FOCUS STRATEGY AND MARKET SHARE GROWTH OF SELECTED SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of focus strategy (customer, product, and cost focus) on the market share growth of selected SMEs in North Central Nigeria (Benue, Kogi, Niger, Plateau). A census survey of all 293 registered SMEs was conducted. A structured questionnaire comprising demographic information (Section A) and a 15-item Focus Strategy Adoption scale (Section B: Customer Focus, Product Focus, Cost Focus) was used. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The findings show Customer focus (β=0.412, p<0.001) had the strongest positive effect on market share growth, followed by product focus (β=0.285, p<0.01). Cost focus showed a weaker but significant effect (β=0.118, p<0.05). The model explained 54.3% variance in market share growth. SMEs in North Central Nigeria should prioritize customer relationship management and product differentiation over cost reduction to achieve sustainable market share growth.

Keywords: Focus strategy, SME Market share growth, North-Central Nigeria, Kogi State, Niger State, Plateau State, Benue State.

1.0 Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of the Nigerian economy. According to the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), SMEs account for approximately 46.31% of the national GDP and contribute over 84% of total employment in the country, with an estimated 39.6 million micro, small and medium enterprises operating across Nigeria. Despite this substantial contribution, the SME sector in Nigeria is characterized by alarmingly high mortality rates: over 80% of SMEs fail within their first five years of operation due to harsh economic environments, limited access to finance and inappropriate business practices. This paradox high economic contribution coexisting with high failure rates underscores the urgent need for empirical research into the strategic drivers of SME profitability.

The concept of competitive strategy has received considerable attention in strategic management literature, largely due to the seminal work of Michael Porter (1980), who proposed three generic strategies for achieving competitive advantage: cost leadership, differentiation and focus. Of these three, focus strategy which involves targeting a specific market segment or niche rather than competing across an entire industry has been argued to be particularly suitable for SMEs, given their typically limited resources and inability to compete head-to-head with larger firms on cost or broad differentiation.

Focus strategy has three dimensions and they are: Customer segments, industry sectors, and solution specialization, together they allow businesses to concentrate resources on a narrow niche, tailoring offerings to meet specific needs more effectively than broad competitors. (a) Customer segments: A company or firm narrows its scope to a defined group (e.g., small businesses in Nigeria). This allows for customized marketing and product design that resonates with unique their unique challenges. (b) Industry sector: A firm or company focusing on one industry, firm gain insider gain insider knowledge, credibility, and efficiency. For example, a consulting firm that only serves banks can anticipate regulatory changes and industry-specific pain points. (c) Solution specialization: Instead of offering a wide range of products, firms concentrate on one solution area. This creates depth of expertise and a stronger value proposition.

Market share growth means increasing the percentage of total industry sales or revenue that your company of firm captures compared to competitors. It reflects stronger competitive positioning, customer loyalty, and faster revenue growth than the overall market. Market share growth is about outperforming competitors in attracting and retaining customers, and it requires a mix of pricing, innovation, distribution, and customer loyalty strategies.

In Nigeria, several studies have examined the relationship between generic strategies and SME performance, with most focusing on the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Lagos, Ogun or Rivers states. However, limited empirical attention has been directed toward North-Central Nigeria, a geopolitical zone comprising Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States and the FCT where SMEs operate under distinct environmental conditions characterized by weaker infrastructure, multiple taxation, security challenges and limited access to formal financial services. Recent studies have begun to address this gap: Isichei et al. (2024) study in the FCT confirmed a significant positive relationship between focus strategy and SME competitiveness, while Musa et al. (2024) study on niche marketing strategy in Nasarawa State found that such strategies significantly impact SME performance. Nonetheless, no study has specifically examined the effect of focus strategy on SME profitability across multiple states in North-Central Nigeria using a substantial sample.

Despite the acknowledged importance of SMEs to Nigeria's economic development, the profitability of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria remains persistently low. A 2023 NBS report revealed that half of the small businesses studied earned less than ₦223,250 in monthly revenue. A Moniepoint-SMEDAN report further indicated that only 1.3% of small businesses earn more than ₦2.5 million monthly in profits, while 79% earn less than ₦250,000 monthly. In Kogi State, Yusufu et al. (2022) study found that promotion strategies negatively related to sales and market share growth performance, suggesting that many SMEs lack effective strategic orientation. Olarewaju (2026) observed that in Niger State, small businesses are choked by multiple taxation amid poor accountability, while in Plateau State, the government launched an MSME policy in 2024 to address the challenges faced by SMEs (Nanlong,2024). In Benue State, compliance costs and tax burdens have been shown to significantly affect SME operations.

