

Utilization of Digital Marketing Channels For Brand Awareness by Small and Medium Scale Enterprise (SME) Operators

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Abstract: *This research paper examined the extent of utilization of digital marketing channel for brand awareness by SME operators in Kwara state, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. Two purposes, two research questions and two null hypotheses were raised for the study. The population of the study comprised 1,416 registered SMEs in Kwara State out of which a sample of 339 was chosen using Taro Yamane formula for finite population. Questionnaire was used as instrument for gathering data and was validated by three experts. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha method to obtain the r-coefficient of 0.90. The data for the research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses 1 and 2 at 0.05 level of significance. The study found that out of the two channels of digital marketing channels examined only the Social Media Marketing is utilized to a high extent while Search Engine Optimization was rated low in the extent to which it is being utilized. Based on the findings, the study concludes that SMEs were not fully aware of how search engine optimization channels of digital marketing work and its benefits, hence many small businesses are yet to have the full awareness of how best it could be explored for business purposes. SMEs should have their businesses presence not only on social media marketing channel. Proper optimization of search engine is equally important, in other to generate more traffic to their business website organically.*

Keywords: Brand Awareness; Digital Marketing; SME operators; Social Media Marketing; Search Engine Optimization; Utilization

I. INTRODUCTION

The wave of technological advancement is creating a new landscape for businesses today. New technologies such as websites, blogs, applications, social media, software, sophisticated devices, big data and quantum computing are helping to blur the lines between the digital and physical worlds. Indeed, the proliferation of the internet has brought unprecedented development in new methods of conducting business transaction which has affected different aspects of lives and professions including marketing. Nowadays, people are consuming digital content on a daily basis, as more households are now having access to the internet and its access is making it easier for people to receive their news and watch TV online, challenging the popularity of traditional platform. From the information age to the current shift age, new technologies, especially digitalization has taken over (Umoru, 2020). In Nigeria, there are over 40 million active mobile phone lines out of which 65% percent are using it on smart phones and other devices (statista, 2020). Meanwhile, television viewing habits are now on the decrease due to lack of time; while social network sites such as Face book, Twitter, YouTube, and Skype are on the increase. About 65% of Nigerians, who are above 18 years, actively use various forms of social networks (Statista, 2020). Thus, businesses are becoming increasingly aware of this fact and cleverly exploring the opportunities by weaving in marketing communication into every digital channel.

Many writers have conceptualized digital marketing in different ways. Indraject (2020) viewed digital marketing as a marketing method that mainly depend on on the internet to connect with the target audience via various digital media channels and platforms. In other words, digital marketing is an exploitation of digital technologies, which are used to create channels to reach potential recipients, in order to achieve the enterprise's goals, through more effective fulfillment of the consumer needs (Artur, 2016). The author stressed further that digital marketing is a digital identity of a company through which it presents itself in the virtual world to enormous numbers of users. Omair (2020) also described digital marketing as an overreaching term that encompasses all types of online marketing that consists of video marketing, email marketing, content marketing, social media marketing, SEO, PPC, display advertising and mobile marketing among others. The author equally identified some of the benefits of digital marketing to include constant online, cost-effective, instant and highly measurable result, excellent sale improvement (for instance, return on investment), interact with target audience etc. Digital marketing allows customers to take action immediately after viewing the ad or content, with just a click on link or save a blog post and move along the sales funnel right away.

Digital marketing has also become the cheapest, flexible and popular platform for brand awareness. One of the most vital aspects of business strategy is branding, since the primary aim of all the companies is to generate profits. Brand awareness is

described as the degree of consumer recognition of a product by its name (Carol, 2021). If there is no recognition of a brand, company or product, the potential customers might lack the information regarding where and how to satisfy their wants and needs. Brand awareness in this context therefore, referred to as the ability of potential customers to appropriately associate a product and a brand. It means all activities deployed by a firm in getting customer aware of its brand and products or services. Creating brand awareness is a key step in promoting a new product or reviving an older brand. Ideally, awareness of the brand may include the qualities that distinguish the product from its competitors. In the days before digital media, a brand that wanted to connect with prospects would put an ad in the paper or invest in a billboard advertisement. But these days, customers use digital media to actively seek out brands, and this has shifted the control from the brand to the consumer (Alejandra & Krzysztof, 2019). Goward (2015) further stressed that, consumers expect brands to have a digital presence, and nearly 30% prefer to communicate with brands via digital channels. Utilization of digital marketing channels allow SME operator in ensuring that its brand is visible when prospective customers are looking for it and ensure it's don't miss opportunities to engage and delight its audience thereby improve their sales.

