variable) were measured using a 4-item scale prepared by the researchers. Digital marketing, traditional open market operations, business profitability, and digital transformation were each measured using 4 items on 5-point Likert scales, designed by the researchers. Content and construct validity tests were conducted for all scales, and reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha. The results of these tests are presented in Table 4. Data analysis was performed descriptively and inferentially using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation with SPSS version 25.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were used to analysis the data and SPSS version 25 was used to review and test the hypothesis.

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of respondents (n=350)

s/n	Demographic variables		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Sex	Male	180	0.51
		Female	170	0.49
2.	Age	Less than 20yrs	60	0.17
		20 – 39yrs	185	0.53
		40 – 45yrs	65	0.19
		60yrs and above	40	0.11
3.	Edu. Qlfn.	Secondary and below	150	0.43
		OND/ Technical certificate	70	0.20

		1 st Degree	60	0.17
		Postgraduates	50	0.14
		No formal education	20	0.6
4.	Respondents	Retailers	221	0.63
		Customers	85	0.24
		Officials	44	0.13

The table above presents the demographic distribution of the respondents. As shown above, 51% of the respondents are male and the rest 49% are females. Information pertaining the age of respondents indicate that 17% are less than 20 years, 53% between the ages of 20 – 39, 19% between 40 – 45 years and the rest 11% are above 60 years. On educational qualification, 43% had attained secondary education, 20% National diplomas or its equivalent, 17% have their 1st degrees, 14% postgraduates and 6% had no formal education. On the category of respondents, 63% are retailers, 24% are customers and 13% are officials.

Table 2. Descriptive results on adoption of digital marketing practices

Categories	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Awareness of Digital Marketing	Yes	315	.90
	No	35	.10
Online Payments/Receipts	Yes	245	70
	No	105	30
Mode of payments/receipts	POS	43	.12
	Cheque	8	.02
	Cash	166	.48
	Mobile	133	.38
Frequency of online payment/receipts requests	Never	0	0
	Daily	324	.93
	Weekly	18	.05
	Occasionally	8	.02

The table above gives the descriptive results on the adoption of digital marketing practices in traditional open markets in Nigeria. The results indicate that 90% of the respondents are aware of and use digital techniques in their business operations, while 10% are not aware of the construction. On the issue of payments and receipts, 70% pay and receive money via digital techniques and 30% do not. For mode of payments and receipts, 12% uses POS machines, 2% uses cheques, 48% cash and 38% use mobile transfers. Responding to the frequency of online receipts/payment requests, 93% get such requests daily, 5% weekly and 2% occasionally. These results show that traditional open market operators in the studied area are not only aware of digital marketing practices but are also deeply involved in it.

Table 3. Descriptive results on the effects of COVID-19 on TOM operations

Categories	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Loss during COVID-19 lockdown	Yes	335	.96
	No	15	.04

Estimated loss in thousands of naira	₦10000 – ₦20000	28	.08
	₦21000 – ₦40000	192	.57
	₦41000– ₦60000	80	.23
	₦60000 and above	37	.11
	No loss	13	.04
Government role in digital marketing	Provide cyber security	115	.33
	Improve transport infrastructure	17	.05
	Provide enabling laws	123	.35
	Provide regulations	77	.22
	Other	18	.05
Feared Spread in COVID-19	Very high	30	.09
	High	90	.26
	Low	70	.20
	Very	40	.11
	No corona virus	120	.34

The table above examines the impact of COVID-19 on TOM operations in the studied area. The responses indicate that 94% of respondents experienced some loss during the lockdown, while only 4% did not report any loss.

Table 4. People that experienced Losses during the Covid19

Impact of COVID-19	Percentage
Experienced some loss during lockdown	94%
Did not report any loss	4%

This suggests that the continued closure of businesses due to the lockdown negatively affects the incomes of traditional open market operators in Nigeria. Regarding their estimated losses in naira, 8% reported a loss of about 10 to 20 thousand naira, 57% about 21 to 40 thousand naira, 23% about 41 to 60 thousand naira, 11% above 60 thousand naira, and 4% reported no loss during the lockdown period. 4% who did not experience any loss were mainly engaged in foodstuff trading, as survival and daily consumption needs remained essential.