These challenges point to a fundamental problem: many SMEs in the region operate without a clear strategic focus, attempting to serve all customers rather than targeting specific, profitable niches. Yet, no empirical study has systematically investigated whether the adoption of focus strategy actually enhances SME market share growth in this context. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by answering the question: what is the effect of focus strategy on the market share growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria?

The study was guided by the following research questions:

i. To what extent does customer focus enhance the market share growth of SMEs in selected states in North-Central Nigeria?
ii. How does product focus enhance the market share growth of SMEs in selected states of North-Central Nigeria?
iii. To what extent does cost focus enhance the market share growth of SMEs in the selected states of North-Central Nigeria?

The broad objective of this study is to examine how the adoption of focus strategy influence market share growth of SMEs among selected states in North-Central Nigeria, while the specific objectives are:

i) To examine how customer focus enhance market share growth of SMEs in selected states in North-Central Nigeria.
ii) To assess how product focus enhance market share growth of SMEs in selected states of North-Central Nigeria.
iii) To know the extent of how cost focus enhances market share growth of SMEs in the selected states of North-Central Nigeria.

The following null hypothesis was tested at a 0.05 significance level:

H_{01}: Customer focus has no significant effect on the market share growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

H_{02}: Product focus has no significant effect on the market share growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

H_{03}: Cost focus has no significant effect on the market share growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Review

Concept of Focus Strategy

Focus strategy, as conceptualized by Michael Porter (1980), involves targeting a specific, narrowly defined market segment rather than competing across the entire industry. Porter identified two variants of focus strategy: cost focus, which seeks a cost advantage in the target segment, and differentiation focus, which seeks a differentiation advantage in the target segment. Common bases for building a focus strategy include targeting a specific geographic area, targeting a group of customers with similar needs or interests, or specializing in a specific product category. For SMEs, focus strategy is particularly attractive because it allows the firm to concentrate limited resources on serving a well-defined group of customers, thereby minimizing direct competition with larger firms and building customer loyalty through specialized knowledge and service.

For the purposes of this study, focus strategy was operationalized across three dimensions:

Customer Focus

This involves targeting specific customer segments based on demographics, income level or purchasing behavior. Prioritizing customer needs, satisfaction, and loyalty above else. Advantage: Creates loyal customers and strong brand reputation. Risk: Can be costly if customer demands are constantly changing

Product/service Focus

This involves specializing in a limited range of products or services; Concentrating on innovation, quality, and uniqueness of the product itself. Advantage: Strong differentiation and premium positioning. Risk: May overlook customer preference or affordability if too focused on product perfection.

Cost Focus

This involves achieving cost efficiency within a narrow segment. Competing by keeping costs low and offering affordable prices. Advantage: Attracts price-sensitive customers and gains market share. Risk: Thin profit margins and vulnerability if competitors also cut costs

Market Share Growth

Market share growth is the process of a company of firm expanding its portion of total industry sales relative to its competitors. It serves as a critical barometer for competitive health and a primary growth objective. Understanding how to achieve it requires examining a combination of drivers and strategies. Market share growth refers to a company's ability to increase its proportion of total sales in an industry, often linked to competitive advantage, profitability, and long-term sustainability. Academic research shows that while higher market share can improve performance, its impact varies across industries, regions, and time periods.

Theoretical Framework

Game Theory

Game theory is the formal study of conflict and cooperation. Game theoretic concepts apply whenever the actions of several agents are interdependent. These agents may be individuals, groups, firms, or any combination of these. The concepts of game theory provide a language to formulate structure, analyze, and understand strategic scenarios. Game-theoretic models assume that firms are (hyper)-rational utility maximizer. Rationality here implies that they strive to achieve the most preferred of outcomes subject to the constraint that their rivals who also behave in a similar fashion (Zagare, 2004). While there may be uncertainty regarding the expectations and actions of its rivals, a rational firm is expected to overcome uncertainty by forming competitive conjectures, subjective probability estimates of rivals' expectations and behavior. In effect, game theoretic models assume intelligent firms are those that can put themselves into the "shoes" of their rivals and reason from their perspective.

This study is anchored on Porter's Competitive Strategy Theory (1980), which posits that firms achieve sustainable competitive advantage by adopting one of three generic strategies: cost leadership, differentiation or focus. Porter argued that firms that attempt to pursue multiple generic strategies simultaneously risk becoming "stuck in the middle" and achieving no advantage at all. For SMEs, the focus strategy is often the most viable path to competitive advantage, as it allows the firm to serve a specific target group very well often at the expense of other potential customer groups and to allocate scarce resources efficiently.

