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DIGITAL MARKETING AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS PHARMACEUTICAL DISTRIBUTION: EVIDENCE FROM WHOLESALE PHARMACIES IN MWANZA CITY, TANZANIA

By

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Abstract

The rapid adoption of digital communication tools has transformed marketing practices in business-to-business (B2B) markets, yet empirical evidence on how specific digital marketing dimensions affect customer loyalty in sub-Saharan African pharmaceutical distribution remains limited. This study examined the effect of digital marketing specifically online promotions, social media marketing, and mobile-based marketing on customer loyalty among retail pharmacy clients of selected wholesale pharmacies in Mwanza City, Tanzania. Guided by Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), the study adopted a qualitative case study design, collecting data through eight semi-structured individual interviews (four with wholesale pharmacy representatives and four with retail pharmacy representatives) and two focus group discussions comprising eight participants each, yielding twenty-four participants in total. Thematic analysis was applied to the data. Ten themes were identified across three objectives. The findings confirm that all three digital marketing dimensions have a significant positive effect on customer loyalty, and that personalisation is the overarching mechanism through which digital marketing communications generate trust, strengthen relational commitment, and sustain repeat purchasing behaviour. Personalised one-to-one mobile-based marketing (WhatsApp/SMS) was identified as the strongest loyalty driver, followed by interactive social media engagement and personalised online promotions. The study validates the applicability of Relationship Marketing Theory's trust-commitment framework to digital marketing in sub-Saharan African B2B pharmaceutical distribution markets and contributes a novel finding on the pre-relational trust-signalling function of social media presence. Practical recommendations are offered for wholesale pharmacy managers and pharmaceutical sector policymakers.

Keywords: *digital marketing, customer loyalty, online promotions, social media marketing, mobile-based marketing, relationship marketing theory, wholesale pharmacy, Tanzania, B2B*

1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered the landscape of business-to-business (B2B) marketing across both developed and developing economies. In sub-Saharan Africa, where mobile penetration rates have outpaced fixed internet infrastructure, platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and SMS have become primary channels through which businesses communicate with clients, share promotional information, and maintain commercial relationships (Mwanzile & Kasanga, 2025; Ochieng & Mshana, 2025). The pharmaceutical distribution sector, in which wholesale pharmacies supply licensed retail pharmacy clients with medicinal products, presents a particularly significant but understudied context for examining the relationship between digital marketing and customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty in B2B pharmaceutical distribution has profound commercial and public health significance. A retail pharmacy that maintains a stable, trust-based purchasing relationship with one or a small number of wholesale suppliers benefits from supply chain reliability, preferential pricing, and priority access to scarce stock items outcomes that directly influence the availability of medicines to end

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consumers (Lyimo & Mponda, 2024). For wholesale pharmacies, retail client loyalty translates to predictable revenue, lower client acquisition costs, and operational stability. Understanding the digital marketing strategies that most effectively generate and sustain this loyalty is therefore commercially important.

Despite growing empirical attention to digital marketing in African B2B markets (Boateng, Kosiba, & Okoe, 2023; Munyoki & Kihoro, 2023), research examining the specific effect of digital marketing dimensions on customer loyalty in Tanzania's wholesale pharmaceutical distribution sector remains absent from the literature. This study addresses that gap by examining the effect of three digital marketing dimensions , online promotions, social media marketing, and mobile-based marketing on customer loyalty among retail pharmacy clients of selected wholesale pharmacies in Mwanza City, Tanzania.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework and relevant empirical literature. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings. Section 5 concludes with implications, recommendations, and directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Relationship Marketing Theory

This study is grounded in Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT), originally proposed by Berry (1983) and later extended by Morgan and Hunt (1994) through their influential Commitment-Trust model. RMT posits that the quality of communication between a supplier and its clients characterised by consistency, attentiveness, and personalisation generates trust, which in turn produces the relational commitment that sustains loyal purchasing behaviour (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In B2B contexts, where switching costs are often lower than commonly assumed and competitive alternatives are numerous, relational trust is the primary barrier to client switching and the primary driver of repeat purchasing (Ranjan & Kumar, 2024).

The application of RMT to digital marketing contexts is increasingly supported by empirical evidence. Sheth and Sharma (2025) demonstrated that the quality of digital communication specifically its personalisation, responsiveness, and informational value is a stronger predictor of B2B relational trust than communication volume or platform reach. This finding is directly relevant to the wholesale pharmacy context, where multiple suppliers compete for retail clients' attention through the same digital channels.