Table 5. Number of losses experienced by respondents

Estimated Loss Range (Naira)	Percentage
10 to 20 thousand	8%
21 to 40 thousand	57%
41 to 60 thousand	23%
Above 60 thousand	11%
No loss	4%

Table 6. Government's Role in Digital Marketing (Respondents' Suggestions)

Category	Percentage
Provision of Enabling Laws	35%
Enhance Cyber Security	33%
Implementation of Regulations	22%
Improve Road Infrastructure	5%
Other Suggestions	5%

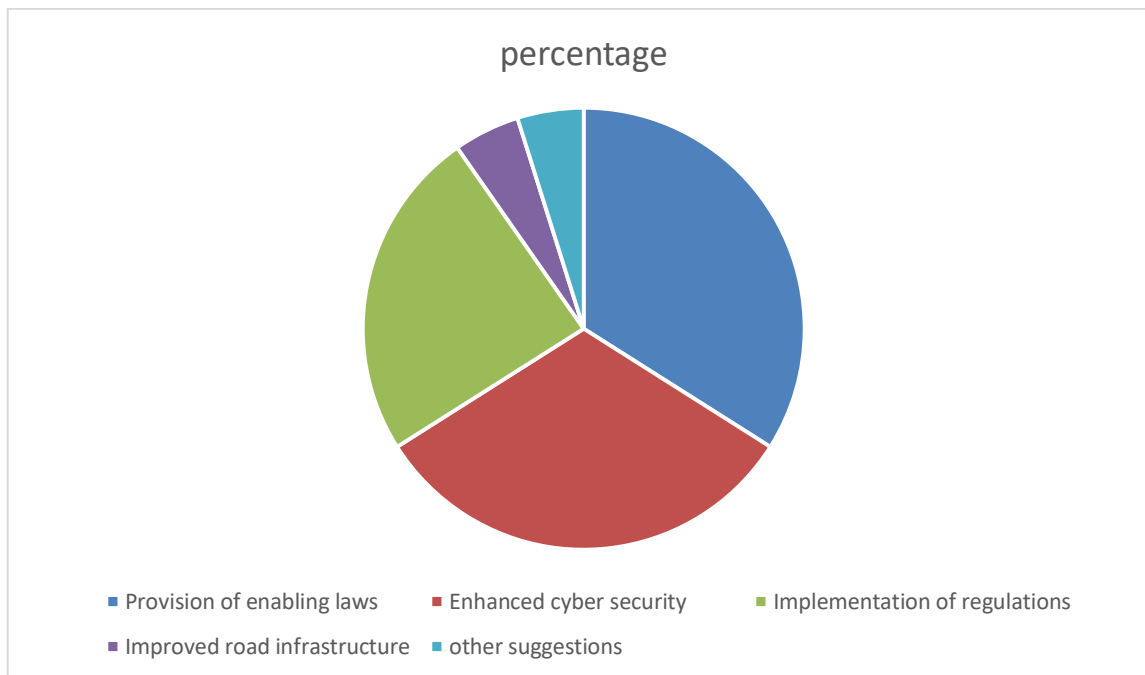


Fig. 1. Respondents' Suggestions on the Role of Government

Finally, when rating their concern about the spread of the coronavirus, 9% believed the spread would be very high, 26% high, 20% low, 11% very low, and 34% believed there was no coronavirus. 34% who doubted the existence of the virus cited the lack of confirmed cases within the markets, which aligns with the Health Belief Model. This model helps explain why some individuals do not adhere to prevention protocols, strategies, or screening tests for detecting and preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

Table 7: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability and Mean Scores

N	Factor	Mean Score	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Digital Marketing	3.69	4	.88
2	Leadership Role	3.80	4	.82
3	TOM Operations	4.34	4	.86
4	Business Profitability	4.31	4	.74
5	Digital	3.83	4	.73

Source: SPSS Output of Survey Data, 2020.

The scales were found reliable in this study, as the alpha value for all the variables i.e. digital marketing (0.88), leadership role (0.82), traditional open market (TOM) operations (0.86), business profitability (0.74) and digital transformation (0.73) are all above the alpha benchmarks for reliability of .60 (Malhotra, 2004) and .65 (Burns & Bush 1995). Again, the high mean values also indicate that there is a general agreement amongst respondents to the issues raised in the instrument of study.

Table 8. Summary of Correlation results between digital marketing and key TOM variables

			Digital Marketing
Traditional Open Market Operations		Correlation Coefficient	.311**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	350
Business Profitability in Traditional Open Markets		Correlation Coefficient	.254**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	350
Wealth Creation in Traditional Open Markets		Correlation Coefficient	.622**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	350

(correlation significant 0.01 2-tailed)

From the results shown in table 3, it is revealed that there is a positive relationship between digital marketing and traditional open market operations as $r = .311$ which is significant at $p = .000 < .05$. The results also indicate that the correlation between digital marketing and business profitability among traditional open market operators is positive as $r = .254$ significant at $p = .000 < .05$. Finally, there is also a positive relationship between digital marketing and wealth creation in traditional open markets as $r = .622$ significant at $p = .000 < .05$. These results show that digital market has a considerable influence on the traditional open market system in Nigeria. Although the results indicate a rather weak influence on the operations and profitability of traditional open market businesses, it has a stronger influence on wealth creation.

Table 9. Correlation outcome on leadership role and digital transformation in TOM

			Leadership Role	Digital Transformation in TOM
Spearman's rho	Leadership Role	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.532**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	350	350
	Digital Transformation in TOM	Correlation Coefficient	.532**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	350	350

(Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)).

