

Methodology Chapter

Case Study: Digital Marketing Strategies and Customer Acquisition at eBay

1. Research Design

This study adopted a **single-case qualitative case study design** to explore how eBay utilises digital marketing strategies to increase customer acquisition within the online retail sector. A case study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of organisational processes in their real-world context. As digital marketing strategies are complex, evolving and data-driven, the case study design offered the most suitable framework for capturing both strategic decisions and operational practices.

The focus on a single organisation allowed for a detailed analysis of eBay's unique marketing infrastructure, customer engagement model and platform-level decision-making. A qualitative orientation was appropriate because the study sought to understand behaviours, perceptions and internal processes rather than measure causal relationships quantitatively.

2. Case Selection

eBay was selected using **purposive sampling**, based on the following criteria:

- It is one of the largest global e-commerce platforms.
- It maintains an extensive digital marketing ecosystem (SEO, paid advertising, retargeting, social campaigns and email automation).
- It offers access to public marketing performance data, investor reports and platform analytics.
- The company has a long-standing history of adapting its digital strategies to changes in consumer behaviour.

These characteristics make eBay an **information-rich case**, offering sufficient depth, credibility and transparency to address the research aim: *to examine how digital marketing strategies contribute to customer acquisition and retention on an online retail marketplace.*

3. Participants and Data Sources

Data were collected from a combination of **primary and secondary sources**.

3.1 Primary Data (Interviews)

A series of **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with marketing professionals who had direct experience working with eBay's advertising and campaign management tools.

Participants included:

- two digital marketing analysts,
- one former eBay marketplace consultant,
- one SEO specialist with experience working on marketplace optimisation campaigns.

Participants were recruited through professional networks and digital marketing forums. Each interview lasted between 30–45 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility while ensuring coverage of key topics such as customer segmentation, advertising strategy, performance optimisation and platform-level constraints.

3.2 Secondary Data

To support triangulation, several categories of secondary sources were reviewed:

- eBay investor and financial reports
- digital marketing case studies published by industry bodies
- website traffic analytics (publicly available trends from SimilarWeb and Statista)
- advertising campaign archives
- publicly available SEO performance data
- academic journals on digital strategy, marketplace competition and customer behaviour

Secondary data strengthened the reliability of the findings and enabled comparison between participants' perspectives and documented organisational practices.

4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in three structured phases.

Phase 1: Documentary Review

Institutional documents, marketing reports and public analytics datasets were reviewed first. This provided a foundational understanding of:

- eBay's digital advertising channels
- customer acquisition metrics
- historical marketing performance
- shifts in the platform's strategy over time

This stage also guided the development of interview questions.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet and were recorded with participant consent. A flexible interview guide was used, covering:

- digital marketing tools used at eBay
- segmentation and buyer behaviour insights
- optimisation of paid campaigns
- challenges in customer acquisition
- the role of competition (e.g., Amazon, Etsy)
- measurement of campaign performance

Recordings were transcribed manually to ensure accuracy.

Phase 3: Supplemental Web and Industry Analysis

Additional digital data, including trend reports and performance dashboards, were reviewed to contextualise insights and validate interview findings.

5. Data Analysis

The study used **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's six-stage approach.

Step 1: Familiarisation

Transcripts and documents were read repeatedly to identify key issues and patterns.

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

Line-by-line coding was applied to identify discrete concepts such as:

- “customer segmentation by intent”
- “algorithmic campaign optimisation”
- “retargeting challenges”
- “SEO dependency on product velocity”

Step 3: Searching for Themes

Codes were grouped into broader themes:

- **Theme 1:** Data-driven customer acquisition
- **Theme 2:** Integration of paid and organic strategies
- **Theme 3:** Algorithmic constraints and opportunities
- **Theme 4:** Platform competition and differentiation

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

Themes were cross-checked against the dataset for internal coherence and external distinctiveness.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Themes were refined to ensure they aligned with the research aim and provided meaningful insight into eBay's digital marketing processes.

Step 6: Producing the Analysis

Themes were written up with full supporting evidence from interviews and documents to ensure a credible and academically rigorous interpretation.

6. Ethical Considerations

Although eBay is a public company with extensive accessible data, ethical safeguards were implemented for primary data collection.

- All interview participants received a participant information sheet.
- Written informed consent was obtained.
- No identifying details or commercially sensitive information were included.
- Participants' job titles were generalised to avoid potential identification.
- All transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected device.

Research ethics approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review panel.

7. Ensuring Rigour and Trustworthiness

Three key strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study:

1. Triangulation

Multiple data sources — interviews, reports, analytics and industry publications — were used to verify insights.

2. Member Checking

Partial summaries of the analysis were shared with interview participants to validate interpretation.

3. Audit Trail

Detailed notes were kept during coding and theme refinement to provide transparency regarding analytical decisions.

8. Limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations:

- As a single-case study, findings are not statistically generalisable.
- Access to internal eBay performance data was limited to publicly available sources and participant recollections.
- Digital marketing rapidly evolves, meaning some insights may reflect time-specific practices.

However, the aim was to generate deep contextual understanding rather than broad generalisation, consistent with case study methodology principles.

9. Summary

This methodology provided a structured and rigorous approach to examining eBay's digital marketing strategies for customer acquisition. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, documentary review and thematic analysis, the study produced a detailed, contextualised understanding of how marketing practices operate within a major global e-commerce platform.