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are small-scale businesses established by individual(s)/entrepreneurs with limited amount of capital and personnel with the aim of making profit. Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDAN, 2013) an agency of the Federal Government of Nigeria, established to facilitate the promotion and development of the MSMEs sector, classified SMEs in three categories namely: Micro Enterprises, Small Enterprises and Medium Enterprises. The distinction between Small and Medium Enterprises which are the focus of this study is based on employment and Assets. According to (SMEDAN 2013) small enterprises are those enterprises whose total assets (excluding land and building) are above five million naira but not exceeding fifty million naira with a total workforce of above ten, but not exceeding forty-nine employees. While, medium enterprises are those enterprises with total assets excluding land and building) are above fifty million naira, but not exceeding five hundred million naira with a total workforce of between 50 and 199 employees. However, digital marketing seems to be thought of as new strategies for businesses in the digital age. Omair (2020) opined that digital marketing is a big part of transition from the analog age to the digital age because marketers now hang out with consumers online. Peace and Obikeze (2017) stressed that any business can be globalized within a short period of time in every corner of the world wherever presence of digital media can be found. The customer from any place can reach business and industry of his choice just with one click. Hence, presence of SMEs business can be seen everywhere and at any time of the globe. Cesaroni and Consoli, (2015) equally found that the use of digital media is extending assistance and support to SMEs for increasing public awareness, opening new methods and procedures of business and sharing, collaborating and mutual creation of innovative concepts for increasing ultimate performance. Obviously, SMEs performance can be highly impacted positively with the utilization of digital marketing in their business proceedings.

Utilization of digital marketing requires some online platforms called "digital marketing channels". According to Michelle (2020) digital marketing channels are platforms that can be used by businesses to reach their target audience with information about the business's brand, product, or service. The author equally identified some the channels of digital marketing for businesses use as; content marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), pay per click (PPC), mobile marketing and display add.

Social media marketing is one of the digital marketing channels utilized in businesses. Generally, Social media refers to websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly, efficiently, and in real-time (Matthew, 2020). Social media allows users to quickly create and share content with the public through the wide range of websites and apps. Such as; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, you tube etc. Social network enables business to conduct social media marketing which is the subset of digital marketing. Thus, social media marketing involves the use of internet social media tools, such as: Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn in order to reach consumers innovatively. Matthew (2022) opined that Social media marketing helps promoting the company and its activities. Active social media tend to attract more new customers or visitors by get business communication to their social media platform and they are more likely to be interested in the brand.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is another important channel of digital marketing that is also very useful for brand awareness and by SMEs operators. Ordinarily a search engine is an Internet tool that locates web pages and sorts them according to specific key words (Purdue university lab, 2013). Search engines are numerous and they include Google search, Yahoo search, Internet Archive, Bing etc. However, SEO referred to sub technique that allows businesses to increase their presence on the web organically, through the use of keywords (The Internet Marketing Academy, 2011). SEO is concerned with optimizing a website so it attracts more organic traffic from search engines, like Google. Hence, organic traffic refers to the search result of search engine that cannot be influenced by paid advertising but ranking search results according to their relevance to the search term (Larry, 2020). Basically, Google as one of search engine can be optimize with the business website display on the top results of the first pages and this will drastically increase the chances of attracting more customers online.

In the context of this study, utilization involves the application of various digital marketing channels by SMEs operators in achieving brand awareness. The knowledge and skills of the various digital channels when fully utilized will enable SMEs operators to explore its various channels for marketing and enhance their activities of creating brand awareness. According to Peace and Obikeze (2017), without the utilization of digital marketing applications, it will be very difficult for SMEs in Nigeria to compete in the global market economy. Because digital marketing has a significant impact on SMEs operations and is crucial for their survival and growth (Berisha, 2019). A number of factors influencing utilization of digital marketing have to do with the organization itself such as exposure to the trends, work experience of SMEs operators and creativity and innovative mindset all play a significant role

