

DIGITAL MARKETING AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH; EVIDENCE FROM SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES (SMES) IN NORTH CENTRAL, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the *effect of digital marketing on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria using descriptive research design in which a cross-sectional survey method was adopted. The method deals with quantitative data generated through questionnaire to answer the research questions and to test the hypotheses formulated. The total population of SMEs in north central was 5,188,310 A sample of 400 SMEs was stratified and randomly selected. However, the conclusion was drawn on the hypotheses based on the three hundred and seventy- nine (379) copies of the questionnaire that were returned. Data were analyzed using multiple regression. The result of the analysis indicates that digital brand awareness ($\beta = 0.310$, $t = 5.011$) have significant positive effect on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria. The study equally revealed that digital brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.689$, $t = 11.130$) have significant positive effect on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria The study recommended that SMEs owners should maintain consistency in branding elements across all digital channels. This includes logo, color palette, tone of voice, and messaging. The study also recommended that SMEs owners should implement digital loyalty programs to reward and incentivize repeat customers.*

Keywords: Brand awareness, Brand loyalty, Digital marketing, Sustainable growth, SMEs

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, digital marketing has become a formidable force, transforming the business landscape worldwide. In North Central Nigeria, where resources are frequently constrained, the adoption of digital marketing strategies presents an unparalleled chance for achieving sustained growth, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Digital marketing provides small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with the opportunity to overcome geographic constraints and extend their market outreach beyond conventional boundaries. Through the effective utilization of social media, search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, and email campaigns, SMEs can connect with a wider audience at a significantly lower cost compared to traditional marketing channels.

Idris et al. (2020) observed that the adoption of digital marketing strategies resulted in a 73% increase in customer base and market reach for Nigerian SMEs. Engaging with customers on digital platforms plays a pivotal role in cultivating brand loyalty and building enduring relationships. Actively participating in social media communities, employing personalized email communication, and creating interactive content are effective ways for SMEs to establish connections with their target audience.

The study conducted by Ameh and Adebayo (2019) reveals that Nigerian SMEs utilizing digital marketing for customer engagement observe increased rates of customer retention and repeat business, thereby enhancing prospects for sustainable growth. SMEs can gather and analyze valuable data on customer behavior and preferences through digital marketing. By leveraging data analytics

tools, they can acquire insights into market trends, consumer habits, and competitor strategies. This valuable information empowers SMEs to make informed business decisions and customize their marketing efforts for optimal impact (Kehinde et al., 2021). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employing data-driven marketing strategies tend to outshine their peers, increasing their likelihood of sustained growth and profitability.

Despite this advantage, resource limitations frequently pose challenges to achieving lasting expansion. The recent surge in digital technologies has transformed how businesses engage with customers and stakeholders. Consequently, harnessing digital brand awareness and loyalty has become a powerful tool for SMEs to surmount growth obstacles and establish a sustainable competitive advantage (Rauschnabel et al., 2018). While there are numerous advantages, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in North Central Nigeria encounter obstacles when it comes to embracing digital marketing. Challenges such as limited digital literacy, infrastructure deficiencies, and cybersecurity concerns may impede the effective implementation of these strategies, (Idris et al., 2020). The main objective of the study is to examine the effect of digital marketing on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria.

The following research questions was generated such as: To what extent does digital brand awareness enhances SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria ?and To what extent does digital brand loyaltyenhances SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria ?

The specific objectives are to:examine the influence of digital brand awareness on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria and to determine the effect of digital brand loyalty on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria.

The following null hypotheses were formulated for the study; **H_{0i}**: digital brand awareness has no significant effect on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria. **H_{0ii}**: digital brand loyalty has no significant effect on SMEs sustainable growth in north-central, Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Digital Marketing.

Digital marketing entails employing diverse digital channels and technologies to promote and advertise products, services, or brands to specific target audiences (Ameh & Adebayo, 2019) .It entails utilizing online platforms and tools like social media, search engines, email marketing, content marketing, and display advertising to connect with potential customers and establish relationships with them in the digital realm (Kehinde et al., 2021). Digital marketing extends beyond online marketing and encompasses various channels that operate independently of the internet (Taiminen & Karjaluto, 2015). These channels comprise mobile phones (utilizing both SMS and MMS), social media marketing, display advertising, search engine marketing, and a diverse array of other digital media forms.