2.2 Digital Marketing and Customer Loyalty in B2B Markets

Digital marketing encompasses all marketing activities delivered through digital channels, including online promotional communications, social media engagement, and mobile-based messaging (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In B2B pharmaceutical distribution, these channels have largely displaced traditional in-person sales visits as the primary mode of supplier-client communication, particularly in the post-pandemic period (Mwangi & Kimaro, 2024).

2.2.1 Online Promotions and Customer Loyalty

Online promotions in the B2B pharmaceutical distribution context include price discount announcements, new product notifications, and stock availability alerts delivered through digital platforms. Wang, Li, and Chen (2023) demonstrated that personalised online promotional communications strengthen trust and commitment in B2B supplier-client relationships by signalling supplier attentiveness to the client's specific procurement needs. Harrigan et al. (2023) extended this finding by establishing that communication quality and relevance, rather than communication volume, are the primary determinants of B2B loyalty outcomes a finding with particular relevance in markets where promotional message saturation is a recognised challenge.

2.2.2 Social Media Marketing and Customer Loyalty

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp Business, have emerged as central digital marketing tools in Tanzanian B2B markets (Mbogho, 2026). Boateng, Kosiba, and Okoe (2023) found that the perceived informational value of social media content specifically its relevance to clients' operational challenges is a stronger B2B loyalty driver than content volume. Amoah and Jibril (2023) identified social media engagement quality, particularly supplier responsiveness to client queries, as a significant predictor of relational trust in African B2B healthcare markets. In the Tanzanian pharmaceutical supply chain context, Mwanzile and Kasanga (2025) found that personalised social media engagement was the strongest predictor of repeat purchasing behaviour among retail clients.

2.2.3 Mobile-Based Marketing and Customer Loyalty

Mobile-based marketing, encompassing individual SMS messages and one-to-one WhatsApp communication, represents the most direct form of supplier-client digital communication in the African B2B context. Msuya (2023) found that personalised WhatsApp communication strengthened perceived supplier trust and relational closeness in Tanzanian B2B markets, producing significantly higher repeat purchase rates. Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh (2024) confirmed that digital communication quality significantly improves trust, satisfaction, and commitment in B2B relationships. Ranjan and Kumar (2024) established that personalised digital touchpoints increase perceived usefulness, engagement, and repeat purchase intentions in B2B pharmaceutical contexts. Critically, Lyimo and Mponda (2024) found that personalised mobile communication improved perceived supplier value and loyalty in Tanzanian pharmaceutical distribution specifically.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on digital marketing and B2B loyalty in African markets, no published study has examined the relative loyalty-generating effects of the three principal digital marketing dimensions in Tanzania's wholesale pharmaceutical distribution sector, or applied

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Relationship Marketing Theory to this context empirically. This study addresses that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an interpretivist philosophical stance and a qualitative case study design. The interpretivist paradigm is appropriate when the research objective is to understand the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of participants in their natural social context, rather than to measure and quantify causal relationships (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2023). The qualitative case study design is well-suited to exploratory investigations of complex social phenomena in specific organisational contexts where limited prior empirical evidence exists (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). An inductive reasoning approach was applied, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data rather than testing pre-specified hypotheses.

3.2 Study Population, Sampling and Participants

The target population comprised two groups: (i) wholesale pharmacy representatives (owners, managers, and marketing staff) from the eighteen licensed wholesale pharmacies operating in Mwanza City, and (ii) retail pharmacy owners and purchasing managers who were active purchasing clients of those wholesale pharmacies. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct personal involvement in the deployment or receipt of digital marketing communications in this B2B pharmaceutical context.

A total of twenty-four participants were recruited across four data collection formats: four individual interviews with wholesale pharmacy representatives (WI-01 to WI-04), four individual interviews with retail pharmacy representatives (RI-01 to RI-04), one focus group discussion (FGD 1) with eight retail pharmacy owners (RF-01 to RF-08), and one focus group discussion (FGD 2) with eight wholesale pharmacy marketing staff (WF-01 to WF-08). This sampling structure was designed to capture perspectives from both the supply and demand sides of the digital marketing relationship, and to facilitate cross-validation of findings across data collection formats. Table 1 summarises the participant profile.

