

Adapting Marketing Strategies in a Post-Pandemic Digital Landscape: Insights from Project Managers

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed business operations, particularly in marketing and consumer engagement strategies. As industries adapt to evolving market conditions, project managers play a crucial role in navigating these challenges. This study explores how project managers adapted their marketing approaches to maintain business resilience and consumer trust during and after the pandemic in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study aimed to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on project managers' marketing strategies, focusing on digital transformation, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and consumer engagement tactics. A qualitative research approach was adopted, utilising semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected project managers. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns and insights from the collected data. The findings reveal that project managers rapidly increased their digital marketing efforts, shifting towards online platforms, social media, and targeted digital advertising to sustain client engagement. Additionally, the need for agility and flexibility in marketing strategies was emphasised, as project managers continuously adjusted campaigns to align with shifting client behaviours and regulatory changes. Despite these adaptive efforts, challenges such as digital fatigue, budget constraints, and consumer scepticism toward CSR initiatives were identified. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on crisis-driven marketing adaptations, offering insights into how project managers can leverage digital tools and CSR to enhance resilience in volatile market conditions. These findings have practical implications for businesses seeking to develop robust marketing strategies that are responsive to future disruptions.

Keywords: consumer trust, corporate social responsibility, COVID-19, digital transformation, marketing strategies.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted global markets, forcing businesses to rethink and adapt their marketing strategies to navigate an unpredictable economic landscape. Lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, and shifting consumer behaviours accelerated the adoption of digital marketing and e-commerce, highlighting the need for agility and innovation in marketing practices (Sheth, 2021). Companies that embraced digital transformation and data-driven decision-making emerged more resilient, while traditional marketing approaches struggled to remain effective in a rapidly changing environment (Ceocea et al., 2022).

As the world transitions into the post-pandemic era, businesses must continue leveraging the lessons learned during the crisis to remain competitive. Consumer expectations have shifted, with greater emphasis on digital convenience, personalised experiences, and corporate social responsibility (Sawang, 2023). Additionally, advancements in artificial intelligence, automation, and omnichannel marketing are reshaping how brands engage with their audiences (Mushe, 2023; Sheth, 2021). Understanding these trends is crucial for project managers seeking to build sustainable and adaptive strategies.

This paper examines how marketing strategies have evolved in response to the pandemic, exploring key

trends such as digital transformation, changing consumer behaviours, and technology used by project managers to shape their marketing strategy. By analysing post-pandemic marketing adaptations, project managers can develop more resilient and future-proof strategies to thrive in an increasingly digital economy.

2. Literature Review

Project managers in the construction and built environment sector operate in a distinct context compared to those in purely commercial industries. Their core responsibilities often encompass the strategic coordination of project lifecycles, stakeholder management, regulatory compliance, and value-driven delivery of infrastructure or building assets. Unlike commercial project managers who may directly engage in marketing or advertising, construction project managers align more closely with business strategies aimed at client retention, project continuity, and long-term partnerships (He & Harris, 2020; Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020). Marketing efforts in this sector are therefore often integrated into broader business development strategies and client relationship management.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional operations in the built environment sector, requiring project managers to respond with agile and innovative

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approaches to stakeholder communication, client engagement, and brand trust (He & Harris, 2020; Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020). Project managers responsible for executing business initiatives have had to navigate an unprecedented shift in consumer behaviour, digital transformation, and corporate responsibility (Alshaketheep et al., 2020; Hanaysha, 2020). Understanding these changes is crucial for optimising marketing strategies that enhance brand resilience and consumer engagement.

Given these developments, this study examines the strategic marketing approaches project managers can adopt to enhance consumer engagement, build trust, and maintain flexibility in an evolving market. By understanding how project managers leverage digital marketing, CSR initiatives, and adaptive strategies, this research provides critical insights into the role of agile marketing practices in a post-pandemic world. The literature review explores the key themes of CSR, consumption patterns, marketing and advertising, consumer trust and engagement, and agility in marketing strategies, all of which contribute to a comprehensive understanding of project managers' evolving roles in modern business environments.

2.1. Corporate Social Responsibility

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) intensified across industries, including construction. He and Harris (2020) highlighted the renewed emphasis on stakeholder reliance, which pushed businesses to re-evaluate their long-term survival strategies. In the built environment sector, this translated into greater emphasis on ethical labour practices, community engagement around construction sites, and environmental stewardship (Asante Antwi et al., 2021; Hanaysha, 2020; Mahmud et al., 2021).

CSR, defined as a corporation's method of assessing and managing its social, environmental, and economic impact (Mahmud et al., 2021), is particularly relevant in construction where operations directly affect communities and urban landscapes. CSR in construction may include initiatives like using sustainable materials, engaging local labour, or supporting local COVID-19 recovery efforts. Asante Antwi et al. (2021) argue that CSR enhances brand image, competitiveness, and client trust, which aligns closely with business strategy objectives in the built environment.