in digital marketing utilization (Ramsey & Ibbotson, 2013). In the same vein, Chackro and Harris (2015) affirmed that there is a growing need for SMEs in Nigeria to integrate into the global supply chain by adopting and utilizing digital marketing applications that will increase their productivity and efficiency. Hence, the researcher is motivated to assess the extent of utilization of digital marketing applications by SMEs in Kwara State of Nigeria in order to unravel where there is need for improvement.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The traditional method of creating brand awareness by SMEs include advertising, public relations, publicity, sponsorship and sales promotions among others. These forms of promotion require huge capital outlays, assignment of expensive professionals and consultants, and invariably, the outcomes generally take time to manifest. This is a challenge for SMEs as they have limited capital, with little or no funds to invest in expensive promotional activities. There is thus the need for a more affordable but effective means for SMEs to promote their businesses. Digital marketing seems to readily meet this need for SMEs. Basically, digital marketing is the online promotional activities of a business's products and services, carried out on the Internet using the various digital medium such as social media, websites, digital advertising on search engines, paid advertising online. However, despite the availability; flexibility and affordability of digital marketing channels; utilization of the same by SMEs operator, still constitute a problem. Inability to drive relevant traffic to the business website; lack of proper optimization of search engines; low lead generation on social media, amongst other, may suggest their none utilization or inability of the SMEs operators to utilize digital marketing channels for brand awareness. Thus, any SME without strong online presence may be confronted with serious challenges of making their goods or services popular and persuasive to large prospective customers in this digital age. Considering the enormous availability and flexibility of digital marketing, the researcher doubted whether the SMEs operators do utilize digital marketing as their strategies for creating brand awareness. This doubt therefore, informed the researcher's urge to embark on this study, to assess utilization of digital marketing channels for brand awareness by SMEs operators.

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to assess the utilization of digital marketing for brand awareness by SME operators in Kwara State. Specifically, the study sought to determine the extent to which SME operators utilize;

1. social media marketing for brand awareness.
2. search engines optimization for brand awareness.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do SME operators utilize social media marketing for brand awareness?
2. To what extent do SME operators utilize search engines optimization for brand awareness?

V. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Based on the specific purpose of the study and research questions, the following null hypotheses are formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on extent of utilizing social media marketing for brand awareness based on years of experience.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on extent of utilizing search engine optimization for brand awareness based on years of experience.

VI. METHODS

Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The researcher considered this design appropriate for this study since it collected data from managers and owners of SMEs in Kwara State. The population of the study comprised 1,416 registered SMEs in Kwara State out of which a sample of 339 was selected using Taro Yamane formula for finite population. Instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The instrument was validated by three experts in business education. Their comments enhanced the content validity of the instrument.

To establish the internal consistency of the research instrument, a pilot test was conducted and Cronbach Alpha reliability method was used to test data collected using the application of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The analysis yielded a co-efficient score of 0.09 which was deemed reliable for the study. The questionnaire was structured on a four-point scale with response categories as "Very High Extent"; "High Extent"; "Low Extent" and Very Low Extent. The administration of the instrument was carried out personally by the researchers with the aid of three research assistants. Out of the 339 copies of the questionnaire administered, 308 were completely filled and returned. A total number of 308 copies of the questionnaire representing 91.2 % return rate were used for data analysis.

Data collected regarding the research questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) while Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses. In testing the null hypotheses, where the calculated p-value is less than the stipulated level of significance (0.05), it means that there was significant difference and the hypothesis was rejected. Conversely, where the calculated p-value is equal to or greater than the stipulated level of significance (0.05), it means that there was no significant difference and the hypothesis was no rejected.

VII. RESULTS

Research Question One

To what extent do SME operators utilize social media marketing for brand awareness?

Table 1: Summary of descriptive statistics of respondents’ mean ratings on the extent of utilizing social media marketing by SME operators.

S/N	Items Statement	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	We have our brand/products up and running on Social media platforms	2.84	0.96	High Extent
2.	We upload pictures/video of our products/service on Facebook page for our customers to see	2.74	1.02	High Extent
3.	We make use of YouTube to share video Adverts	2.32	1.06	Low Extent
4.	We jump on trend tweets to advertise our products/service to wide audience	2.44	0.99	Low Extent
5.	We use social media to attract and maintain new customer.	2.87	1.03	High Extent
6.	We use social media platform to measure brands popularity in a large market.	2.84	1.04	High Extent
7.	We make use of Photo sites like Pinterest and Flicker in our brand awareness campaign	2.07	1.07	Low Extent
8.	We use Social media platform to generate timely feedback on our brand	2.64	0.99	High Extent
Grand Weighted Mean		2.60	0.89	High Extent

Source: Field Survey 2022.

Table 1 reveals that SME operators indicated that utilization of Social media for brand awareness is to high extent in the following areas: they have their brand/products up and running on social media platforms (Mean=2.84), upload pictures/video of our products/service on Facebook page for our customers to see (Mean =2.74), using social media platform to measure brands popularity in a large market (Mean = 2.84), using social media to attract and maintain new customer and using Social media platform to generate timely feedback on our brand (Mean = 2.87 and 2.64), while the respondents indicated low extent of utilizing social media marketing in the following areas: making use of YouTube to share video Adverts (Mean = 2.32), jumping on trend tweets to advertise their products/service to wide audience and making use of Photo sites like Pinterest and Flicker in their brand awareness campaign (Mean = 2.44 and 2.07). The standard deviations of the items are low ranging from 0.96 to 1.07 indicating that their responses are not too widespread. In summary, SME operators utilize social media marketing for brand awareness is to high extent (Mean = 2.60; SD = 0.89).

