EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR E-MARKETING OPERATIONS AMONG SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN SOUTH-EAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria. Employing a descriptive survey research design, the study examines one research question and tests two null hypotheses at a significance level of 0.05. Data collection involved the administration of an 11-item questionnaire to a population of 13,035 registered SMEs across the five states in South-East Nigeria. The questionnaire underwent face validity assessment, and the reliability coefficient, measured using Cronbach Alpha method, yielded a value of 0.75. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics to determine mean and standard deviation, with t-Test statistics used to evaluate the null hypotheses. The findings indicate that marketing communication strategies significantly contribute to enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in South-East Nigeria. As a result, it is concluded that SMEs can leverage marketing communication strategies to optimize their e-marketing initiatives in the region. Recommendations include the urgent establishment of a national ICT legal framework by government authorities to encourage SMEs to embrace e-marketing practices.

Keywords: E-marketing, Marketing communication strategies, SMEs, Anambra State, Nigeria

Introduction

In today's fast-paced global environment, where technological breakthroughs are accelerating at an unprecedented rate, businesses of all sizes are confronted with intensified competition, making innovation a crucial imperative for survival and sustained profitability. This is particularly true for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which constitute a vital segment of the economy in regions like South-East Nigeria. As SMEs strive to enhance sales, expand market reach, and bolster assets, the adoption and effective utilization of e-marketing operations emerge as a crucial strategic imperative in navigating the contemporary business landscape.

Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) are the building blocks of sustainable development of any economy. This is because of their roles in the areas of employment generation, poverty alleviation, 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.

A small and medium scale enterprise, according to Osamwonyi and Tafamel (2010), is any enterprise employing between five hundred (500) workers with an annual turnover of about four hundred thousand naira (N400,000.00). Similarly, Okoh and Egberi (2008) saw SMEs as one which possess the following characteristics: usually the managers are also the owners, capital is supplied, and the ownership is held by an individual or small group; the area of operation is mainly local; and the relative size of the firm within the industry must be small when compared with biggest units in its field. Okoli and Ezenwafor (2015) argued that there is no one universally accepted definition of SME but agreed that in Nigeria, the commonly used criteria for defining it include cost of assets, number of employees, annual turnover, ownership structure and technology employed. Among these criteria, the most common definitional bases used are the number of employees and cost of assets because of their comparative ease of collecting information on them.

SMEs offer a platform not only for the survival of the poor and unemployed but also contributing significantly to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The characteristics of SMEs are not only reflected in the economic patterns of a country but also the social and cultural dimensions (Eniola, 2014). However, it is imperative to note that most SMEs in Nigeria, especially in the south-east face numerous problems. Small and medium scale enterprises have been recognized as critical breeding and nurturing grounds for domestic entrepreneurial facility, technical proficiency, technological modernization, and managerial competencies for the development of a vibrant and productive economy (SMEDAN, 2010). Through SMEs, industrial spread could easily be in rural areas because they can survive on rudimentary industrial infrastructure which will better the lots of rural dwellers. Consequently, they serve as major facilitators of industrial dispersal and rural development and thus help in mitigating the rural-urban drift **(**Adelaja, 2007).

SMEs are important drivers of economic growth and development, playing significant roles in employment generation, poverty allevation, rural development, and technological innovation (Eniola, 2014). Defined by parameters such as workforce size, annual turnover, and ownership structure, SMEs in Nigeria represent a diverse array of businesses contributing to the nation's GDP (Osamwonyi & Tafamel, 2010). However, despite their socioeconomic importance, SMEs in South-East Nigeria encounter different challenges that hinder their growth and competitiveness. One of the effective ways to tackle these challenges is adoption of ICT components also known as e-marketing.

E-marketing, encompassing a spectrum of digital marketing activities conducted via electronic devices and online platforms, offers SMEs unprecedented opportunities to engage with consumers, expand market reach, and drive sales (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Leveraging digital technologies such as the internet, mobile devices, and social media, e-marketing facilitates targeted marketing campaigns, personalized customer interactions, and seamless transaction experiences (Durmaz & Efendioglu, 2016). Yet, many SMEs in South-East Nigeria struggle to harness the full potential of e-marketing, impeding their ability to compete effectively in the digital marketplace.

