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IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION ON SUSTAINABLE MARKETING OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES IN BENIN CITY

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ABSTRACT

Digitalization has revolutionized marketing practices in the commercial real estate sector worldwide, and Benin City, Nigeria, is no exception. This paper explores the impact of digitalization on sustainable marketing of commercial properties in Benin City, specifically focusing on how digital tools, such as social media platforms, online property listing portals, virtual tour applications, and mobile communication systems, have transformed marketing efficiency, lowered costs, and broadened market reach. The study also assesses the sustainability aspects of digital marketing in real estate, which include environmental, economic, and social outcomes. Utilizing a descriptive research design and relying on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature and professional reports from the Estate Surveyors and Valuers Registration Board of Nigeria (ESVARBON), the study concludes that digitalization has markedly enhanced property visibility and transaction speed while diminishing reliance on traditional marketing methods. Nonetheless, challenges such as insufficient power infrastructure, poor internet connectivity, limited digital skills among practitioners, and the prevalence of online fraud hinder the complete realization of these advantages. The paper advocates for improved digital capacity development for real estate professionals, increased investment in broadband infrastructure, and stringent regulatory oversight of online property advertising platforms.

Keywords: Digitalization; sustainability; commercial property marketing; real estate; Benin City; Nigeria

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Real estate marketing encompasses the promotion of properties to potential buyers, tenants, and investors through strategic communication and the dissemination of information. Throughout much of the twentieth century, this practice relied heavily on physical and analogue methods, such as billboards, newspaper ads, flyers, and personal referral networks (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Although these traditional methods were effective within their geographic and temporal constraints, they were marked by high costs, slow information exchange, and limited market reach

(Ali and Song, 2022) . The advent and swift proliferation of digital technology have fundamentally transformed this environment, allowing practitioners to connect with larger, more diverse audiences at reduced costs and with enhanced efficiency.

Digitalization, broadly defined as the incorporation of digital technologies into business processes to facilitate quicker communication, broader reach, and improved operational efficiency, has infiltrated nearly every sector of the Nigerian economy. The real estate sector has not escaped this evolution. Increasing internet penetration, the rise of affordable smartphones, and the embrace of digital social platforms have collectively broadened the possibilities in property marketing. Naeem, Rana, and Nasir (2023) classified the digital tools that are reshaping real estate into four functional categories: information and communication technologies (ICT), networking systems, data collection technologies, and decision-support systems. This classification highlights the extensive technological changes currently affecting how commercial properties are marketed, evaluated, and sold.

Commercial real estate, which includes shops, office spaces, shopping centers, warehouses, and other income-generating properties, has traditionally been transacted through face-to-face negotiations and agent-to-agent networks. Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) discovered that digital disruption has resulted in the complete adoption of digital marketing channels among practicing Estate Surveyors and Valuers in State, with social media marketing and electronic mail identified as the most widely used channels. In a similar vein, Nwaogu and Christian (2021) identified that Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter are the primary online platforms utilized by real estate firms in Nigeria for property sales, with Facebook being the most favored according to the practitioners surveyed.

The sustainability aspect of digital real estate marketing further enhances the significance of this investigation. Sustainable marketing includes practices that are not only economically viable but also socially inclusive and environmentally responsible. Low et al. (2020) illustrated that intelligent digital marketing within the property sector allows firms to gain real-time insights into customer behaviour, enhance communication with stakeholders, and establish enduring competitive advantages, all while minimizing paper consumption and carbon emissions linked to traditional property inspections. These characteristics connect digital marketing with the environmental, economic, and social foundations of sustainable development.

Despite the increasing adoption of these technologies, Nigeria poses unique structural challenges. Inconsistent public power supply, inadequate internet infrastructure in semi-urban and rural areas, limited digital literacy among older professionals, and the rising complexity of online property fraud collectively hinder the complete realization of digital potential in practice (Oluwunmi and Agara, 2023). As a result, this study seeks to investigate: (i) the impact of digitalization on commercial property marketing in Benin City; (ii) the sustainability consequences of digital real estate marketing across environmental, economic, and social dimensions; and (iii) the structural obstacles that impede effective digitalization in the region under study.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digitalization and Real Estate Marketing

Digitalization is generally understood as the process through which digital technology becomes embedded in various aspects of daily business operations, transforming how organizations generate and provide value (Naeem et al., 2023). In real estate, this includes the use of digital platforms for property marketing, client interaction, transaction management, and market research. Kotler and Keller (2016) indicated that digital marketing enables businesses to connect with specific audiences with a level of accuracy and cost-effectiveness that traditional approaches cannot match, a conclusion that has been supported across numerous real estate markets.

Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) defined digital intelligence in the real estate sector as the set of skills acquired and utilized concerning digital technologies and channels, which empower professionals to market properties successfully and efficiently in online settings. Their research, which involved 100 registered Estate Surveyors and Valuers in Edo State, revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between the degree of digital intelligence and the use of social media marketing, highlighting the necessity of intentional capacity building as a prerequisite for successful digitalization.

Naeem et al. (2023) performed a systematic review of the literature concerning digital real estate, pinpointing the essential technologies that are transforming the industry. Their framework, which is divided into four categories: communication technologies, networking tools, data collection systems, and decision-support platforms, offers a valuable analytical perspective for comprehending how digitalization influences both marketing processes and the wider industry structures. In Nigeria, Nwaogu and Christian (2021) empirically validated this framework,

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illustrating that social media platforms and online real estate portals have become the primary means through which estate firms across the nation engage in property disposal.

2.2 Sustainable Real Estate Marketing

Sustainable marketing in the context of real estate pertains to promotional and transactional practices that generate long-term economic benefits while minimizing negative environmental impacts and ensuring fair social outcomes (Low, Ullah, Shirowzhan, Sepasgozar, and Lee, 2020). The three pillars of sustainability, which are environmental, economic, and social, offer a structured approach for assessing the implications of adopting digital marketing in property markets.

From an environmental standpoint, Low et al. (2020) revealed that digital marketing in property development decreases paper usage, reduces the carbon footprint linked to repeated physical property inspections, and diminishes the energy requirements of traditional marketing practices. Their case study on the Malaysian property market indicated that digital platforms allow potential buyers to perform comprehensive pre-inspection evaluations online, significantly cutting down on travel needs without sacrificing the quality of decision-making. These findings are applicable to the Nigerian context, where practitioners in Benin City are increasingly using high-resolution images, video walkthroughs, and virtual tour applications to cater to clients who may be located in different geographical areas.

From an economic perspective, sustainable digital marketing enhances the turnover rate of commercial properties by facilitating faster information exchange between property owners and prospective tenants or buyers. It minimizes the ongoing expenses related to print advertizing, banner creation, and physical listing offices, thus reducing entry barriers for small and medium-sized real estate firms. Low et al. (2020) discovered that digital tools enhance the return on marketing investment and promote broader participation in property markets by allowing non-institutional players to compete effectively online.

On a social level, digital platforms democratize access to property information, mitigate information asymmetries that have historically put prospective tenants and buyers at a disadvantage, and enhance transaction transparency. Naeem et al. (2023) noted that digitalization improves communication between consultants and clients, encourages greater accountability

among agents, and allows for real-time market feedback, all of which contribute to a more inclusive and equitable property market.

2.3 Digital Real Estate Marketing in Nigeria

The Nigerian real estate industry has witnessed significant growth in digital adoption, although the speed and extent of this transformation have varied across different regions and groups of practitioners. Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) found that practitioners exhibiting higher levels of digital intelligence were considerably more inclined to adopt and effectively utilize digital marketing channels, indicating that the challenge in Nigeria is more about the readiness of human capital than the availability of platforms. Their study, conducted in Edo State, which encompasses Benin City, offers directly relevant evidence for the assertions discussed in this paper.

Nwaogu and Christian (2021) further validated the transition from traditional to digital marketing in Nigeria, revealing that among the 186 real estate firms surveyed, the majority now employ online platforms as their main method for disposing of both residential and commercial properties. This shift from agency networks and newspaper classifieds to social media and property portals signifies a more extensive structural transformation in the manner in which market information is generated and consumed within the Nigerian property sector (Oluwunmi, Role and Umeh, 2022) .

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive research design, which is suitable for investigations aimed at depicting phenomena and recognizing patterns in existing knowledge without experimental manipulation (Naeem et al., 2023). Data were exclusively sourced from secondary materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic textbooks, and professional industry publications. The sources reviewed encompass publications from the Estate Surveyors and Valuers Registration Board of Nigeria (ESVARBON), empirical studies from journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, as well as publicly accessible market data from the National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria (NBS, 2022). The scope of the study was limited to the commercial property sub-sector of the Benin City real estate market in Edo State, Nigeria. Content analysis was employed to synthesize findings from the literature reviewed and to draw thematic conclusions.

The limitation of this methodology lies in its dependence on secondary data, which implies that the findings are contingent upon the quality and breadth of the underlying studies reviewed. The

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collection of primary data through structured questionnaires or interviews with active practitioners in Benin City would enhance the empirical basis of the conclusions drawn and is suggested for future research.