In various ways, digital technologies have the potential to surpass traditional media channels and marketing communication, thereby influencing and shaping the marketing mix (Idris et al., 2020).The implementation of marketing practices through digital media involves utilizing digital tools such as emails, mobile marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC), viral marketing, and social media (Scharl et al., 2005).Technological tools play a pivotal role in enhancing communication between customers and service providers. This dynamic interaction fosters sustainable growth in the consumer-brand relationship, leading to increased brand awareness and heightened customer interest (Martinez, 2019).

Digital Brand Awareness

Digital brand awareness pertains to the extent of recognition and familiarity that a company's brand achieves within its target audience in the online sphere (Rauschnabel et al., 2018). This concept encompasses multiple facets, such as website visibility, social media presence, search engine rankings, online advertising, and customer engagement (Sheela, 2021). In the contemporary interconnected landscape, where consumers heavily depend on the internet for information and purchasing decisions, establishing a strong digital brand presence has become crucial for SMEs to effectively connect with their audience. Various studies underscore the positive relationship between digital brand awareness and customer loyalty.

Research conducted by Rauschnabel et al. (2018) revealed that a robust digital branding strategy significantly enhances customer satisfaction, resulting in increased repeat purchases and brand advocacy. Through active engagement on social media, targeted email campaigns, and interactive websites, SMEs can cultivate stronger connections with their audience, ultimately fostering enduring customer loyalty. Establishing digital brand awareness empowers SMEs to carve out a unique market position in the midst of intense competition. As consumers increasingly turn to digital channels for comparing products and services, a strategically executed digital brand strategy can effectively distinguish an SME from its competitors. (Lee & Shin, 2018) demonstrated that SMEs with strong digital brand awareness are perceived as more innovative. The study by Lee and Shin (2018) illustrated that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) possessing robust digital brand awareness are seen as more innovative, trustworthy, and customer-focused, consequently drawing a larger market share. SMEs with a strong digital brand presence frequently observe enhancements in their financial performance. Trustworthy, and customer-focused, thus attracting a larger market share. SMEs with a robust digital brand presence often experience improved financial performance.

According to Wang et al. (2020), small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that strategically invested in digital branding experienced greater revenue growth and profitability in comparison to their less digitally engaged counterparts. The capacity to reach broader audiences and effectively convey the brand's value proposition translates into heightened sales and business expansion. The sustainability of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is significantly bolstered by digital brand awareness, which helps in creating a loyal customer base, improving operational efficiency, and fostering innovation. As highlighted in a study by Sheela (2021), SMEs that leverage digital brand awareness are better equipped to adapt to shifting market conditions and demonstrate increased resilience during economic downturns.

Digital Brand Loyalty

In the digital realm, brand loyalty extends to the emotional attachment and repetitive purchasing patterns exhibited by customers toward a brand. Several elements contribute to digital brand loyalty, including personalized customer experiences, consistent product quality, exceptional customer service, captivating social media presence, and effective content marketing strategies. As customer interactions with brands predominantly occur through online channels, establishing a robust and positive digital brand experience becomes crucial for nurturing loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Studies suggest that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with elevated levels of digital brand loyalty typically enjoy enhanced customer retention, a rise in repeat purchases, and a decrease in customer acquisition costs. Loyal customers often assume the role of brand advocates, disseminating positive word-of-mouth and drawing new customers to the SME's digital platforms. As a result, this leads to heightened brand equity and improved financial performance (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013).

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have the opportunity to utilize customer data and insights to offer personalized product recommendations and customized marketing campaigns, thereby elevating the overall customer experience and fostering loyalty (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019). Actively participating in customer interactions on social media platforms enables SMEs to establish relationships, address feedback, and showcase authenticity—essential elements for cultivating brand loyalty (Melewar & Nguyen, 2019). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can position themselves as industry thought leaders, build trust, and strengthen their digital brand loyalty. It is crucial for SMEs to address customer concerns promptly and effectively, with initiatives like providing reward points or exclusive deals for repeat customers serving as incentives for retaining customers (Wiedmann et al., 2007). The development of digital brand loyalty aligns with the principles of sustainable growth, promoting long-term customer retention, reducing waste, and improving overall operational efficiency.

