

## DIRECT MARKETING STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECT ON INCREASING READERSHIP: AN INQUIRY INTO REVIVING THE DECLINING PRINT NEWSPAPER MARKET

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### Abstract

The print newspaper market has faced a significant decline in readership and circulation due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies and changing consumer behaviour. This study investigates the effectiveness of direct marketing strategies in revitalising the traditional newspaper sector, with a particular focus on the Sri Lankan context. Four key dimensions of direct marketing, namely direct selling, direct mail, telemarketing, and SMS marketing, were assessed to determine their influence on reviving newspaper readership. Adopting a positivist research paradigm and a deductive quantitative approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 366 respondents using a judgmental sampling technique. Participants were selected based on their engagement with locally published newspapers within the past three months. Findings from simple linear regression analysis reveal that all four strategies exhibit a positive relationship with increased readership. Notably, direct selling, direct mail, and SMS marketing demonstrated moderate significance, while telemarketing showed a weaker yet positive effect. This research offers actionable insights for media houses struggling to remain relevant in a digital-first environment, particularly in emerging markets like Sri Lanka, where print still holds cultural value. It bridges an empirical gap in understanding the long-term impact of direct marketing on reader engagement and addresses a practical void in the development of cost-effective, targeted strategies for traditional media revival.

**Keywords:** Direct marketing strategies, newspaper readership, media revival, print media

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## Introduction

The print newspaper market has long been a key part of democratic societies. It provides timely news, shapes public discussions, and holds power accountable through investigative journalism (Saxena, 2019). Traditionally seen as a reliable source, newspapers have played a vital role in media diversity and civic engagement. However, the fast growth of digital technology and the rise of online platforms have greatly disrupted the traditional print media landscape. As real-time news becomes easily available through websites, mobile apps, and social media, traditional newspapers are seeing a drop in readership and financial struggles (Nelson, 2019; Pew Research Centre, 2023; Sambrook, 2017).

This digital change has also affected developing countries. In Sri Lanka, over 100 newspapers are still published in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (Verite Research, 2019), but the print industry is facing a significant decline in readership, especially among young people. While older generations may appreciate the physical nature and cultural importance of newspapers, digital media has become the main news source for many people. Along with shifts in how people consume news, rising printing costs, decreasing advertising revenue, and competition from online-native media pose serious challenges to the industry's future. These trends not only threaten the economy but also hinder newspapers' ability to support independent journalism and engage the public in democracy.

In light of these challenges, direct marketing strategies may provide a way to revive newspaper readership. These strategies involve personalised communication channels that target consumers directly, such as direct selling, telemarketing, direct mail, and SMS marketing. They have worked well in areas like retail, healthcare, and telecommunications (Kotler & Keller, 2019; Gibbons, 2014). In those fields, personalised marketing has boosted customer retention, engagement, and loyalty. However, the newspaper market largely underuses these methods, despite their potential to rebuild personal connections with readers in an increasingly impersonal digital world.

Current research lacks thorough empirical studies on the long-term effects of direct marketing in the newspaper field, especially in emerging markets like Sri Lanka. While some efforts, like subscription discounts or email campaigns, have been tried, there is no agreement on which strategies work best for different demographic groups (Aziri & Mazllami, 2018). Furthermore, the cost of implementing these strategies poses a challenge for mid-sized and regional publishers with limited budgets (Direct Marketing Association, 2023). This study aims to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of four key direct marketing strategies in increasing newspaper readership in Sri Lanka.

This research holds significance for both economic and societal reasons. Economically, a stronger newspaper sector can help keep jobs in journalism, printing, distribution, and local advertising. Societally, it helps maintain quality journalism, which is essential for an informed public and a resilient democracy. In this setting, the main research question arises: How do direct marketing strategies affect the growth of newspaper readership in the struggling newspaper market? This question highlights the urgent need to find cost-effective, scalable, and demographic-specific solutions to ensure the long-term survival of print media.