4. EFFECTS OF DIGITALIZATION ON COMMERCIAL PROPERTY MARKETING IN BENIN CITY

4.1 Improved Market Reach and Property Visibility

One of the most significant impacts of digitalization on the marketing of commercial properties is the substantial increase in market reach. Digital platforms, such as Facebook Marketplace, Instagram, property listing websites, and WhatsApp broadcast groups, allow estate agents in Benin City to connect with local, national, and diaspora clients simultaneously, without the excessive costs linked to traditional advertising. Nwaogu and Christian (2021) discovered that Facebook was the most favoured marketing channel among Nigerian estate professionals, followed by Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, reflecting broader trends in digital adoption across Nigerian urban areas.

The incorporation of high-quality images, promotional videos, and virtual tour technologies has further improved property visibility (Yagboyaju and Ikwuagwu, 2023) . Potential tenants and investors can now thoroughly evaluate a commercial property, including its layout, finishes, and surrounding area, without needing to visit in person initially. This ability to perform remote pre-qualification significantly decreases the time required for transactions and alleviates the financial burden on both parties, as corroborated by Low et al. (2020), who found that online property searches expedite the sales process and lessen the transactional friction associated with multiple physical inspections.

4.2 Accelerated Transaction Speed

Digital platforms facilitate almost immediate property advertising, enabling agents to publish listings within minutes of receiving new instructions. This promptness speeds up the inquiry-to-lease or inquiry-to-sale process. Real-time communication through WhatsApp and email allows for quick responses to client inquiries, while online payment systems simplify financial transactions that previously necessitated several in-person meetings. The overall result is a shortening of the marketing timeline for commercial properties, enhancing cash flow for property

owners and minimizing vacancy durations, which is a result that has direct consequences for the economic viability of the sector.

4.3 Cost Efficiency in Marketing Operations

Conventional real estate marketing involved ongoing expenses for print advertising, outdoor signage, flyer production, and agency personnel time spent on physical viewings. Digital marketing significantly cuts these costs (Oluwunmi and Agara, 2023). Social media platforms and property listing websites provide free or low-cost advertising options that can reach much larger audiences than comparable print campaigns. Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) confirmed that cost efficiency is one of the main reasons cited by Nigerian estate practitioners for embracing digital marketing, along with the ability to connect with a wider client base. For small and medium-sized estate firms in Benin City, this cost benefit is especially important, as it reduces the barriers to competitive engagement in the commercial property market.

4.4 Enhanced Competition and Service Quality

The democratization of marketing access through digital platforms has heightened competition among estate agents in Benin City. As more practitioners create an online presence, the standards for property presentations improve, forcing agents to invest in professional photography, engaging copy, and prompt client communication. This competitive pressure, while challenging for individual firms, positively contributes to the overall quality of service in the market. Naeem et al. (2023) observed that digital platforms introduce a form of market discipline, as client reviews and ratings on listing portals create accountability mechanisms that were absent in traditional agency arrangements.

5. SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL REAL ESTATE MARKETING

5.1 Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability in real estate pertains to the development, management, and operation of properties in a way that minimizes ecological harm while fostering efficient resource use (Low et al., 2020). In property marketing, digitalization enhances environmental sustainability mainly by decreasing paper usage and reducing the carbon emissions linked to unnecessary physical movements for property viewings. Low et al. (2020) discovered that the digital display of property information through photographs, video walkthroughs, and interactive listing

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platforms, significantly diminishes the number of physical site visits needed before a transaction is finalized, therefore lowering transport-related carbon emissions.

In Benin City, where property seekers may travel long distances to evaluate commercial properties only to find them unsuitable, the pre-qualification advantage of detailed digital listings is especially important. Therefore, digital marketing aids environmental sustainability not merely as a secondary advantage, but as a fundamental result of more efficient information dissemination.

5.2 Economic Sustainability

Economic sustainability denotes the ability of a business model or economic activity to remain productive, profitable, and financially stable over the long term without exhausting resources or incurring future financial obligations (Low et al., 2020). Digital marketing fosters economic sustainability in commercial real estate by lowering per-transaction marketing expenses, enhancing property turnover rates, and facilitating wider participation in investment markets through improved access to information (Yagboyaju and Ikwuagwu, 2023) . The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) reported a 4.44% growth in Nigeria's real estate sector in Q3 2022, contributing 5.34% to GDP. This is a trend that is partly due to the increased market liquidity made possible by digital platforms.

For real estate companies in Benin City, the transition to digital marketing has enabled better access to diaspora investors and institutional buyers based in Lagos and Abuja, markets that were once reachable only through costly in-person roadshows or intermediary agents. As a result, online listing platforms have broadened the effective reach of the Benin City commercial property market.