Table 1: Summary of Participant Profile (N = 24)

Data Collection Format	Participant Group	Participant Codes	n	Yrs Exp. (Range)
Individual Interview	Wholesale pharmacy representatives	WI-01 to WI-04	4	5–12
Individual Interview	Retail pharmacy representatives	RI-01 to RI-04	4	3–9
FGD 1	Retail pharmacy owners	RF-01 to RF-08	8	2–11
FGD 2	Wholesale marketing staff	WF-01 to WF-08	8	2–9
Total			**24**	

Source: Field Data (2025)

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected between January and April 2025 using two instruments developed and piloted by the researcher. Individual semi-structured interviews followed a guide of open-ended questions covering participants' experiences with each digital marketing dimension and their perceived relationship with customer loyalty. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting at the participant's pharmacy premises. Focus group discussions followed a structured guide designed to elicit group interaction and shared experience around the same three digital marketing dimensions; each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes. All sessions were conducted in Swahili and English according to participants' preference, audio-recorded with informed consent, and professionally transcribed and translated.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software was used to manage and systematically code the data. Analytical rigour was maintained through triangulation across the four data collection formats, member-checking of emergent themes with a sub-sample of participants, and reflexive journaling to document analytical decisions throughout the process.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Directorate of Postgraduate Studies, Research and Consultancy at St. Augustine University of Tanzania and from the relevant regulatory authority. All participants provided written informed consent. Anonymity was maintained throughout through the use of participant codes. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis generated ten themes across three objectives. Table 2 presents a summary of all themes and their correspondence to the Relationship Marketing Theory framework.

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Table 2: Summary of Themes, RMT Mechanisms and Loyalty Outcomes

Objective	Theme	RMT Mechanism	Loyalty Outcome
Online Promotions	1. Personalised promotions affirm relational value	Trust via supplier attentiveness	Repeat purchase / reduced switching
Online Promotions	2. Timing-conscious promotions drive purchasing action	Commitment via perceived reliability	Increased order frequency
Online Promotions	3. Generic promotions undermine relational quality	Erosion of trust	Switching behaviour
Online Promotions	4. Transparent, accurate promotions build credibility	Trust via communication consistency	Long-term relationship maintenance
Social Media Marketing	5. Interactive responsiveness builds relational trust	Trust via supplier accessibility	Loyalty and exclusive sourcing
Social Media Marketing	6. Informational content drives purchasing decisions	Commitment via perceived value	Increased purchase frequency
Social Media Marketing	7. Absent/unprofessional presence is a negative trust signal	Pre-relational trust erosion	Reluctance to initiate relationship
Mobile-Based Marketing	8. Personalised 1-to-1 WhatsApp drives deepest loyalty	Strongest trust-commitment signal	Exclusive, long-term purchasing
Mobile-Based Marketing	9. Mobile accessibility determines switching decisions	Trust via reliability and presence	Switching prevention
Mobile-Based Marketing	10. Excessive messaging causes saturation	Communication quality decline	Reduced promotional effectiveness

Source: Field Data Analysis (2025)

4.1 Online Promotions and Customer Loyalty

Findings under Objective One confirm that online promotions have a significant positive effect on customer loyalty, but that this effect is critically conditioned by the personalisation, timing, and credibility of promotional communications. Retail pharmacy clients who received personalised, timely, and accurately represented promotional offers reported stronger relational trust, more consistent repeat purchasing, and greater resistance to switching. Conversely, generic broadcast promotions were found to erode relational quality and contribute to supplier switching.

The primacy of personalisation was unambiguous across all data collection formats. RI-01, a retail pharmacy owner with nine years of purchasing experience, described the loyalty impact of receiving a personalised stock promotion:

"When they send me a message saying 'we have restocked the malaria drugs you usually order and we are offering you a special price this week,' I feel like they know me. That is not just selling. That is a relationship. I do not look at other suppliers when I receive that kind of message."

Wholesale marketing staff in FGD 2 confirmed that systematic client segmentation by purchasing profile was their most commercially effective promotional strategy. WF-03 noted that the retention rate among personally targeted clients was significantly higher than among clients receiving general group broadcasts. These findings align with Wang, Li, and Chen (2023) and extend Harrigan et al.'s (2023) conclusion that communication quality, not volume, determines B2B loyalty. Within the RMT framework, personalised promotions function as relational communications that generate the trust and commitment Morgan and Hunt (1994) identify as the precondition for sustained loyalty.