SMEs and Sustainable Growth in North-Central Nigeria

The transition to digitalization has paved the way for fresh opportunities in growth and innovation, and North-Central Nigeria is not exempt from this trend. Digital technologies have played a crucial role in improving market access and broadening the customer base for SMEs in the region. As reported by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), there has been a significant surge in internet penetration in North-Central Nigeria, with over 40% of its population now having internet access (NCC, 2021).

This has empowered SMEs to establish a digital presence through websites, social media platforms, and e-commerce marketplaces, allowing them to connect with both local and global customers. The incorporation of digital tools and software in SME operations has resulted in heightened efficiency and productivity. According to a study conducted by the World Bank Group, SMEs that leverage digital technologies witness a 10% increase in productivity compared to their traditional counterparts (World Bank Group, 2021). Through the adoption of digital solutions for tasks like inventory management, customer relationship management (CRM), and online payment systems, SMEs in North-Central Nigeria have successfully streamlined their processes and optimized resource utilization.

The advent of digitalization has enhanced the accessibility of finance and funding options for SMEs in the region. Online crowdfunding platforms, peer-to-peer lending, and digital banking services have become available to SMEs in North-Central Nigeria, diminishing their dependence on conventional financial institutions. Consequently, these businesses have successfully secured capital for expansion and innovation. The expansion of digital SMEs in North-Central Nigeria has contributed to a rise in job opportunities for the local population.

As reported by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), SMEs constitute more than 80% of the region's workforce, with the digital sector playing a pivotal role in generating employment opportunities. Fields such as digital marketing, web development, and data analysis have seen notable growth (SMEDAN, 2021). By responsibly harnessing digital technologies and aligning their strategies with sustainable development goals, these SMEs possess the potential to further enhance the region's prosperity in the upcoming years.

Theoretical Review

Social Exchange Theory

George C. Homans, an American sociologist, introduced the Social Exchange Theory in 1958. Homans outlined the fundamental concepts of the theory, emphasizing that social interactions are fundamentally rooted in the principles of cost and reward. According to this theory, individuals participate in social relationships when they perceive that the benefits surpass the costs, and they are inclined to sustain these relationships as long as the rewards outweigh the expenses (Homans, 1958). The Social

Exchange Theory (SET) operates under the assumption that individuals are rational actors, meticulously assessing the costs and benefits of their actions within relationships. However, this assumption oversimplifies human decision-making, neglecting the influence of emotions, cultural norms, and psychological factors that significantly shape social interactions. Human behavior is not always solely driven by self-interest or calculated utility, challenging the core premise of SET (Blau, 1964). The Social Exchange Theory offers a robust framework for predicting and comprehending human behavior across diverse social settings. This theory suggests that individuals participate in relationships and interactions by conducting a cost-benefit analysis, aiming to maximize rewards while minimizing costs (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964). The Social Exchange Theory offers valuable perspectives on how SMEs can utilize digital marketing to cultivate positive interactions with their target audience. Through an emphasis on reciprocity, customer engagement, perceived value, and ethical behavior, SMEs can establish sustainable growth by enhancing brand loyalty, acquiring new customers, and generating positive word-of-mouth (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

Innovation Diffusion Theory

In 1962, Everett Rogers introduced the Innovation Diffusion Theory, which offers a framework for comprehending the spread of new ideas, technologies, or innovations within a society (Rogers, 2003). The entrepreneurial orientation of SMEs plays a crucial role in determining their readiness to adopt innovations, with more entrepreneurial firms displaying greater openness to risk and change (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). The theory's versatility renders it applicable for comprehending the adoption of innovation in SMEs, which frequently function in dynamic and resource-limited settings (Baptista and Swann, 1998). However, the theory might not entirely encompass the impact of social and cultural factors on innovation adoption within SMEs, especially in diverse cultural contexts characterized by widely varying norms and values (Hughes and Hughes, 2005).