Studies during the pandemic revealed that construction firms adopting proactive CSR—such as providing PPE to workers, supporting community health initiatives, and ensuring workforce safety—saw improved client retention and public approval (Ahmed et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2022). Moreover, firms demonstrating CSR were more likely to access governmental subsidies, further supporting their operational resilience. Transparency in

CSR disclosure correlated with enhanced client trust and project continuity (Mahmud et al., 2021; Popa et al., 2022).

Despite the advantages, some scholars caution against the misuse of CSR as a superficial marketing tool. Asante Antwi et al. (2021) warn that the pressure for survival may lead construction firms to adopt performative CSR, risking reputational damage. Popa et al. (2022) also note that CSR efforts perceived as insincere may generate distrust among both employees and clients. Billedeau et al. (2022) emphasizes the need for context-specific CSR models, particularly in complex and multi-stakeholder sectors like construction.

2.2. Shifting Consumption and Client Expectations in the Built Environment

Consumption patterns refer to the purchasing behaviour of consumers influenced by demand, technological advancements, and environmental regulations (Rutitis et al., 2022). These patterns encompass how and why consumers obtain products based on their needs, financial capacity, and situational factors such as economic stability, crisis events, and regulatory policies (He & Harris, 2020; Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020).

The pandemic significantly altered client behaviours and expectations in the construction sector. Consumption patterns, traditionally driven by demand for office spaces, housing, and infrastructure, shifted in response to economic uncertainty and remote working trends (Dumitras et al., 2021; Rutitis et al., 2022). Clients began prioritising health-conscious designs, flexible usage of space, and environmental performance.

These behavioural shifts reflect broader consumer anxieties and the demand for projects that address post-pandemic realities (Hanaysha, 2020). In the built environment, this has led to increased interest in digital construction solutions (e.g., BIM, digital twinning), sustainable building certifications, and transparent communication from project teams about safety and progress (Dumitras et al., 2021).

2.3. Marketing and Business Strategy in Construction Project Management

Marketing communication in the construction sector is not about direct consumer sales but about building long-term client relationships, enhancing firm visibility, and securing new project opportunities (Alshaketheep et al., 2020; He and Harris, 2020; Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020). Strategies include public relations, participation in industry events, digital presence through professional platforms, and submission of bids and tenders aligned with client expectations (Hanaysha, 2020; Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020).

The pandemic forced construction project managers to adopt digital tools for client engagement and stakeholder updates. Virtual site visits, online proposal submissions, and webinars became essential components of business development strategies (Toubes et al., 2021). Purpose-driven messaging, aligned with CSR and health safety measures, further demonstrated a firm's reliability and adaptability (DiResta et al., 2020).

The digitalisation of communication and promotion allowed firms to stay connected with existing and prospective clients. Alshaketheep et al. (2020) note that online presence helped firms attract attention to their crisis management efforts, boosting brand trust. This is particularly important in construction where project managers act as both technical leads and brand ambassadors.

2.3.1. *Building Client Trust and Engagement*

Client trust in the construction industry hinges on clear communication, ethical practices, and demonstrated project performance. During the pandemic, firms that maintained transparency about project delays, health measures, and risk management earned client loyalty (Popa et al., 2022). Project managers played a pivotal role in delivering these communications, thereby reinforcing business relationships and brand equity.

Park et al. (2022) assert that authentic and empathetic communication—such as updates on worker safety and proactive project planning—helped reduce client uncertainty. Such actions aligned with traditional business strategies in construction, where trust and reliability are key to securing repeat business (Taylor, 2020).

2.3.2. *Digitalisation*

The biggest trend in marketing communications with respect to the global pandemic was digitalisation. In the wake of COVID-19, many companies used digitalisation as an innovative tool for retaining and expanding their consumer bases (He and Harris, 2020) since digital processes were mostly unaffected by the state of events (Taylor, 2020). Consumers themselves were found to embrace digitalisation, especially given the restrictions and uncertainties caused by the virus (Alshaketheep et al., 2020). Digitalisation is the process by which technological advances and online platforms are used to conduct business matters (Alshaketheep et al., 2020; Toubes et al., 2021); hence, with the appearance of the COVID-19 virus, digitalisation was not just an alternative but also a necessary medium for business survival. Several authors like Alshaketheep et al. (2020), He and Harris (2020), Hoekstra and Leeftang (2020), Sheth (2020) and Taylor (2020) have echoed these sentiments of new marketing operations and paradigm shifts due to changing consumer behaviours and the move towards digitalisation.