Timing emerged as an equally significant loyalty determinant. Retail participants described receiving promotions at their weekly ordering moment as the decisive factor in acting on a promotion and ordering from a particular supplier. WF-05 confirmed that scheduling promotions early in the working week, aligned with retail clients' typical ordering cycle, had nearly doubled WhatsApp promotion response rates. A further theme concerned promotional credibility: multiple participants across both FGDs recounted that a single instance of a promoted product being unavailable upon ordering had caused permanent trust erosion, demonstrating the asymmetric nature of trust-building described by Morgan and Hunt (1994).

4.2 Social Media Marketing and Customer Loyalty

Findings under Objective Two confirm that social media marketing has a significant positive effect on customer loyalty, operating through interactive engagement quality and the informational value of content. The most consistent finding was that supplier responsiveness on social media platforms was the dominant loyalty driver, outweighing content frequency or visual quality. RI-04, a retail pharmacy owner, explained:

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"The wholesaler I have used since I opened my pharmacy is always quick on WhatsApp. I ask a question, they answer within minutes, even in the evening. That responsiveness makes me feel that they value my business. I would not change to a supplier who is slow to respond, even if they offered slightly better prices."

Switching specifically caused by declining social media responsiveness was reported by multiple FGD 1 participants, establishing social media accessibility as a non-price loyalty-critical factor. This finding extends Sheth and Sharma (2025) and corroborates Amoah and Jibril (2023) in an African pharmaceutical distribution context.

A novel finding of this study is the pre-relational trust-signalling function of social media presence. Multiple retail pharmacy participants reported evaluating wholesale suppliers' social media activity before initiating purchasing relationships, with absent or inactive social media presence functioning as a negative reputational signal that reduced their willingness to commit to a new supplier. RF-01 stated:

"If I search for a wholesaler on Facebook or WhatsApp and they are not there, or their last post was two years ago, I become cautious. It tells me they are not engaged, not growing, or not professional."

This finding extends the existing literature by establishing that digital marketing performs a trust-signalling function at the pre-transactional stage of B2B relationship formation — a dimension not explicitly addressed in Morgan and Hunt's (1994) original framework. In a digitally transitioning market such as Mwanza City, digital presence has become a threshold credibility criterion for prospective retail clients.

4.3 Mobile-Based Marketing and Customer Loyalty

The most analytically significant finding of this study is the near-universal identification of personalised, one-to-one WhatsApp communication as the single most powerful digital marketing driver of customer loyalty in this B2B pharmaceutical context. This finding was cross-validated across all four data collection formats, giving it exceptional evidentiary strength within the qualitative design.

Participants drew a sharp and operationally meaningful distinction between WhatsApp group broadcast messages categorised as equivalent in effect to generic online promotions and direct, one-to-one WhatsApp conversations initiated by a named wholesale pharmacy representative who addressed the client by name and referenced their specific purchasing history. RI-01, who had maintained an exclusive purchasing relationship with one wholesale pharmacy for nine years, described the mechanism:

"I have a direct WhatsApp contact with the sales manager at my main wholesale pharmacy. He knows my name, he knows what I stock, and he messages me personally when something I order frequently is available at a good price. That personal relationship through WhatsApp is why I have stayed with them for nine years."

In FGD 2, wholesale marketing staff confirmed that one-to-one mobile communication was their most resource-intensive but most commercially effective retention strategy, with WF-07 reporting that retention rates among clients with personal mobile relationships with a named pharmacy representative were substantially higher than among clients receiving only group broadcasts.

A second significant finding under this objective is that mobile response speed functions as a non-price switching trigger. Multiple participants reported abandoning long-standing wholesale relationships specifically because of declining WhatsApp response times, despite being otherwise satisfied with the supplier's products and pricing. RI-03 described switching from a four-year supplier relationship because of slow mobile responses, concluding:

"The product was the same. The price was the same. The only difference was that the new supplier was reliably there when I needed them."

This finding directly validates Morgan and Hunt's (1994) prediction that relational quality, not transactional attributes, is the primary determinant of B2B loyalty and identifies mobile accessibility as a specific relational quality dimension that can override price and product parity in supplier selection decisions.

A cautionary theme emerged regarding the counterproductive effects of excessive mobile messaging. FGD 1 participants described belonging to fifteen or more wholesale supplier WhatsApp groups simultaneously, reporting that group broadcast messages had become informational noise routinely ignored, while personal one-to-one messages were always read. This finding reinforces the primacy of personalisation depth over communication volume as the determinant of mobile marketing's loyalty-generating effectiveness.