Research Question Two

To what extent do SME operators utilize search engines optimization for brand awareness?

Table 2: Summary of descriptive statistics of respondents’ mean ratings on the extent of utilizing search engine optimization by SME operators.

S/N	Items Statement	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	We optimize search engines to promote brand image	2.56	1.05	High Extent
2.	We make use of “Google my Business” site for our online presence.	2.44	1.02	Low Extent
3.	We make use of relevant keywords to hit first page on search engines organically.	2.31	0.97	Low Extent

4. We make use of Google search Console our brand awareness campaign.	2.11	1.09	Low Extent
5. We optimize search engines to improve users experience of our brand's website.	2.27	1.04	Low Extent
6. We optimize keyword phrases to increase organic search traffic on our website.	2.17	1.04	Low Extent
7. We optimization search engines to insert the brand personality on the website	2.07	0.93	Low Extent
8. We optimize search engines to disclose content that strengthens branding.	2.37	1.10	Low Extent
Grand weighted mean	2.29	1.03	Low Extent

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 2 reveals the extent of utilization of Search Engine Optimization for brand awareness by SME operators. The table show that SME operators optimize utilize search engines to promote brand image to a high extent (Mean = 2.56). while they indicated low extent of utilizing search engine optimization in the following areas: making use of “Google my Business” site for their online presence (Mean =2.44), making use of relevant **keywords** to hit first page on search engines organically (Mean = 2.31), making use of Google search Console our brand awareness campaign (Mean =2.11), optimizing search engines to improve users experience of our brand's website (Mean =2.27),optimization of keyword phrases to increase organic search traffic on their website (Mean = 2.17), optimization of search engines to insert the brand personality on the website and optimization of search engines to disclose content that strengthens branding (Mean =2.07 and 2.37). The standard deviations of the items are low ranging from 0.93 to 1.10 indicating that their responses are not too widespread. More specifically, the result indicated that utilization of search engine optimization for brand awareness creation by SME operators is to a low extent (Mean =2.29; SD 1.03).

VIII. TESTING OF HYPOTHESES

Null Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on extent of utilization social media marketing for brand awareness based on years of experience.

Table 3: Summary of ANOVA result showing difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on the extent of utilization of Social media marketing foe brand awareness based on years of experience

	Sum of Squares	Df	Means Squares	F	Sig	Decision
Between Groups	1.766	3	0.58	0.88	0.45	
Within Groups	203.509	304	0.67			Significant
Total	205.275	307				

Source: Field survey, 2022

P>0.05

The result of analysis of variance as presented in Table 3 reveals that the calculated value of F was 0.88 ($F_{307} = 0.88$) and the observed probability value is 0.45 which is greater than the fixed probability value of 0.05 ($P > 0.05$). This indicated that the null hypothesis which stated that, there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SME operators on the extent of utilizing Social media marketing for brand awareness according to years of experience was not rejected. This implied that SME operators do not differ in their responses regarding the extent to which social media marketing is utilized for brand awareness by SME operators according to their years of experiences in businesses.

Null Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on extent of utilizing search engine optimization for brand awareness according to years of experience.

Table 4: Summary of ANOVA result showing difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on the extent of utilization of Search engine optimization for brand awareness based on years of experience.

	Sum of	df	Means Squares	F	Sig	Decision
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	Squares				
Between Groups	9.947	3	3.316	4.766	0.003
Within Groups	211.468	304	0.70		Significant
Total	221.414	307			

Source: Field survey 2022

P < 0.05

The result of analysis of variance as presented in Table 4 reveals that the calculated value of F was 4.766 ($F_{307} = 4.766$) and the observed probability value is 0.003 which is less than the fixed probability value of 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). This indicated that the null hypothesis which stated that, there is no significant difference between the mean rating of SME operators on the extent to which they utilize Search engine optimization for brand awareness was rejected. This implied that SME operators are significantly differ in their responses regarding the extent to which search engine optimization is utilized for brand awareness by SME operators in their respective businesses.