5.3 Social Sustainability

Social sustainability pertains to the ability of communities and markets to enhance human well-being, promote equity, ensure safety, and encourage inclusive participation over time. In the realm of commercial real estate marketing, digitalization bolsters social sustainability by democratizing access to property information, enhancing transaction transparency, and improving communication between clients and professionals. Naeem et al. (2023) discovered that digital platforms significantly mitigate information asymmetries in property markets. This is a persistent issue in Nigerian real estate, where a lack of clarity in pricing and availability has historically put less-informed buyers and tenants at a disadvantage.

Online listing platforms offer standardized property descriptions, pricing details, and location information that enable clients to make better-informed decisions without relying entirely on intermediary agents. This transformation fosters a more equitable market structure, even as it necessitates that practitioners adjust to a more transparent and accountable operational landscape.

6.0 CHALLENGES OF DIGITALIZATION IN BENIN CITY

6.1 Inadequate Power Infrastructure

The ongoing unreliability of public electricity supply continues to be a major limitation on digitalization efforts in Benin City and throughout Nigeria. Digital marketing activities rely heavily on a stable power supply for devices, internet routers, servers, and mobile charging systems. Frequent power interruptions force businesses and individual practitioners to depend on petrol generators or inverter systems, which considerably raise operational expenses (Oluwunmi and Agara, 2023). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) has repeatedly highlighted energy infrastructure as one of the most critical barriers to the productivity of Nigerian SMEs. This is a conclusion that is particularly relevant for small estate firms aiming to utilize digital platforms for property marketing.

6.2 Limited Digital Skills Among Practitioners

A considerable portion of practicing estate agents in Benin City, particularly those educated within analogue-era frameworks, lacks the necessary digital skills to function effectively in an online marketing context. Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) established a statistically significant correlation between the level of digital intelligence and digital marketing performance, affirming that shortcomings in digital skills directly hinder marketing results.

The deficiencies in skills related to content creation, search engine optimization, digital photography, and the utilization of property listing platforms are especially evident among older professionals, many of whom still depend largely on conventional marketing methods. Sado, Jinanwa and Ndeche (2025) specified that continuous training programmes and continuous improvement in technological literacy is needed by real estate professionals to adapt to the emerging digitalization trend. This lack of human capital poses a structural challenge that cannot be resolved solely through infrastructure investment; it necessitates intentional professional development initiatives.

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6.3 Poor Internet Connectivity and Network Instability

In spite of advancements in national broadband coverage, large areas of Benin City, especially in peripheral and semi-urban regions, still face issues with unstable and slow internet connectivity. This instability has a direct impact on the quality and promptness of online marketing activities: uploads of listings are delayed, high-resolution images and videos do not transmit effectively, and real-time communication with clients is interrupted. Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) identified network quality as a vital moderating factor influencing the adoption of digital marketing among estate practitioners in Edo State, observing that those in regions with better connectivity exhibited significantly higher levels of digital engagement.

6.4 Fraudulent Online Property Listings

The rise of fraudulent property advertisements on social media and online platforms poses a considerable risk to public trust in digital real estate transactions in Nigeria. Common types of online property fraud include the posting of fake listings featuring stolen images, the false representation of rental prices or ownership status, and advance-fee scams where clients are persuaded to make deposits for properties that either do not exist or are unavailable. Nwaogu and Christian (2021) identified online fraud as a major obstacle to the acceptance of digital real estate platforms among Nigerian property seekers, highlighting that previous victimization, or awareness of victimization within one's social circle, significantly diminishes the willingness to engage in online transactions. The lack of a strong, enforceable regulatory framework for digital property advertising in Nigeria intensifies this vulnerability.

6.5 Cybersecurity Risks

In addition to fraudulent listings, the overall cybersecurity landscape for online real estate transactions in Nigeria presents significant risks. Account hacking, phishing attacks aimed at practitioners' client databases, counterfeit transaction websites, and data theft collectively deter both practitioners and clients from fully embracing digital financial transactions and sensitive communications. These issues are particularly pressing given the lack of specific digital consumer protection laws in the Nigerian property sector, which leaves affected parties with limited options for recourse. To this end, Sado, Jinanwa and Ndeche (2025) emphasized the Implementation of robust security measures to address concerns related to data security during digitalization process, thereby fostering trust among users.