4.4 Cross-Cutting Finding: Hierarchy of Digital Marketing Dimensions

A consistent cross-cutting finding across all objectives and all four data collection formats was the ranking of digital marketing dimensions by loyalty-generating effectiveness: personalised one-to-one mobile-based marketing > interactive social media engagement > personalised online promotions. This hierarchy corresponds directly to the degree of personalisation depth and relational directness associated with each channel, confirming that it is the personalisation mechanism not the platform that generates loyalty. This finding is represented schematically in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Digital Marketing Dimensions — Loyalty-Generating Hierarchy (Mwanza City Wholesale Pharmacy B2B Context, 2025)

Rank	Digital Marketing Dimension	Primary Mechanism	Loyalty Strength
1	Personalised one-to-one mobile (WhatsApp/SMS)	Individual trust-building through named personal contact	Strongest

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Rank	Digital Marketing Dimension	Primary Mechanism	Loyalty Strength
2	Interactive social media engagement (Facebook/WhatsApp Business)	Responsiveness and informational value	Strong
3	Personalised online promotions	Timing- and relevance-based relational signalling	Moderate-Strong

Source: Authors' construction from field data analysis (2025)

5. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study concludes that digital marketing has a significant positive effect on customer loyalty among retail pharmacy clients of wholesale pharmacies in Mwanza City, Tanzania. The effect is strongest for personalised one-to-one mobile-based marketing, followed by interactive social media engagement and personalised online promotions, reflecting a hierarchy of personalisation depth that corresponds directly to the trust-commitment pathway of Relationship Marketing Theory. Personalisation is the overarching mechanism through which all three digital marketing dimensions generate loyalty: digital communications that demonstrate knowledge of, attentiveness to, and responsiveness toward individual clients consistently generate stronger trust, deeper commitment, and more frequent repeat purchasing than generic or broadcast communications.

The study makes three original contributions to the literature. First, it establishes for the first time the digital marketing-loyalty relationship in Mwanza City's wholesale pharmacy sector, confirming all three research hypotheses (H1: online promotions; H2: social media marketing; H3: mobile-based marketing each positively influence customer loyalty). Second, it identifies a personalisation-mediated hierarchy of digital marketing dimensions as loyalty drivers in this B2B pharmaceutical context. Third, it contributes a novel theoretical finding the pre-relational trust-signalling function of social media presence that extends Morgan and Hunt's (1994) original trust-commitment framework in the digital marketing context.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings validate the applicability of Relationship Marketing Theory's trust-commitment framework to digital marketing in sub-Saharan African B2B pharmaceutical distribution markets, demonstrating its cross-cultural and cross-contextual generalisability (cf. Boateng, Kosiba, & Okoe, 2023). The study extends RMT by identifying personalisation depth as the critical variable that determines whether a digital communication act generates trust-building effects, adding theoretical precision to the theory's communication-trust pathway. The novel finding on pre-relational trust-signalling through social media presence suggests that RMT's framework needs extension to account for digital marketing's role at the pre-transactional stage of B2B relationship formation in digitally transitioning markets.

5.3 Practical Recommendations

For wholesale pharmacy managers, the study recommends: (i) prioritising investment in personalised one-to-one WhatsApp communication with key retail clients over high-volume broadcast messaging; (ii) establishing and enforcing clear response time standards for mobile client communications, with a recommended maximum of two hours during business hours; (iii) segmenting promotional communications by client purchasing profile to ensure promotional relevance; (iv) maintaining a professionally managed, regularly updated social media presence with a minimum posting frequency of three times per week; and (v) implementing operational quality control of promotional content to ensure accuracy of stock and pricing claims before distribution.

For pharmaceutical sector policymakers, including the Tanzania Medicines and Medical Devices Authority and the Pharmacy Council of Tanzania, the study recommends the development of guidelines on responsible digital marketing practices for licensed wholesale pharmacies, and the incorporation of digital marketing capacity building into continuing professional development programmes for pharmaceutical distribution sector operators.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its qualitative design, single-city geographic scope, and reliance on self-reported perceptions. The findings should be understood as exploratory and hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory. Future research should: (i) conduct a quantitative replication using structural equation modelling to test the relationships identified and measure effect sizes across a statistically representative sample; (ii) extend the comparison to multiple Tanzanian cities; (iii) investigate the mediating role of trust and relational commitment using validated scales; and (iv) examine the digital marketing-loyalty relationship in other Tanzanian B2B distribution sectors to assess the generalisability of the personalisation-loyalty hierarchy identified here.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest. This paper is derived from an MBA dissertation submitted to St. Augustine University of Tanzania in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Business Administration.

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