Empirical Review

Isichei et al. (2024) studied Generic business strategies and competitiveness of SMEs in Nigeria" using a sample of 349 SMEs registered with SMEDAN in the FCT-Abuja and employing PLS-SEM analysis, found a significant positive relationship between focus strategy and SME competitiveness ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that focus strategy significantly contributes to SME competitiveness. Similarly, a 2025 study in Kaduna State found a significant positive relationship between focus strategy and improved quality of service, suggesting that focus strategy enhances service delivery outcomes.

Hilaru et al. (2024) in their work titled" Effect of Competitive Intelligence on the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises in North Central, Nigeria" their study specifically examined the impact of niche marketing strategy on SME performance in Nasarawa State (one of the states included in this study's North-Central region) and found that the application of niche marketing strategy had a significant impact on SME performance. Another study titled "Determining the Underlying Dimensions of Competitive Strategies and Profit of Small and Medium Enterprises in Nigeria" Adudu et al (2022) empirically proved that competitive strategies including focus tactics are excellent indicators of the financial success of SMEs in Nigeria.

Uwasomba and Boniface (2024) studied the improving sales volume of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs): relevance of business strategies using survey of retail SMEs in Abia State. A sample of 150 was analyzed using multiple regression, all the three business strategies- low cost, market focus, and differentiation- had significant effects on sales volume. Strategic alliances also contribute positively to sales growth the study recommended to promote the adoption of cost reduction, differentiation, focus, and strategic alliance strategies among SMEs.

Casimir (2025) examined business strategy and SMEs growth in Kaduna, Nigeria using a survey of 240 staff from 8 SMEs in Kaduna State. A sample of 173was analyzed using ANOVA and multiple regression the findings showed that focus strategy had a significant positive relationship with improved service quality. The conclusion of the study showed that adopting a clear focus on a specific market niche is crucial for SMEs to achieve leadership in that segment of market. The study recommended that SMEs should concentrate on narrow market segments to outperform competitors. Additionally, focus on cutting costs and differentiating products or services to enhance sales and market share.

Iwuagwu and Azuonye (2025) in their study on "low-cost strategy and market performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in South Eastern Nigeria" did a survey design using a questionnaire to collect data. Responses were analyzed using mean statistics and Pearson product moment correlation coefficient at a 0.05% significant level. The findings show a very strong positive and significant relationship was established low-cost strategy and three key metrics: customer acquisition, sales volume, and market share. The conclusion of the study showed that the achievement of improved market performance in SMEs largely depends on the extent to which a low-cost strategy is implemented and the study recommended that SMEs should intensify their efforts to offer products at a low cost to achieve higher sales. Additionally, they should adopt varying pricing strategies to attract different customer categories.

However, most of these studies focused on single states or the FCT, and none specifically examined the effect of focus strategy on profitability across multiple states in North-Central Nigeria using a cross-state sample. Furthermore, while the 2024 FCT study confirmed the relationship between focus strategy and competitiveness, it did not directly measure profitability as an outcome variable. This study therefore addresses these gaps by directly examining the effect of focus strategy on profitability in Kogi, Niger, Plateau and Benue States.

3.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted for this study. This design is appropriate for collecting data from a sample of SMEs at a single point in time, allowing the researcher to examine the relationship between focus strategy and market share growth without manipulating any variables.

The study was conducted in four states of North-Central Nigeria: Kogi, Niger, Plateau and Benue. These states were purposively selected because they host a substantial number of registered SMEs, face distinct but comparable environmental challenges (including multiple taxation, infrastructure deficits and limited access to finance), Together, these four states represent a significant proportion of the SME population in North-Central Nigeria.

The population comprised of Chief Executive officers, Top management staff and workers of the selected SMEs in the four states capitals of Kogi, Niger, Benue and Plateau. The total population is 1095

Using Yamane's formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the effective sample size for analysis was 293 SMEs.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where N = number of populations

e = confidence interval

n = sample size.

Given that Population = 1095, e = 0.05

Therefore, $n = \frac{1095}{1+1095(0.05)^2}$ = 293 approximately.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation from each state, with the number of SMEs selected from each state proportionate to its estimated population. With the sample size of 293, it was proportionally distributed as follows: The distribution was as follows: Benue State (265/1095 x 293 = 71), Kogi State (290/1095 x 293= 78), Niger State (255/1095 x 293 = 68), and Plateau State (285/1095 x 293 = 76). This uneven distribution reflects the underlying population differences and was accounted for in the data analysis through appropriate weighting.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Focus Strategy and market share growth Questionnaire (FSSP-Q)". It consisted of three sections:

· Section A: Demographic information (Gender, Age bracket, Education qualification, Position in the organization, years of experience).

· Section B: Focus strategy adoption (16 items, 5-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree = 5), covering three dimensions: customer focus (4 items), product/service focus (4 items), and cost focus (4 items).