In Summary, this study seeks to evaluate how direct selling, direct mail, telemarketing, and SMS marketing can increase newspaper readership in Sri Lanka. Using a quantitative approach based on consumer feedback, the research will provide new insights and practical advice for media professionals facing the challenges of print media in a digital-first world.

## Literature Review

Many research studies show a significant positive effect on direct marketing strategies. According to the past literature cited by Mlobothi (2022), the author shows a significant positive relationship between direct marketing and consumer buying decisions. Musyoka (2002) described that there is a significant positive relationship between direct marketing strategies and prescribing decisions in the pharmaceutical industry. Risselada et.al (2014) assume that there is a positive relationship between both direct marketing strategies and customers' smartphone adoption probability. Past literature, Mlobothi (2022), Musyoka (2002), Risselada et.al (2014), shows the significant impact on direct marketing strategies and its based on dependent variables shows the significant impact. So, we therefore hypothesise:

*H1: There is a significant impact of direct marketing strategies and increasing readership*

Many research studies show the positive effect of this model of direct selling strategies, which is characterised mostly by interactive communication, given that many messages are delivered to the clients through in-person communication with the sales agent (Alturas & Santos, 2021). According to the past literature connected by Alturas & Santos (2024), it is stated that Direct salespeople are most usually independent contractors and not employees of the company, and direct selling companies embrace compliance from individuals of all ages,

experiences, and personal characteristics. Brown and Peterson (1994) also report a significant effect on Direct Selling strategies, distributor sales performance. Sparks and Schenk (2001) assume that there is a positive relationship between both a distributor's sales and the distributor's average sales percentage per year, and consistent with those results, there is a significant effect of direct sales. So we therefore *hypothesise*:

H1a: *There is a significant impact of direct selling strategies and increasing readership*

Despite the growth of direct marketing, multichannel retailers rely on direct mail for its ability to reach consumers conveniently, generate brand awareness and excitement, and provide higher response rates than digital marketing communications (Valenti, Srinivasan, Yildirim, & Pauwels, 2021). Several studies have shown that direct mail has a significant impact on consumer behaviour (Hill, Provost, & Volinsky, 2006). According to studies conducted by Naik and Peters (2009) provide empirical evidence that direct mail directly drives online travel to enable car configurations. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that direct mail can have a significant impact on increasing readership. So, we therefore hypothesise:

H1b: *There is a significant impact of direct mail strategies and increasing readership*

According to Eric (1996) mentioned in Nkpurukwe (2024), Telemarketing is a strong and proven communication tool used to establish business relationships and retain customers. Despite the many benefits and advantages of telemarketing, there has not been much interest in using it correctly. Furthermore, the ability of marketers to maximise benefits, maturity, relevance to customers, and focus on customer attraction can be achieved through attention to the unfulfilled expectations of customers (Geetika, 2012). According to past literature, Nkpurukwe (2020), Lobothe (2022), the literature shows, there is a significant relationship between telemarketing and customer relationship enhancement. So, we therefore hypothesise:

H1c: *There is a significant impact of telemarketing strategies and increasing readership*

Generations of youth and adults today have mobile phones as a multi-purpose tool that facilitates efficient performance of tasks such as processing and receiving text messages, uploading and downloading music, videos, images, and other data. The advantages of these mobile devices have made communication more interactive and confirm that SMS messages have a significant positive impact, especially in past literature (Siraj, Rauf, & Sultan, 2021). According to past literature conducted by these (Khasawneh & Shuhaiber), (Sharma, Dwivedi, Vikas, & Siddiqui), SMS Marketing helps to increase consumer awareness and willingness to buy. According to the findings of the reports mentioned above, it appears that SMS Marketing has a significant impact on purchasing intention and consumer attitudes.