IDT underscores specific perceived traits that impact the adoption rate. Concerning SMEs, these traits encompass the perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability of an innovation. SMEs are more inclined to adopt innovations that harmonize with their current practices, present distinct advantages, and are straightforward to comprehend and implement.

This study is anchor on Social Exchange Theory because it offers valuable perspectives on how SMEs can utilize digital marketing to cultivate positive interactions with their target audience.

Empirical Review

Nwali and Ntegeeh,(2022) explored the influence of social media marketing on the brand awareness of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. They utilized a descriptive survey to collect qualitative data from 458 online shoppers/customers, and regression analysis was employed for data analysis. The findings indicated that social media marketing has a positive impact on both organizational brand awareness and performance. However, the study did not specify the particular social media platforms used by the SMEs. Since various social media platforms have unique user demographics and functionalities, their effects on brand awareness can differ. It would be advantageous to investigate which specific platforms are more effective for different types of SMEs, aiding in the development of more targeted social media marketing strategies.

Lateefat and Joshua (2022) investigated the impact of social media marketing on brand loyalty among selected SMEs in South West, Nigeria, employing a survey design. The sample size of 489 was determined using the Raosoft Sample Size calculator, and data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential methods. PLS-SEM predictive results indicated a significant influence of social media marketing on the brand loyalty of SMEs in Southwest, Nigeria. The study recommends SME owners to share engaging social media content and timely brand information to foster brand loyalty. While the research adopts a descriptive survey design and involves a sample size of 489 SMEs from three states

in South West, Nigeria, it does not specify the process used to select these SMEs, potentially introducing sampling bias. If the sample does not accurately represent the entire population of SMEs in the region, the findings may not be universally applicable to all SMEs in South West, Nigeria.

Anber (2022) explored the influence of digital marketing success on customer loyalty in Jordan by administering a questionnaire to 187 online restaurant customers. Structural equation modeling was employed to assess the hypothesized effects. The findings revealed that digital marketing success had a substantial impact on the customer loyalty of online restaurant customers in Jordan. The study underscores the importance for marketing managers to recognize that, in the digital era, customer loyalty hinges on the capacity to create, communicate, and deliver digital content through digital technologies, along with the quality of digital content and capabilities that provide customer value. Nevertheless, the study's focus specifically on online restaurant customers in Jordan may limit its applicability to other industries or geographical regions. As customer behaviors and preferences can vary significantly across different sectors and countries, further exploration is warranted to understand the impact of digital marketing on customer loyalty in diverse contexts.

Johannes et al. (2021) investigated the impact of digital marketing and brand awareness on the performance of SMEs in Makassar City. The study employed validity tests to assess each component of digital marketing and brand awareness, and those deemed valid were further subjected to a reliability test using multiple regression processing. The results indicated that both Digital Marketing (X1) and Brand Awareness (X2) collectively influence the performance of SMEs in Makassar City (Y). Consequently, it is imperative to reevaluate the components crucial to SME performance, particularly emphasizing the substantial role played by digital marketing. The study mentions using validity tests to evaluate each component of digital marketing and brand awareness, followed by a reliability test for the valid components. However, it lacks specific details on the validity and reliability tests conducted. To comprehensively assess the study's conclusions, understanding the methods and tools employed for these tests and their appropriateness for the measured variables is crucial.

METHODOLOGY

The survey design was chosen due to the descriptive nature of the study. Out of the 400 questionnaires distributed to SMEs in North Central Nigeria, 383 were accurately completed and returned, with 17 copies deemed invalid. The conclusions were drawn based on the 383 returned questionnaires. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, was employed. Data were organized in tables, and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 software was utilized for analysis. The frequency table was used to assess responses, and multiple regression was employed to test the formulated hypotheses.

Model Specification

$$SG = \alpha + \beta_1 BA_1 + \beta_2 BT_2 + e \text{ -----1}$$

Where

α = Vertical Intercept

SG= Dependent variable i.e. sustainable growth.

BA- Brand awareness (BA)

BT- Building trust (BT)

e =Error terms or residual.

