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BUSINESS OPERATOR-BASED STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE UTILIZATION OF E-MARKETING OPERATIONS IN SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN SOUTH-EAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to determine strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East, Nigeria. One research question guided the study, and two null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Descriptive survey research design was adopted. The study was carried out in the five states in South-East, Nigeria. The population of the study was 13,035 registered small and medium scale enterprises in the South-East. A 9-item questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was tested for validity and to determine the reliability, a pilot study was carried out. Test on the data collected using Cronbach alpha reliability method yielded reliability coefficients of 0.61. The data from the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation. The mean ratings were used to answer the one research question while standard deviation was used to determine the closeness of the respondents' mean ratings. t-Test statistics was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that operator-based strategies are considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East, Nigeria. Based on these findings, it was concluded that SMEs can adopt operator-based strategies to improve the utilization of e-marketing operations in South-East, Nigeria. The researcher recommended that SME operators should improve their knowledge and skills of Information and Communication Technology for e-marketing operations by attending conferences and seminar where utilization of ICT in business is discussed.
Keywords. Operator-based strategies, utilization, e-marketing, SMEs.

Introduction

Globalization has brought about increase in industrialization and highly competitive business environment. The business environment has become more intensely competitive for large, medium, and small-scale enterprises that constantly seek to improve sales and expand assets and market size. As a result of increasing market competition occasioned by technological advancement, several strategies are devised to attract and retain customers with a view to raising the sales level and thereby remaining on profitable path. Improving sales however depends on marketing skills of business organizations, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) are the building blocks of the economy. This is because of their roles in the areas of employment generation, rural development, youth empowerment, contribution to national income and growth, spread and development of adaptable technology. SMEs are business organizations set-up by individuals or group of individuals known as business operators, owners, or entrepreneurs for the purpose of providing goods and services. The Central Bank of Nigeria (2010) defined SME as any business that has account base (excluding the cost of land) of not more than N500 million and labour force of not more than 300 workers. Similarly, the Federal Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Oroka (2013) defined SMEs as firms with total investment (excluding cost of land but including capital) at up

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to N750,000 and paid employment of up to fifty persons. The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDAN, 2016), defined SMEs using dual criteria of number of employees and assets base with three classifications as micro enterprises, small enterprises, and medium enterprises. Micro enterprises are enterprises whose assets (excluding land and buildings) are less that N5 million with a workforce not exceeding 10 employees. Small enterprises include enterprises whose total assets (excluding land and building) are above N5 million but not exceeding N50 million, with a total workforce of above 10 but not exceeding 49 employees. Medium enterprises, on the other hand, are enterprises whose total assets (excluding land and building) are above N50 million, but not exceeding N500 million with a total workforce of between 50 and 199 employees (SMEDAN, 2016).

According to Aremu and Adeyemi in Agwu and Emeti (2014), most SMEs in Nigeria die within their first five years of existence, a smaller percentage goes into extinction between the sixth and tenth year while only about five to ten percent survive, thrive, and grow to maturity. Many factors as postulated by the authors contribute to this premature death of SMEs. These include insufficient capital, irregular power supply, infrastructural inadequacies (water, roads), lack of focus, inadequate market research, slow in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) adoption, over-concentration on one or two markets for finished products, lack of succession plan, inexperience, lack of proper book-keeping, lack of business strategy, cut-throat competition, among others. To tackle some of these problems especially in this 21st century, SMEs need to adopt ICT. Among the components of ICT is e-marketing, which, according to Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick (2013), aids in boosting the performance of small and medium enterprises. Faloye (2014) identified lack of awareness of the benefits of e-marketing, knowledge and understanding of e-marketing, and perceived cost of adopting e-marketing, as barriers to e-marketing utilization in Nigerian SMEs. Agwu, et al. (2015) also observed that many of the SMEs in Nigeria lack resources to purchase computers and necessary broadband internet connectivity equipment, maintenance, electricity, poor technical know-how, low business coverage and poor quality of products and services which affects SMEs' utilization of e-marketing.

E-marketing refers to electronic representation of business activities designed to plan, price, promote and distribute wants-satisfying (valuable) goods and services to potential customers. It aims at increasing sales, reducing costs, and making SMEs business more competitive. Nwachi (2012) defined e-marketing as the application of principles and techniques through electronic media and more specifically the internet. In the context of this study, e-marketing, also known as digital marketing, web marketing, online marketing, or search marketing, is the promotion of products or services over the internet. Since e-marketing can change the shape and nature of SMEs around the world, it is imperative to adopt certain strategies to improv the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East, Nigeria. Strategies are plans of action designed to achieve a specific goal or series of goals within an organizational framework. Strategy, according to Riley (2015), is the direction and scope over a long-term through its configuration of resources to meet the organisational needs and expectations.