H1d: *There is a significant impact of SMS marketing strategies and increasing readership*

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy, which emphasises the use of observable, empirical data and objective measurement to uncover relationships between variables. Positivism is particularly well-suited to hypothesis testing and statistical analysis in social sciences (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). A deductive approach was employed, enabling the testing of pre-established hypotheses derived from the AIDA model and previous literature concerning direct marketing effectiveness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A quantitative explanatory research design was chosen to examine causal relationships between the four direct marketing strategies, direct selling, direct mail, telemarketing, and SMS marketing (independent variables) and newspaper readership (dependent variable). Quantitative designs are especially effective for hypothesis-driven studies seeking generalizable insights.

The target population for this research included newspaper readers in Sri Lanka. A judgmental (purposive) sampling technique was used to select respondents who had read local newspapers within the past three months. This non-probability sampling method allows the researcher to focus on individuals most relevant to the study's objectives. A total of 366 responses were collected, meeting the minimum threshold for regression analysis and ensuring sufficient statistical power (Field, 2018).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, developed based on validated measurement items from prior studies in marketing and consumer behaviour. A 5-point Likert scale was employed to capture levels of agreement, with values ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). Distribution occurred through both physical and digital channels to enhance reach and inclusivity.

The collected data were analysed using SPSS statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the sample population. The reliability of constructs was evaluated through Cronbach's Alpha, and validity was

assessed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). To test the hypotheses, simple linear regression analysis was conducted, assessing the individual impact of each marketing strategy on newspaper readership. Statistical significance was determined at  $p < 0.05$ , ensuring rigorous evaluation of relationships.

## Results and Analysis

This study aimed to assess the impact of direct marketing strategies on increasing newspaper readership within the Sri Lankan context. A total of 366 valid responses were analysed using SPSS to evaluate the relationships between the independent variables, direct selling, direct mail, telemarketing, and SMS marketing and the dependent variable, increasing readership.

### Results of normality, reliability and validity

Concerning the scales' reliability, it used Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1970) with a cutoff value of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). When considering the independent and dependent variables of the study, Direct Marketing has recorded 0.913 of reliability Cronbach's alpha value which is greater than 0.7. Increasing Readership, the dependent variable of the study, states that the reliability Cronbach alpha value is 0.769, which is greater than 0.7.

**Table 1**  
*Reliability analysis*

Construct	No of Item	Cronbach's Alpha
Direct Selling	4	0.816
Direct Mail	3	0.773
SMS Marketing	4	0.772
Telemarketing	4	0.832
Increasing Readership	4	0.769

(Source: Authors' Compilation)

Table 2 shows that the overall KMO value is .918 and the Bartlett's Test (sig) value is 0.000, both of which are within the acceptable range. Hence, the study states that the validity of this study is capable enough to measure what it seeks to assess, as the statistical values of the research instrument demonstrated its overall validity in relation to the study.

**Table 2**  
*Validity analysis*

Variable	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure	Sig.
Direct Selling	0.785	0.000
Direct Mail	0.692	0.000
SMS Marketing	0.780	0.000
Telemarketing	0.777	0.000
Increasing Readership	0.745	0.000

(Source: Authors' Compilation)

### Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis is a statistical method used to assess both the strength and direction of relationships between two or more variables. It determines the extent to which changes in one variable are linked to changes in another. The correlation coefficient, symbolised by "r," serves as the main numerical indicator in this process. A positive correlation (where  $0 < r < 1$ ) suggests that as one variable increases, the other tends to increase as well, with the strength of this relationship growing as "r" approaches 1. On the other hand, a negative correlation (where  $-1 < r$

< 0) means that as one variable increases, the other tends to decrease. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in the table below.