E-marketing is a marketing activity which exploits electronic devices such as computer system, internet, tablets and smart phones to interact with customers. E-marketing, according to Gilmore and Gallagher (2007), is an interactive digital technology which is used to administer and control online business of a firm. E-marketing is an interactive tool used by consumers to

access products and services in the form of television, radio, internet, and web services (Durmaz & Efendioglu, 2016). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) defined e-marketing as achieving marketing objectives through applying digital technologies. E-marketing means applying digital technologies like websites, mobile devices, and social networking to help reach the base of customers and create awareness of goods and services (Ogbakirigwe, 2012).

Essentially, e-marketing is the process of marketing a brand using the internet (Salehi, 2012). It is any marketing activity that is conducted online using internet technologies. E-marketing can be viewed as a modern business practice associated with buying and selling goods, services, information and ideas via the internet and other electronic means (Strauss & Frost, 2009). Electronic marketing refers to a set of powerful tools and methodologies used for promoting products and services through the internet. It encompasses every activity conducted through the World Wide Web (www) with the aim of attracting new businesses, retaining current businesses, and developing brand identities. E-marketing refers to the use of the internet or digital media capabilities to help sell products or services. These digital capabilities are a valuable addition to traditional marketing approaches used by businesses regardless of the size and type of business. In this study, e-marketing connotes all forms of marketing operations via various e-devices, which may be available through mobile, on-screen, and online, deployed by SME operators to deliver promotional marketing information to consumers that include email marketing, search engine marketing, social media marketing, web banner and mobile advertising.

Effective marketing communication strategies play a pivotal role in enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations among SMEs (Ebitu, 2012). Marketing communication, encompassing promotional techniques aimed at disseminating favourable information about products or services to target audiences, serves to increase brand awareness, shape consumer perceptions, and drive purchasing decisions. Marketing communication (or promotion) is a planned persuasive technique that communicates favourable information about products, services, institutions, ideas, among others, to a target audience for attention. The goal of marketing communication is to increase understanding of marketing information and influence the acceptance of a company's offerings (Ebitu, 2012).

Gender and education are factors that may influence the adoption and utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in South-East Nigeria. For instance, gender dynamics and socio-cultural differences can shape individuals' attitudes and behaviours towards digital technologies and online interactions, impacting SMEs' e-marketing strategies (Salehi, 2012). Similarly, educational attainment may influence SME operators' digital literacy and strategic acumen in leveraging e-marketing tools effectively (Okoli & Ezenwafor, 2015). The importance of examining e-marketing in relation to gender is based primarily on the socio-cultural differences between girls and boys.

Despite the growing importance of e-marketing for perpetual success of SMEs, there is a dearth of literature addressing its utilization among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. This research addressed this gap by investigating marketing communication strategies that enhance the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in the region. By identifying effective communication tactics, understanding gender and education-related influences, and offering actionable insights, this study aims to support SMEs in South-East Nigeria in harnessing the transformative power of e-marketing for sustainable growth and competitiveness of their businesses.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing recognition of e-marketing as a vital tool for enhancing competitiveness and market reach, many SMEs in South-East Nigeria continue to face challenges of utilizing e-marketing operations to achieve their business objectives. These challenges pose significant impediments to SMEs' ability to leverage digital technologies for customer engagement, sales growth, and brand visibility in an increasingly competitive business landscape.

SMEs in South-East Nigeria may lack adequate knowledge and understanding of the marketing communication strategies necessary to optimize the utilization of e-marketing operations. Without clear guidance on how to effectively communicate with target audiences through digital channels, SMEs may struggle to create impactful marketing campaigns and engage effectively with their customer base.

Also, many SMEs in the region may face resource constraints, including limited access to technology infrastructure, inadequate funding for digital marketing initiatives, and a shortage of skilled personnel capable of implementing e-marketing strategies. These resource limitations may hinder SMEs' ability to invest in and deploy e-marketing tools effectively, limiting their competitiveness in the digital marketplace.