$\beta_1 - \beta_2$ = Slope of the coefficients

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Statement of hypotheses

Ho₁ There is no statistically significant impact of brand awareness on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

Ho₁₁: There is no statistically significant effect of brand loyalty on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

Results of Regression

Table .1 Model Summary

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.939 ^a	.917	.897	.158

a. Predictors: (Constant), BLT, BAW

The R-square value of .917 in the above Table 1 suggests that the independent variable components have an impact of 89% on the dependent variable. Additionally, the adjusted R-square value of .897 indicates a precise effect of 89% from digital brand awareness and brand loyalty on the sustainable growth of SMEs.

Table .2 ANOVA

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3380.386	2	1690.193	68085.997	.000 ^b
	Residual	9.334	376	.025		
	Total	3389.720	378			

a. Dependent Variable: SG

b. Predictors: (Constant), BLT, BAW

The F-Statistics value of 68085.997, along with the associated significance level of 0.00 in the above Table 2, indicates that the model is well-fitted and statistically significant at the 1% level. This suggests that the model is suitable and applicable for the sustainable growth of SMEs.

Table .3 Coefficients

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.007	.020		-.338	.735
	BAW	.155	.031	.310	5.011	.000
	BLT	.345	.031	.689	11.130	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SG

Test of Hypotheses

The formulated hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis

Ho₁ There is no statistically significant impact of brand awareness on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

In Table 3, the t-statistic value is 5.011, and the beta coefficient value is .310. The p-value from the regression table is .000, which is greater than the 0.05 level of significance. This signifies that brand awareness has a statistically significant positive effect on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. Consequently, the null hypothesis one, stating that brand awareness has no significant effect on SMEs' sustainable growth in North-Central Nigeria, is rejected.

Test of Hypotheses

Ho₁₁: There is no statistically significant effect of brand loyalty on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

In Table 3, the t-statistic value is 11.130, and the beta coefficient value is .689. The p-value from the regression table is .000, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This suggests that brand loyalty has a statistically significant positive effect on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. Consequently, the null hypothesis two, which posits that brand loyalty has no significant effect on SMEs' sustainable growth in North-Central Nigeria, is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis results reveal a notable and positive impact of digital brand awareness on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. This observation aligns with the principles of the Social Exchange Theory, which asserts that individuals engage in relationships and interactions guided by a cost-benefit analysis, aiming to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. This discovery is consistent with the findings reported by Nwali and Ntegeeh (2022) as well as Johannes et al. (2021).

The investigation also unveiled that digital brand loyalty has a substantial positive impact on the sustainable growth of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. This result is in accordance with the principles of the Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that individuals participate in relationships and interactions grounded in a cost-benefit analysis, with the aim of maximizing rewards while minimizing costs. Additionally, this outcome aligns with the discoveries made by Lateefat and Joshua (2022) as well as Anber (2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital brand awareness serves as a pivotal driver for the sustainable growth of SMEs. In the dynamic landscape of digital evolution, SMEs are compelled to adopt and invest in digital branding strategies to stay competitive and secure enduring success. Establishing robust digital brand awareness enables SMEs to bolster customer loyalty, stand out in the market, and attain enhanced financial performance. The manifold advantages derived from these efforts play a crucial role in ensuring the overall sustainability of SMEs, underscoring the indispensable nature of digital brand awareness in their growth trajectory.

Furthermore, the connection between digital brand loyalty and sustainable growth for SMEs becomes increasingly apparent in the digital era. SMEs that give precedence to cultivating robust brand loyalty within the digital landscape stand to gain from heightened customer retention, augmented brand equity, and enduring business growth. By comprehending the fundamental elements of digital brand loyalty and implementing fitting strategies, SMEs can elevate their competitiveness and position themselves for sustained success in the ever-evolving digital marketplace.

The study therefore recommends the following:

- i. The study suggests that owners of SMEs should uphold uniformity in branding elements across various digital channels. This encompasses maintaining consistency in the logo, color palette, tone of voice, and messaging. This uniformity plays a crucial role in reinforcing brand recognition and fostering trust among customers.
- ii. Additionally, the study proposes that owners of SMEs should introduce digital loyalty programs to acknowledge and motivate repeat customers. Providing exclusive discounts, promotions, or access to special content can serve as incentives to promote customer retention.

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