**Table 3**  
Correlation analysis

Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	P Value
Direct Selling vs Increasing Readership	0.363	0.000
Direct Mail vs Increasing Readership	0.363	0.000
SMS Marketing vs Increasing Readership	0.264	0.000
Telemarketing vs Increasing Readership	0.327	0.000

(Source: Authors' Compilation)

The given values indicate that the correlation between each independent variable and the dependent variable is statistically significant, with a p-value of less than 0.05. Additionally, the correlation coefficient for all independent variables with customer engagement exceeds 0.2, signifying a positive relationship. In every instance, the correlation coefficient is positive, highlighting a robust positive relationship between Direct Marketing and Increasing Readership in the print Newspaper market.

### Multiple regression analysis

Regression analysis can be used to assess the relationship between independent factors and dependent variables. Simple regression analysis and multiple regression analysis are the two primary types of regression analysis that are frequently used. When there is only one dependent variable and one independent variable, simple regression makes sense; when there are multiple independent variables, multiple regression is used (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). In this study, there are four independently identifiable variables which are considered for analysis. Consequently, to evaluate the level of correlation between the independent variables and the variable under investigation, the researcher employed multiple regression analysis.

**Table 4**  
Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	Df1	Df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.381a	0.145	0.143	0.41134	0.145	61.833	1	364	<.001	1.966

a. Predictors: (Constant), Direct Marketing Strategies

b. Dependent Variable: Increasing Readership

(Source: Authors' Compilation)

The above table shows an Adjusted R-Square of 0.143. Hence, the Author identified that the Direct marketing strategies impact on increasing readership by 14.3%. This is very important for comparing the models with different numbers of predictors. In this case, the value is close to R Square (0.145), which signifies a well-fitted model.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reaffirm a pressing issue: the print newspaper market in Sri Lanka is in a state of decline, mirroring global trends of diminishing print media consumption (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2019). This deterioration is evident not only in the reviewed literature but also through the study's empirical results, where direct marketing strategies, namely direct selling, direct mail, telemarketing, and SMS marketing, exhibited statistically significant yet modest correlations with increased readership. These results suggest that while direct marketing strategies are capable of making a measurable impact, the current implementation within the print newspaper market lacks the

depth or innovation necessary to catalyse meaningful change. This stands in contrast to other industries where direct marketing has been used successfully to drive customer loyalty and market retention (Kotler & Keller, 2019). In the case of newspapers, the observed correlation coefficients, although positive and significant, indicate that existing efforts are not yet optimised for maximum influence.

Despite the moderate nature of these relationships, the presence of statistical significance across all tested variables should not be overlooked. It suggests that direct marketing strategies still offer a credible foundation upon which the newspaper market can build. The path forward lies in amplifying these strategies through digital transformation and personalisation. Integrating data-driven approaches, such as AI-enabled targeting, dynamic SMS campaigns, and automated direct mail systems, has shown potential in enhancing customer responsiveness and engagement (Kannan & Li, 2017). These innovations allow for more precise audience segmentation and delivery of tailored content, which can improve message relevance and reader loyalty, two factors critical to sustaining the readership base. Given that consumers now expect highly personalised communication across platforms, adopting traditional direct marketing methods to meet this standard is both a necessity and an opportunity for revitalisation.

Encouragingly, emerging data support the feasibility of such a transformation. According to the Digital Outlook Report Sri Lanka 2025, Sri Lanka recorded a 3.2% increase in print newspaper circulation compared to the previous year, suggesting that the market, while challenged, is not beyond recovery (Datareportal, 2025). This rebound, albeit modest, underscores the potential of well-executed marketing strategies to reconnect with readers in a fragmented media environment. Therefore, the industry's stakeholders must rethink their marketing approach by merging traditional outreach with digital tools, leveraging mobile platforms, customer lifecycle mapping, and behavioural analytics to deliver compelling, timely, and relevant messaging. Such an integrated strategy could help not only to reinforce the connection between marketing initiatives and readership but also contribute meaningfully to the long-term sustainability of print journalism in Sri Lanka's rapidly evolving media landscape. Future studies could overcome these constraints by incorporating longitudinal designs or experimental methods to observe how marketing strategies influence readership behaviour over time.

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