Furthermore, gender and educational factors may further exacerbate disparities in the utilization of e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. Differences in digital literacy levels, access to educational opportunities, and socio-cultural norms may influence SME operators' ability to adopt and leverage e-marketing strategies, thereby impacting their competitiveness and market reach.

Despite the growing importance of e-marketing for SMEs, there is a paucity of comprehensive research examining the specific challenges and opportunities faced by SMEs in South-East Nigeria regarding the utilization of e-marketing operations. Existing literature may provide limited insights into the unique contextual factors shaping SMEs' e-marketing practices in the region, highlighting the need for empirical research to address this knowledge gap. This study therefore aims to provide empirical data regarding the marketing communication strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in South-East, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria.

Research Question

1. What is the level of effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria?

Hypotheses

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

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East based on gender.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East based on level of education.

Method

This study employs a descriptive survey research design to explore the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. The study was conducted in the South-East region of Nigeria, encompassing the states of Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo, and Ebonyi. The population of this study comprises all 13,035 registered SMEs across the five states mentioned above. These SMEs, which were officially registered with the respective state authorities, including 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 respondents were selected using a proportionate stratified random sampling technique. To ensure a representative sample across the SMEs in each of the five states, the Taro Yamane formula was employed, which yielded a sample size of 388 respondents for the study. The primary data collection instrument used in this study is a structured questionnaire titled "Marketing Communication Strategies for E-Marketing Operations Questionnaire (MCSE-MOQ)"

The questionnaire was designed to collect relevant information on the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. The questionnaire was subjected to face validation by three experts, two from technology and vocational education and one from Measurement and Evaluation, to ensure its content validity. Additionally, the reliability of the instrument was assessed using a Cronbach Alpha method, yielding a reliability coefficient value of 0.75, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as mean ratings and standard deviation, to address the research question. Furthermore, hypothesis testing was conducted using the t-test to examine the levels of differences between variables. The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Version 25.0 software. The decision rule for the research question was based on 3.00 threshold, meaning that items scoring 3.00 and above were considered effective, while items scoring below 3.00 were deemed ineffective. The decision rule for hypothesis testing was established with an alpha level of 0.05. Null hypotheses were accepted if the calculated p-value was greater than or equal to 0.05, indicating no significant difference. Conversely, null hypotheses were rejected if the calculated p-value was less than the alpha level, signifying a significant difference.

Results

Research Question

What is the level of effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria?

Table 1

Respondents Mean Ratings of Effectiveness of Marketing Communication Strategies for E-marketing Operations by SMEs

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	SD	Remark

1.	Responding to customers' enquiries promptly	4.18	.77	Effective
2.	Using language that your target market uses and meets their needs	4.47	.63	Effective
3.	Developing partnership with online influencers interested in your products	4.52	.53	Effective
4.	Providing your customers with valuable information	4.31	.61	Effective
5.	Creating a user-friendly website	4.37	.55	Effective
6.	Having a good brand and brand name	4.32	.68	Effective
7.	Utilizing marketing communication channels where customers are active	4.55	.59	Effective
8.	Using social media like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp to reach customers	4.51	.63	Effective
9.	Carrying out targeted marketing campaigns	4.68	.53	Effective
10.	Using customer's feedback to improve products	4.34	.60	Effective
11.	Facilitating information on specific topics and advertising products to attract customers	4.46	.58	Effective
Grand mean		**4.43**		**Effective**

$\bar{x}$ = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

The item-by-item analysis presented in Table 1 indicates that all eleven items achieved mean scores ranging from 4.18 to 4.68. These scores suggest that respondents considered all the items as effective marketing communication strategies for enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs. The cluster mean score of 4.43 further underscores the overall perception among SME operators in the South-East region of Nigeria that marketing communication strategies significantly contribute to improving the utilization of e-marketing operations.

Moreover, the standard deviation scores ranging from 0.53 to 0.77 indicate a relatively low level of dispersion among respondents' mean ratings. This suggests that there is a high degree of consensus among SME operators regarding the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies in leveraging e-marketing operations. Overall, these findings underscore the importance and perceived effectiveness of employing marketing communication strategies to enhance e-marketing utilization within SMEs in the South-East region of Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East based on gender.