The table above shows that correlation between leadership role and digital transformation is .532 significant at $p = .000 < .05$. This indicates that there is a moderate positive relationship between the two variables. The results therefore confirm a correlation, hence the Null hypothesis from 1-4 are rejected and the alternative hypothesis are accepted.

DISCUSSION

Digital marketing refers to the utilization of digital technologies in the promotion of a company's products. This concept is rapidly gaining traction as organizations globally are undergoing some form of digital transformation for their offerings. The present study investigated the level of awareness of digital marketing among traditional open market (TOM) operators and examined how leadership influences digital transformation among TOM operatives in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Additionally, it assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on business profitability in relation to digital marketing.

The data analysis revealed that TOM operators in the region are considerably aware of and have adopted digital marketing practices, albeit unintentionally. This was evident as a substantial percentage of the respondents, including businessmen, customers, and market officials, were actively engaged in various online transactions. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted business operations within the traditional open market system, particularly for operators resistant to embracing digital marketing.

Inferential analysis demonstrated positive and significant relationships among the variables under study. The first hypothesis tested the relationship between digital marketing and TOM operations, revealing a statistically significant, albeit moderate, link between the variables. This suggests that digital marketing does influence TOM operations in Nigeria to a meaningful extent, especially regarding daily business activities during the lockdown period. Even amid restrictions, TOM operators continued their transactions via digital marketing. Similar results were observed concerning business profitability and digital marketing, and wealth creation within TOMs and digital marketing. Notably, the relationship was weaker between digital marketing and profitability but stronger with wealth creation driven by digital marketing across Nigerian TOM systems. The weaker correlation between digital marketing and profitability can be attributed to the multifaceted factors influencing profitability. Nonetheless, the study underscored the importance of digital marketing adoption as a critical factor in business profitability among TOM operators in the studied area.

Moreover, the strongest relationship was found between digital marketing and wealth creation. The application of digital technologies extends business operations beyond physical boundaries, ensuring broader coverage and a more extensive customer network. An increase in business reach and customer base leads to higher turnover, consequently generating more wealth for the business owner. These findings align with the research conducted by Shirisha (2018), Kenzhegul et al. (2019), and Ogbo et al. (2019). These studies emphasize the significance of digital technologies in business operations, particularly during global health crises such as the current pandemic. Digital marketing has proven indispensable, enabling businesses within the TOM system to maintain customer engagement despite lockdowns.

The final hypothesis examined the connection between leadership roles and digital transformation in TOM systems in Nigeria. The results indicated a statistically significant link, highlighting the crucial role of leadership in facilitating digital transformation among TOM operators. The study suggested that effective legislation in cybersecurity and related areas would encourage more businesses to transition online. Thus, to remain operational during challenging times, businesses must undergo digital transformation, which requires governmental support in creating a conducive environment for such changes.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommend that operators of traditional open markets in Nigeria should take advantage of extant digital technologies in their day-to-day business operations as this will spur better performance and even assist them in the event of unavoidable turbulent environmental occurrences. It is recommended that the government should try and implement an ICT policy at the state and regional levels to start rigorous training of citizens in tech driven initiatives. This is most important because many of the stakeholders are aware of digital marketing but lack the basic skills to drive it. Again, TOM operators should endeavor to make their digital marketing platforms more user friendly as this would attract more customers. Since the issue of cyber security is crucial to business safety in cyber space, government should enact laws that will foster cyber security. Finally, leaders in the TOM system should be more proactive in their operations as it is shown to be relevant in digital transformation among TOM operators.

The need for digital marketing transformation in the traditional open markets in Nigeria is very urgent and critical to the continued survival of retail outlets and prevention of covid-19 spike in the country. With the lackluster attitude of marketers and other stakeholders in adopting digital forms of transacting businesses in the open markets, it's compelling for government and leaders in the different market unions to plan and execute programs and policies aimed at digitalization of the open market operations. Financial barriers, cost implications, ICT knowledge and infrastructures, weak government institutions and widespread cyber frauds are some fears exhibited by the respondents during this study. With the proliferation of social media platforms,

market operators can easily sell and advertise their wares even with their mobile phones and have an improved customer base. People in the South-south part of Nigeria are laggards when it comes to scientific innovations like digital marketing hence government need to play the leadership role of raising peer groups and carry out seminars, public enlightenment campaigns and push the citizenry towards accepting the new normal.

Recommendations for Future studies It is recommended that this study should be expanded to cover the traditional open markets within the entire country or a cluster of sub-national units in the country to enable better understanding of the feelings and experiences of a greater percentage of entrepreneurs. This will also create diversity awareness and considerations in government policies.

ABBREVIATIONS: -

1. TOM: Traditional open markets
2. ICT : Information communication technology

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