2.3.3. *Agility and Flexibility in Construction Business Strategies*

Agility and flexibility became critical to business survival in the built environment sector. Faced with material shortages, labour disruptions, and health regulations, construction project managers had to adapt quickly. These adjustments included rescheduling project timelines, incorporating modular construction techniques, and renegotiating supplier contracts (Alshaketheep et al., 2020; Hanaysha, 2020).

According to Sheth (2020) and Taylor (2020), agile strategies that prioritise adaptability, learning, and decentralised decision-making enabled firms to remain competitive during the pandemic. In construction, this agility translated into reconfigured workflows, digital project management platforms, and proactive stakeholder engagement. Project managers who embraced such changes contributed directly to business continuity and resilience.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped expectations, practices, and strategies within the built environment sector. While marketing strategies are not a direct responsibility of construction project managers, their roles have evolved to include client engagement, CSR alignment, and digital communication which are core elements of business strategy. This literature review fills a notable gap by examining these themes through the lens of construction project management, offering a contextualised understanding of how industry professionals adapted during the crisis.

3. **Research Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research design underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm (Saunders, et al., 2019) to explore the adaptive marketing and business strategies employed by construction project managers in the post-pandemic context. The aim was to understand the lived experiences, practices, and perspectives of professionals operating within the built environment sector in South Africa.

A purposive sampling approach was used to identify participants via LinkedIn who are professionally registered with the South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP). A total of eight participants were interviewed virtually via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Although the sample size of eight participants appears limited given the extensive SACPCMP database, the qualitative nature of the study prioritised depth over breadth. The chosen sample size aligns with qualitative research norms where rich, detailed accounts from a smaller group provide valuable insights into context-

specific phenomena (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, interviews were deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the study, allowing for open-ended inquiry into sensitive and strategic professional experiences that may not be captured through surveys or quantitative tools.

This methodological approach ensured that the nuances of project managers' strategic decisions during a volatile period were adequately explored, providing valuable contributions to the understanding of business strategy adaptation in the construction industry post-pandemic.

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify common patterns and key insights across the interviews. The data was coded using Nvivo 14 to ensure accuracy and depth in the analysis. The themes emerging from the data were compared with existing literature to establish the consistency or divergence of findings, providing a well-rounded understanding of post-pandemic marketing adaptations.

4. Findings and Discussion

All participants in this study were male as indicated in Table 1. The researcher acknowledges the inherent gender bias in the sample; however, this was not intentional. The composition of the participant pool resulted from individuals' availability and willingness to participate at the time the interviews were conducted. It reflected the profile of those who were available and willing to participate at the time of data collection. Additionally, the participants had an average of 26 years of employment experience, and the highest academic qualification attained among them was a master's degree. Six of the participants were professionally registered with the SACPCMP, and two had their PMP registration.

strategies and challenges in adapting marketing strategies, which are elaborated on further below.

4.1. Increased Digital Marketing Efforts

A notable finding from the interviews was the significant increase in digital marketing efforts by project managers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many participants highlighted the shift towards online platforms as a means to maintain engagement with customers. Participant 2 noted, *"We had to completely rethink our marketing strategy. Traditional methods were no longer effective, so we increased our digital presence through social media and targeted advertising."*

Participant 5 emphasised the role of social media, stating, *"During the lockdown, our social media interactions doubled. We had to create more engaging content, collaborate with marketing experts, and use data-driven strategies to remain competitive."* This aligns with research by Ceoceca, et al. (2022), which underscores digital marketing as a critical tool for business continuity.

Project managers also reported an increased reliance on data analytics. Participant 2 explained, *"We used data analytics extensively to track website traffic and tailored our campaigns accordingly. Understanding what our clients wanted in real-time was key to our success."*

However, some project managers acknowledged challenges in sustaining digital efforts. Participant 8 stated, *"The initial shift to digital marketing was necessary, but maintaining it requires constant innovation. Consumers are now bombarded with digital content, so standing out is becoming more difficult."* This highlights the need for businesses to balance digital marketing expansion with meaningful and personalised engagement strategies.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Qualification	Years of Experience
P1	52	Male	Master's Degree	31
P2	45	Male	Honours Degree	23
P3	56	Male	Honours Degree	34
P4	40	Male	Post Grad Diploma	17
P5	49	Male	Honours Degree	28
P6	42	Male	Bachelor's Degree	20
P7	55	Male	Bachelor's Degree	32
P8	47	Male	Honours Degree	26

Four themes emerged from the data: increased digital marketing efforts, building consumer trust and engagement, agility and flexibility in marketing

These insights reinforce the necessity for businesses to invest in digital marketing, not only as a short-term crisis response but as a long-term strategy for sustained

growth in an increasingly digital economy (Ceocca, et al., 2022).