6.6 High Cost of Professional Digital Marketing Tools

Although basic social media platforms are accessible at no cost, engaging in professional-grade digital marketing necessitates investment in high-quality cameras and photography tools, video editing software, premium subscriptions for listing portals, website development, and data analytics platforms. For many small estate firms in Benin City, these financial requirements pose a considerable obstacle. The cumulative impact of high data expenses, costly software licenses, and the price of backup power systems renders the comprehensive adoption of digital marketing financially burdensome for practitioners with limited resources (Akinwamide and Olukolajo, 2024).

7.0 DISCUSSION

The results compiled in this paper affirm that digitalization has fundamentally altered the nature of commercial property marketing in Benin City, hastening the shift from traditional, physically-bound advertising methods to vibrant, multi-platform digital campaigns (Ali and Song, 2022). The substitution, or more precisely, the enhancement, of conventional marketing channels with Facebook Marketplace, Instagram, WhatsApp, and online property portals has broadened market access, decreased marketing costs per listing, and enhanced the speed and efficiency of property transactions.

Importantly, this transformation brings significant sustainability advantages. Digitalization lessens the environmental impact of property marketing by reducing paper consumption and transport emissions; it enhances economic sustainability by decreasing transaction costs and expanding market participation; and it promotes social sustainability by diminishing information asymmetries and enhancing transparency in client-practitioner communication. These results closely align with the sustainability marketing framework proposed by Low et al. (2020) and the digital real estate framework suggested by Naeem et al. (2023).

Nonetheless, the disparity between the theoretical possibilities of digitalization and its actual implementation in Benin City remains considerable. The intersection of infrastructural shortcomings, especially unreliable electricity supply and inadequate broadband connectivity, along with deficiencies in human capital and a poorly regulated online marketplace, forms a complex obstacle that cannot be resolved through any singular intervention. The insights from Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) are particularly enlightening in this context: the main limitation

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on digital adoption in Edo State is not the availability of platforms but rather the digital competence of practitioners. This conclusion indicates that investments in training and professional development should be prioritized equally alongside infrastructure investments in any policy initiatives.

The issue of fraud constitutes a separate category of challenge, fundamentally structural and regulatory rather than technical. The reliability of online property platforms hinges on the establishment and enforcement of standards for listing verification, accountability of advertisers, and mechanisms for consumer redress. In the absence of such a regulatory framework, the growth of digital marketing in Benin City will persistently face obstacles due to well-founded public skepticism.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated that digitalization serves as a significant and predominantly beneficial force in the evolution of commercial property marketing in Benin City, Nigeria. By enhancing market reach, expediting transaction processes, lowering marketing expenses, and making meaningful contributions to environmental, economic, and social sustainability, digital tools have transformed the possibilities for estate practitioners and their clients in the region studied. These results align with the global literature on digital real estate marketing, tailored to the unique structural conditions of the Nigerian urban property market.

Simultaneously, the research highlights a significant and impactful disparity between the possible advantages of digitalization and their complete realization. In Benin City, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of digital skills, cybersecurity risks, and online fraud collectively hinder the efficacy of digital marketing for commercial properties. To close this gap, a collaborative effort is necessary among estate professionals, professional organizations, government entities, and technology service providers.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the analysis provided, the following suggestions are proposed. Firstly, the Estate Surveyors and Valuers Registration Board of Nigeria (ESVARBON) along with the pertinent state professional associations should create structured continuing professional development programs focused on digital marketing skills, particularly emphasizing social media management, online listing optimization, and cybersecurity measures. This aligns with the suggestion made by

Akinwamide and Olukolajo (2024) that the development of digital intelligence be formalized within the real estate sector in Nigeria.

Secondly, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the Edo State government ought to enhance investments in broadband infrastructure, especially in regions that are currently lacking high-speed internet access, to ensure that digital marketing tools can be utilized with the necessary reliability and speed for professional activities.

Thirdly, regulatory bodies such as the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC) and ESVARBON should implement enforceable standards for online property advertising, which should include mandatory verification procedures for listings, requirements for advertiser registration, and accessible mechanisms for resolving complaints. These initiatives would directly tackle the trust deficit related to fraud that continues to impede digital adoption among property seekers.

Fourth, real estate companies ought to intentionally invest in robust digital marketing infrastructure, which encompasses high-quality photographic equipment, video production capabilities, and premium memberships to listing portals, acknowledging these as vital instruments for maintaining competitiveness in the changing commercial property landscape. In cases where individual firms are unable to afford these expenses, professional associations should consider collective purchasing and shared platform solutions.

Lastly, it is imperative that practitioners and professional organizations educate potential clients and investors on how to authenticate online property listings, recognize the warning signs of fraudulent advertisements, and understand the recourse options available to them should they fall victim to such scams.

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