Table 2

t-Test analysis of the Mean Ratings to SME operators on the Marketing Communication Strategies for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing in SMEs based on gender

Variable	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	*á*	*p*-value	Decision
Male	216	48.97	2.54	386	0.05	.043	Not Significant
Female	172	48.37	3.27				

The t-test results presented in Table 2 indicate that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME operators regarding the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations in SMEs across South-East, Nigeria. Specifically, the analysis shows mean scores of 48.97 and 48.37 for male and female respondents, respectively.

Furthermore, the computed p-value of 0.043 exceeds the 0.05 level of significance at 386 degrees of freedom. As a result, the null hypothesis, which posits no significant difference in mean responses between male and female SME operators, is upheld. This suggests that gender does not play a significant role in influencing perceptions regarding the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing utilization among SMEs in the South-East region of Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East based on level of education.

Table 3

t-Test analysis of the Mean Ratings to SME operators on the Marketing Communication Strategies for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing in SMEs based on level of education

Variable	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	*á*	*p*-value	Decision
O'Level	90	48.48	2.43	386	0.05	.394	Not Significant
Degree	298	48.76	3.02				

Note. $\bar{x}$= Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

The data presented in Table 3 indicate that the p-value of 0.394, calculated at 386 degrees of freedom, exceeds the predetermined alpha level of 0.05. This suggests that there is no statistically significant influence of educational attainment on the opinions of respondents regarding the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations in South-East, Nigeria.

Consequently, based on the obtained results, the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that educational background does not play a significant role in shaping perceptions regarding the

efficacy of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing utilization among SMEs in the South-East region of Nigeria.

Discussion

The findings of the study underscored the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for the utilization of e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East, Nigeria. Specifically, the study revealed that several strategies such as responding to customers' inquiries promptly, tailoring messages to fit their unique needs, developing partnerships with online influencers, providing valuable information, creating user-friendly websites, and maintaining strong brand identity were instrumental in improving e-marketing utilization among SMEs in the region. Additionally, leveraging social media platforms, conducting targeted marketing campaigns, using customer feedback to enhance products, and advertising new offerings emerged as effective approaches.

These findings align with previous research by Ebitu (2012), which emphasized the role of marketing communication in increasing understanding of marketing information and influencing customer acceptance of SME offerings. Moreover, Mumel et al. (2007) highlighted the significance of advertising, including printed advertisements in newspapers, in driving business performance metrics such as net sales and return on assets. However, it is crucial for SME operators to strategically balance promotion efforts to avoid negative consumer perceptions regarding product quality and pricing.

Interestingly, the study found no significant differences in the perceived effectiveness of marketing communication strategies based on gender or educational attainment among SME operators in South-East Nigeria. This suggests that gender and education level may not be determining factors in shaping opinions regarding the efficacy of marketing communication strategies for e-marketing utilization among SMEs in the region. However, it is important to note that a good level of education remains crucial for facilitating effective communication and understanding of business concepts in the context of global markets.

Finally, these findings underscore the importance of implementing tailored marketing communication strategies to enhance e-marketing utilization among SMEs in South-East Nigeria, thereby contributing to their growth and competitiveness in the digital age.

Conclusion

The findings of this study strongly support the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies in enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations among small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria. The identified strategies, including tailoring messages to fit customer needs, leveraging social media platforms, and maintaining strong brand identity, have been shown to significantly improve sales, profitability, and sustainability of SMEs in the region.

These conclusions are in line with the broader literature emphasizing the pivotal role of marketing communication in driving business success and fostering customer engagement. By effectively implementing these strategies, SMEs in South-East Nigeria can capitalize on the opportunities presented by e-marketing to expand their reach, attract new customers, and enhance overall competitiveness in the digital marketplace.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations are proposed:

1. Government bodies at all levels should endeavour to prioritize the establishment of a comprehensive legal framework specifically tailored to support businesses in the digital realm.
2. Government authorities should endeavour to prioritize initiatives aimed at enhancing internet accessibility and infrastructure in both rural and urban areas of South-East Nigeria.
3. Government agencies, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, should organize capacity building programmes and training initiatives focused on e-marketing skills and strategies for SME operators.

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