One of the strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs is the operator-based strategy. Operator-based strategy is the readiness and level of commitment expressed by SME managers that will influence their decision towards adoption of e-marketing operations. It recognizes the significance of the owner or manager of the business in the utilization of ICTs and e-marketing in business transactions (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2006). Operator-based strategy relate to executive decisions that the SME operator must make; the financial commitments to take in relation to the overall direction of the firm; acquisition of new e-marketing infrastructure, whether the SME must consider e-marketing adoption or not, their appreciation or non-appreciation of ICT and new technological developments, and the like. Business operator-based strategy, according to Zhao (2013) is based on the education, ICT and e-marketing knowledge, social and cultural attributes of the business owner. Furthermore, gender and education could be

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factors influencing the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in South-East, Nigeria (Kren-Ikidi, 2017).

Gender is one of such factors also mentioned in literature to have considerable effects on the utilization of e-marketing. Gender is the range of physical, biological, mental, and behavioural characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between the feminine and masculine (female and male) population. The importance of examining e-marketing in relation to gender is based primarily on the socio-cultural differences between girls and boys. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. Similarly, education attained by small and medium enterprises' operators can have a significant role in the extent of utilization of e-marketing. A good level of education is critical strategy for allowing easy communication and appreciation of business terms in global business. Hence, effort towards motivating the SME operators for higher business qualification will further stimulate the utilization of e-marketing for better performance of SMEs (Kren-Ikidi, 2017).

Despite the array of existing and upcoming SMEs in the study areas, there is rather scanty literature on the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria. This reason prompted the researchers to undertake this study to determine operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the utilization of e-marketing operations has gained significance as a crucial avenue for enhancing business visibility, reaching wider audiences, and driving growth for small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria. However, despite the potential benefits, many SMEs in the region continue to face challenges in effectively implementing and maximizing the outcomes of e-marketing strategies. These challenges encompass a range of factors, including limited digital literacy, inadequate resources, lack of strategic planning, and an absence of tailored business operator-based strategies that address the specific needs and contexts of SMEs operating in South-East Nigeria.

As such, a pressing problem arises: How can business operator-based strategies be developed and optimized to enhance the utilization of e-marketing operations by small and medium scale enterprises in the South-East region of Nigeria? Addressing this problem is essential to propel the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in the digital era and to ensure that they can effectively harness the potential of e-marketing for achieving sustainable success.

To help small and medium scale enterprises in South-East Nigeria utilize, as well as enjoy the full-scale benefits of e-marketing, operator-based strategies must be employed. To address these challenges therefore, these researchers consider it desideratum to identify effective business operator-based strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research question guided the study:

1. Operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises

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Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East on the operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations based on gender.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East on the operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations based on level of education.

Methods

Descriptive survey research design is adopted for this study. This study was carried out in the South-East, Nigeria. The population of this study comprise all the 13,035 SME business operators drawn across the five states that registered with the State Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Technology (Anambra State); Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises and New Business Development (Enugu State); Ministry of Small

Medium Enterprise and New Businesses Development (Abia State); Ministry of Trade and Industry (Imo State) and Ministry of Commerce and Industry (Ebonyi State). The sample size for the study is 388 obtained using the Taro Yamane formular. The 388 respondents were selected across SMEs in Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo and Ebonyi States. Consequently, SME operators were selected using proportionate stratified random sampling technique. Thus, convenience sampling technique was used to distribute the copies of questionnaire in favour of the SME operators willing to complete and return the instrument.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled, "Strategies for Utilization of E-Marketing Operations Questionnaire (SUE-MOQ)". The instrument was subjected to face validation by three experts. Cronbach alpha method was used to test the internal consistency of the instrument, resulting in the reliability coefficient of 0.61. Copies of the instrument were administered to the respondents by the researcher with the help of five research assistants, resident in the study states. The data collected was analyzed using mean and standard deviation for the research question and t-test for the hypotheses. The data was analyzed using SPSS Version 23. Mean responses between 4.50 to 5.00 will be considered Very Effective; 3.50 to 4.49 will be considered Effective; 2.50 to 3.49 will be considered Moderately Effective; Mean score of 1.50 to 2.49 will be considered Ineffective (IE), while 1.00 to 1.49 will be considered Very Ineffective. The decision rule was to accept a null hypothesis where the p-value is greater than or equal to the alpha level of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis was rejected where the calculated p-value is less than the alpha level.

Results

The results are presented in the order of the research questions and the corresponding hypothesis.