· Section C: Market share growth (4 items, 5-point Likert scale), covering self-reported return on sales and return on assets relative to industry average.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage) were used to answer research questions 1 and 2. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the bivariate relationship between focus strategy and market share growth, and simple linear regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis at a 0.05 significance level. Prior to regression analysis, assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and independence of errors were tested and satisfied.

4.0 Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The majority of respondents were male (70.7%), while female respondents accounted for 29.3%. The average age of the businesses was 45-54 years, Education qualification of respondents 38% are BSC/HND holders, Position in the Organization 45.1% are Supervisors, 34.6% managers,10.5% CEOs and the Years of work experience in the SME sector 7-10 years account for 33.5%, Above ten years are26.3%, 1-3 years 19.9%,4-6 years 13.5% and less than 1 year 6.8%.

Level of Focus Strategy Adoption

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which their SMEs adopted focus strategy across four dimensions. Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each dimension.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Focus Strategy Adoption

S/N	Dimension	Mean	SD	Level
1	Customer focus	3.38	0.79	Moderate
2	Product/service focus	3.12	0.84	Moderate
3	Cost focus	2.78	0.88	Low
	Grand Mean	**3.09**	**-**	**Moderate**

Source: Field work,2025

The grand mean of 3.09 indicates a moderate level of focus strategy adoption overall. Customer focus recorded the highest mean (M = 3.38, SD = 0.79), followed by product/service focus (M = 3.12, SD = 0.84). and cost focus (M = 2.78, SD = 0.88) were rated low. Across states, Plateau State recorded the highest mean focus strategy adoption (M = 3.24, SD = 0.71), followed by Benue State (M = 3.12, SD = 0.76), Niger State (M = 2.98, SD = 0.82) and Kogi State (M = 2.89, SD = 0.85).

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Focus Strategy on SME Market share growth

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.737[a]	.543	.538	.4123	1.745

a. Predictors: (Constant), Market share growth

Interpretation: The three focus strategies jointly explain 54.3% of the variance in market share growth of SMEs

Table 3: Regression Coefficients and hypothesis testing

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
Customer focus	.386	.052	.412	7.423	.001
Product focus	.301	.071	.285	4.240	.01
Cost focus	.097	.048	.118	2.021	.044

Discussion of Findings

Finding 1 (Customer Focus - Strongest Effect):

The data shows customer focus has the most substantial positive impact on market share growth ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that SMEs in North Central Nigeria that actively segment customers, personalize offerings, and build long-term relationships gain market share more rapidly than those that do not. The finding aligns with resource-based view theory—customer intimacy creates switching costs and repeat patronage.

Finding 2 (Product/Service Focus - Moderate Effect):

Product focus ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.01$) also contributes significantly but less than customer focus. This suggests that while offering a specialized, high-quality niche product helps grow market share, the effect is mediated by how well that product is targeted to specific customer groups. SMEs that over-emphasize product features without aligning with customer preferences see lower returns.

Finding 3 (Cost Focus - Weakest Effect):

Although statistically significant ($\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.05$), cost focus has a very small practical effect on market share growth. This is notable and suggests that in the North Central Nigeria context, competing on cost within a niche may be risky. The region's economic volatility and low-price sensitivity of niche customers likely render cost leadership less effective than differentiation strategies. SMEs pursuing aggressive cost reduction may sacrifice quality or customer service, harming long-term market share.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that focus strategy significantly drives market share growth among selected SMEs in North Central Nigeria, but not all dimensions contribute equally. Customer focus emerged as the most powerful predictor, followed by product/service focus, while cost focus had only a marginal positive effect. This suggests that SMEs in this region grow market share more effectively by deeply understanding and serving specific customer segments and offering tailored products, rather than by attempting to lead on cost within niche. The overall model explains over 54% of market share growth variance, confirming the strategic relevance of focus strategy.

Based on the findings, the followings recommendations were made:

i) SMEs in North Central Nigeria should implement structured customer segmentation and personalized relationship management systems. Given that customer focus yielded the highest impact on market share growth, owners must allocate at least 50% of their strategic budget to customer feedback mechanism, loyalty programs, and after-sales service, rather than cost to cost reduction or generic advertising.

ii) SMEs should adopt continuous niche product innovation without broadening their product range. Since product focus contributes less than customer focus but more than cost focus, businesses should introduce at least one product improvement per quarter tailored specifically to their target segment (e.g., unique packaging, added functionality) and avoid diversifying into unrelated product lines, which would dilute focus.

iii) SMEs should treat cost focus only as a complementary, not primary, strategy. Given its minimal contribution to market share growth, business owners should reduce costs only in non-value-adding activities (e.g., logistics, administrative waste) while refusing to cut costs that affect product quality or customer service. Aggressive cost leadership within the niche is not advised for the North Central Nigeria context.

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