4.2. Building Consumer Trust and Engagement

Project managers emphasised that building consumer trust and engagement was a critical strategy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many businesses focused on transparency, customer-centric communication, and corporate social responsibility to foster stronger relationships with their customers. Participant 3 stated, *"During uncertain times, clients wanted reassurance. We made a conscious effort to be as transparent as possible about our service offerings, delivery times, and safety measures."* This aligns with Sawang et al. (2023), who stress that trust-building through clear communication enhances customer loyalty.

Another key strategy was personalisation. Participant 1 explained, *"We tried to deliver personalised experiences. Clients responded better when they felt our brand understood their unique needs and preferences."*

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) also played a significant role in strengthening consumer trust. Participant 4 highlighted, *"We supported local communities during the pandemic. Clients appreciated the effort, and it strengthened our brand loyalty."* This echoes the findings of DiResta, et al. (2020) and Sheth (2021), who emphasise that brands demonstrating social responsibility see greater long-term engagement.

However, challenges in maintaining engagement were noted. Participant 7 expressed concern, stating, *"Consumer expectations have evolved. They now demand authenticity and consistency across all touchpoints, which requires continuous effort and adaptation."* This highlights the need for businesses to sustain their trust-building efforts beyond the pandemic era.

Businesses successfully built consumer trust and engagement during the pandemic by focusing on transparency, personalisation, and corporate responsibility. These findings suggest that trust remains a key pillar of marketing strategies moving forward, requiring brands to maintain clear, authentic, and customer-focused communication.

4.3. Agility and Flexibility in Marketing Strategies

Project managers highlighted that agility and flexibility were crucial for business survival during the pandemic. Participant 6 noted, *"We had to make rapid adjustments to our marketing approach almost overnight. Consumer behaviours were changing daily, and only businesses that could quickly pivot were able to stay ahead."* This supports Sheth (2021), who emphasises

that businesses that adopt real-time data-driven strategies are more resilient in times of crisis.

Participant 2 explained, *"Our supply chain was disrupted, and we had to rethink how we delivered products and services. Flexible marketing strategies allowed us to communicate these changes effectively to our customers, keeping them engaged and informed."* This aligns with the findings of Alshaketheep et al. (2020), who highlight the role of adaptive marketing in crisis management.

Participants also stressed the need for real-time responsiveness. One interviewee stated, *"We moved to a more agile decision-making process so that we could adapt quickly to clients' needs."* This reflects the argument by Sawang, et. al. (2023) and Sheth (2021) that marketing strategies must be iterative and responsive to changing customer expectations.

Agility and flexibility enabled businesses to respond effectively to unpredictable market shifts during the pandemic. These findings indicate that companies should continue embracing adaptive marketing approaches to remain competitive in an evolving business environment.

4.4. Challenges in Adapting Marketing Strategies

While many project managers successfully adapted their marketing strategies, they also faced significant challenges. One major issue was the rapid need for upskilling. As Participant 5 noted, *"We had to learn new digital tools almost overnight. The pressure to adapt was immense, and not everyone on the team was equipped to handle the transition."* This aligns with the findings of Sheth (2021), who noted that rapid digitalisation exposed skill gaps in many organisations.

Another challenge was resource allocation. Participant 2 explained, *"Our budget constraints made it difficult to implement all the changes we wanted. We had to prioritise digital initiatives that provided the most immediate impact."* This supports Mushe (2023) assertion that financial constraints often limit the extent of digital transformation efforts.

Additionally, digital fatigue among consumers was a growing concern. Participant 7 shared, *"People were overwhelmed with digital content. Engagement levels started high but began to drop as clients became more selective about what they paid attention to."* This echoes the concerns raised by Ceocca et al. (2022) regarding digital saturation and consumer burnout.

These challenges highlight the complexities of digital transformation and the need for businesses to adopt sustainable, well-planned marketing strategies that balance innovation with consumer needs.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

This study highlights the critical role of project managers in navigating marketing challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that digital transformation, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and consumer trust-building were pivotal in sustaining business resilience. Project managers leveraged digital marketing tools, social media engagement, and data-driven insights to maintain customer relationships while adapting to shifting client behaviours and market uncertainties.

Moreover, integrating CSR into marketing strategies enhanced consumer loyalty, provided that initiatives were perceived as authentic and aligned with broader societal concerns. Agility and flexibility emerged as essential competencies for project managers, as they continuously adjusted marketing strategies to respond

to rapidly changing external conditions. However, challenges such as digital fatigue, budget constraints, and scepticism towards CSR initiatives indicate the need for a balanced approach to marketing adaptation.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on crisis-driven marketing by emphasising the intersection of project management and marketing strategies. Future research could further explore industry-specific adaptations and long-term impacts of these strategies beyond the pandemic context. For businesses, the key takeaway is the importance of proactive and consumer-centric marketing approaches that integrate digital innovation, social responsibility, and strategic adaptability to ensure resilience in uncertain environments.

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