***Research Question 1*:** To what extent are operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises?

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Table 1
Mean Ratings on the Operator-Based Strategies Considered Effective for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing Operations in SMEs

S/N	Items	Mean	Std. Dev/	Remarks
1.	Employing competent ICT experts	4.20	.72	Effective
2.	Organizing ICT training for SMEs operators	4.32	.60	Effective
3.	Training personnel on ICT	4.34	.64	Effective
4.	Formulating relevant ICT policies	4.08	.76	Effective
5.	Enforcing strict internet fraud sanctions	4.16	.66	Effective
6.	Subsidizing ICT charges by service providers	4.39	.60	Effective
7.	Adopting social reorientation for operators of SMEs	4.19	.72	Effective
8.	Eliminating ICT phobia among SMEs operators	4.36	.67	Effective
9.	Investing in relevant technologies	4.38	.69	Effective
	Cluster	4.27		Effective

The item-by-item analysis in Table 1 showed that all the nine items achieved mean scores ranging from 4.08 to 4.39, with all the item considered effective as operator-based strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs. The cluster mean score of 4.27 indicated that overall, SME operators consider operator-based strategies effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria. The standard deviations score ranges from 0.60 to 0.76, showing homogeneity of their responses. This means that they do not differ much in their responses.

***Hypothesis 1*:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East on the operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations based on gender.

Table 2
The t-test analysis on the Operator-Based Strategies for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing in SMEs based on gender

Variable	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**	**df**	**ά**	***p*-value**	**Decision**
Male	216	38.60	2.39				
				386	0.05	.099	Not Significate
Female	172	38.16	2.64				

Data in Table 2 show that the p-value of 0.99 at 386 degrees of freedom is greater than 0.05 alpha level. This shows that gender did not significantly influence the opinion of respondents on operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria. The analysis also shows mean scores of 38.60 and 38.16 for males and females respectively. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant difference between the two groups is upheld.

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***Hypothesis 2*:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East on the b operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations based on level of education.

Table 3
The t-test analysis on the Operator-Based Strategies for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing in SMEs based on level of education

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	*ά*	*p*-value	Decision
O'Level	90	38.77	2.13				
				386	0.05	.119	Not Significate
Degree	298	38.30	2.61				

The t-test in Table 3 revealed that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME operators with o'level and those with degree certificates on the operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria. The analysis shows mean scores of 38.77 and 38.30 for o'level and degree respectively. It also showed the p-value of 0.119 which is greater than 0.05 level of significance at 386 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted.

Discussion of Findings

Findings revealed that operator-based strategies are considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East. The study revealed that employing competent ICT experts, organizing ICT training for SMEs operators, training personnel on ICT, formulating relevant ICT policies, enforcing strict internet fraud sanctions, subsidizing ICT charges by service providers, adopting social reorientation for operators of SMEs, eliminating ICT phobia among SMEs operators, and investing in relevant technologies, were effective operator-based strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East. This may be because SME operators are able to relate with these strategies and may perceive them as capable of improving e-marketing utilization.

This finding of this study is in line with the submissions of Caldeira and Ward in Kren-Ikidi (2017), who established that a combination of owner/manager perspectives and attitudes towards ICT adoption and use, play an important role in the development of internal ICT competencies, and provide an important contribution to the development of an environment that enables e-marketing usage in SMEs. According to the authors, where the owner or manager of the small and medium enterprise slumbers and does not appreciate the value of ICT or e-marketing innovation, there is stifled growth in the firm. This implies that the personal characteristics and behavior of owners or managers of SMEs are integral to SMEs utilization of e-marketing operations in South-East, Nigeria. The study of Meso, Musa and Mbarika in Amobi (2021) averred that an acceptable level of ICT and e-marketing knowledge of the owner or key manager, and other key decision-making personnel can assist the SME to adopt appropriate e-marketing tools in their business. Furthermore, Zhao (2013) posited that operator-based strategy is based on the education, ICT and e-marketing knowledge, social and cultural attributes of the business owner.

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The t-test of the first hypothesis revealed that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East on operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations based on gender. Thus, implying that male and female SME owners do not necessarily differ in their responses. Similarly, the t-test of the second hypothesis showed that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East on operator-based strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations based on level of education. This finding contradicts the postulation of Taylor and Owusu (2012) who found that educational qualification affected the utilization of e-marketing by SMEs owners or managers. According to the authors, the educational qualification of managers of SMEs affected their appreciation and application of e-marketing services or tools in their business operations.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that operator-based strategies are considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium scale enterprises in South-East, Nigeria. In addition, it can be concluded that the existence of these strategies can contribute significantly to the high utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria. It was also concluded that gender and level of education do not have significant influence on the operator-based strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs in South-East, Nigeria.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommends that SME operators should improve their knowledge and skills of Information and Communication Technology for e-marketing operations by attending conferences and seminar where utilization of ICT in business is discussed. Furthermore, the government should provide legislation that will curb the activities of cyber criminals.

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