Table 5: Summary of Post Hoc Test result showing the significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators on extent of utilization Search engine optimization for brand awareness based on years of experience
(I) Years of Experience (J) Years of Experience Mean Difference (I-J) Sig. Remarks

(I) Years of Experience	(J) Years of Experience	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.	Remarks
0-5 years	6-10 years	.37888*	.020	Significant
	11-15 years	.46257*	.013	Significant.
	16 years and above	.31466	.203	Not sig
6-10 years	0-5 years	-.37888	.020	Not sig
	11-15 years	.08370	.942	Not sig
	16 years and above	-.06422	.976	Not sig
11-15 years	0-5 years	-.46257*	.013	Significant
	6-10 years	-.08370	.942	Not sig
	16 years and above	-.14792	.831	Not sig
16 years and above	0-5 years	-.31466	.203	Not sig
	6-10 years	.06422	.976	Not sig
	11-15 years	.14792	.831	Not sig

Source: Field survey 2022

Analysis of data in Table 5 shows that the Post Hoc test, which compare the response of SME operators according to their years of experience taking two at a time to see where the difference between the group occurs. The table reveals that between SME in the category of 0 and 5 years' experience and the one with 6 and 10 years' experience there was significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators regarding the extent to which search engine optimization is being utilized for brand awareness with a mean difference of 0.38 and p-value of 0.020 which is less than fixed probability value of 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). same way, comparing SME in the category of 0 and 5 years of experience and the one with 11-15 years of experience, the table shows a mean difference of 0.46 and P-value of 0.013 which is less than the fixed probability value of 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). This means that mean rating of SME operators in the category of 6 and 10 years' experience and those with 10 and 15 years' experience was lower than mean ratings of SME operators who are in the category of 0 and 5 years of experience.

IX. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results indicated that SME operators utilized social media marketing for brand awareness to a high extent. This means that the extent to which social media marketing channel is utilized for brand awareness activities by SME operators is high. The finding is in consonance with that of Lain (2017) who stated that customers trust businesses who have published advertisements on social media but also prefer businesses who have it compared to those who do not. Umoru (2015) also found out that social media allows an enterprise to connect with both existing and potential customers, engage with them and reinforce a sense of community around the enterprises' offering(s). Furthermore, the result of the hypothesis revealed that there was no significant difference between the main scores of SME operators on the extent of utilizing social media marketing for brand awareness according to years of

experience. This means that SME operators irrespective of their years of experiences did not differ on the extent to which social media marketing channel is utilized for brand awareness. This is in tandem with Jindrichovoka and Kubickova, (2013) who inferred that SME operators irrespective of business size and years of experience, use social media to enhance an organization's performance in various ways such as to accomplish business objectives, increasing annual sales of the organization.

Findings of the study also revealed that utilization of search engine optimization for brand awareness by SME operators based on the year of experience is to a low extent. This means that SME operators utilize search engine optimization in their brand awareness activities to a low extent. This is in spite of the fact that search engine optimization as seen by Lovatt and Legge (2014), is favorable for marketers because they do not have to spend for web traffic from organic ads. It provides continuous and real-time insights about the online behavior of the consumer.

The result of the test of hypothesis in Table 12 and 13 revealed that there was significant difference between the mean scores of SME operators according to years on experience ranging from 0 and 5 years category, 6 and 10 years, 11 and 15 years category and those with 16 years and above on the extent to which search engine optimization is utilize for brand awareness. It is quite apparent from the finding that SME operators whose years of experience fall within the category of 6 and 10 years and 11 and 15 years rated the extent of utilizing search engine optimization for brand awareness lower than those in the category of 0 and 5 years of experience did. Hamza (2015) similarly found out that there is a statistically significant effect of utilizing search engine optimization for online advertisement by SME managers based on years of experience.

X. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study which revealed that between the two channels of digital marketing examined in this study, social media marketing was the only channel of digital marking which SMEs operators utilized to a high extent and rated search engine optimization to a low extent. This is not surprising because Internet users, using social networking sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are obviously large with audiences waiting to be reached. While the low extent to which search engine optimization is utilized, may be due lack of proper awareness of how it works. It could be concluded that search engine optimization as a channel of digital marketing is not as popular as social media, hence many small businesses are yet to have the full awareness of how best it could be explored for business purposes. The implication of this study is that, the poor and low utilization of other channels of digital marketing asides social media marketing for brand awareness purposes by SMEs may result to lack of strong online presence thereby creating serious challenges in making their goods or services popular and persuasive to large prospective customers in this era of digitalized economy.

XI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding of the study, the following recommendation were made;

1. Owners/Managers of SMEs should continue to seek further training/skills from digital marketing experts, consultants as well as business schools on how best social media marketing channels could be utilized for brand awareness campaign.
2. SMEs should have their businesses presence not only on social media marketing channel. Proper optimization of search engine is equally important, in other to generate more traffic to their business website organically, thereby maintaini first page ranking on search engines for their brands.

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