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Digital disruption in the marketing landscape of small businesses: A strategic pathway to success

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Abstract

Big businesses have over the years exploited digital marketing to expand their reach and sustain their performance, however, the extent to which SMEs in Nigeria have utilized DM tools and techniques in improving their performance is still relatively understudied, hence, necessitating this study to examine how DM has caused disruption in the marketing landscape of small businesses in Nigeria. The study employed a survey research design. The population of the study comprised 12,301 SMEs from the five South-Eastern states of Nigeria and the sample size was 372 using Krejcie and Morgan formula. A self-structured questionnaire was employed for data collection, and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study revealed a generally low level of digital marketing tool usage among the sampled SMEs and that there is limited adoption of digital marketing practices among SMEs in the area. It was concluded that numerous SMEs have not completely capitalized on the potential presented by digital disruption in the marketing arena. Sequel to this, among others, it was recommended that government agencies, businesses and support organizations ought to conduct regular training on digital literacy and marketing for SME proprietors. It was also recommended that relevant stakeholders need to enhance access to cheap internet services, digital infrastructure, and smart devices, particularly in underdeveloped regions, to promote digital inclusion.

Keywords: Technology; Digital Marketing; Digital Disruption; Artificial Intelligence; Small Businesses; Facebook Marketing; Online Marketing; Online Advertisement

1. Introduction

The operational environment of business has undergone severe discontinuities and disruptions, coming from different angles, including in the digital space. In Nigeria, as in many parts of the world, the shift from traditional to digital marketing has not only changed how businesses communicate and interact with customers, but also how they operate, compete, and innovate. The role of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) has been observed to be pivotal in the economic growth of nations across the world, and the digital disruptions sweeping across many areas are expected to make their roles even more sterling.

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Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have played significant roles in the economic growth and development of nations (Arachie, Nzewi, Emejulu & Kekeocha, 2020; Umetiti, Nwafor, Arachie & Ifeme, 2025; Arachie, Dibua & Idigo, 2023). Their role is even more pronounced with digital marketing (DM) features; they can now compete more efficiently and effectively with bigger firms. Raji, Olodo, Oke, Addy, Ofodile and Oyewole (2024) opine that firms that successfully introduce DM techniques can achieve a higher audience reach, more efficient conversion rates, and better Return on Investment (ROI). DM helps to connect firms with customers instantly to offer more personalized assistance, helping them to elevate customer satisfaction and loyalty (Sharabati, Ali, Allahham, Hussein, Alheet & Mohammad, 2024).

Marketing has become crucial for businesses of all sizes (Payares, Luna, & Carbal, 2023), especially in today's globalized markets (Payares, Luna & Carbal, 2023), as it helps them make more profit, which is one of the most important goals of SMEs (Nnabuife, Okoli & Arachie, 2018). Technology adoption in marketing has disrupted the whole marketing landscape. Digital disruption refers to the radical changes brought about by digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), web analytics, social media platforms, and mobile applications, which have revolutionized marketing strategies and forced businesses to rethink their engagement models (Algumzi, 2022; Kumar & Ayedee, 2019). DM strategies on the other hand encompass internet advertising, social media marketing, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and consumer interaction across various digital platforms, all of which seek to improve brand visibility, promote customer engagement, and stimulate business growth in a cost-efficient and quantifiable way (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). It brings benefits to those who adopt it in terms of brand visibility and an increase in turnover (Sharabati, et al., 2024). Sharabati, et al. (2024) state that DM involves using digital media such as search engines, social media networks, emails, and websites to advertise goods, services, and viewpoints. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn have become crucial instruments for engaging with target audiences, establishing brand recognition, and generating sales for SMEs (Fuad, Natha, Siddiquea & Chowdhury, 2024). The adoption of digital platforms has disrupted how marketers and businesses interact with customers (Gao, Siddik, Khawar Abbas, Hamayun, Masukujjaman & Alam, 2023).

In the past, SMEs frequently face financial constraints that hinder their ability to allocate funds towards costly advertising platforms like television, radio, or print media (Al Busaidi et al., 2019). Conversely, DM platforms provide a cost-effective option that has the potential for a greater ROI. For instance, social media advertising enables firms to allocate their resources and focus on certain demographics, assuring optimal utilization of their marketing expenditure (Fuad, et al., 2024). The impact of DM on reshaping the operational and strategic structure of SMEs has received considerable recognition in academic and industry communities. Research indicates that SMEs that have active social media communities tend to have increased levels of customer engagement and advocacy (Arjang et al., 2024).

In Nigeria, the digital divide remains a significant challenge, with infrastructural gaps, high data costs, and digital illiteracy, limiting the extent to which small businesses can fully embrace digital transformation. Nonetheless, evidence shows that those that have successfully incorporated DM tactics such as SEO, influencer partnerships, email campaigns, and online advertising report higher levels of customer engagement, improved brand awareness, and revenue growth (Raji et al., 2024; Bâra et al., 2023; Okwudiri, Arachie, Elechi & Egede, 2025). These businesses are leveraging DM not just to promote their offerings but also to redefine their customer experience. However, the extent to which SMEs in Nigeria have utilized DM tools and techniques in expanding their reach and sustaining the performance of their business is still relatively understudied, hence, necessitating this study to examine how DM has caused disruption in the marketing landscape of SMEs in Nigeria. Specifically, however, this study seeks to:

- Ascertain if smes use DM tools in southeast Nigeria.
- Identify the most commonly used DM tools and techniques by smes southeast Nigeria.

2. Review of related literature

2.1. Digital Marketing

Okwudiri, Arachie, Elechi and Egede (2025) posit that digital marketing (DM) is allowing technology to play critical role in the marketing dynamics of companies. When the internet plays a role in the marketing activities of companies, then it is said to be DM. It is a form of marketing that uses various online mediums and platforms to get to the target audience. DM is the application of technology to marketing operations in order to boost customer knowledge by meeting their needs (May, Bunmi, Oyekunle, Ugbomeh & Matthew, 2025). It is done digitally, as against the traditional marketing forms. Kotler and Keller (2015) define it as a marketing approach that relies on the use of online channels and platforms such as websites, search engines, social media, and email to communicate with the target audience, promote products or services, and achieve business objectives. DM is a broad concept encompassing all marketing efforts that apply an electronic device or the internet (Payares, Luna, & Carbal, 2023). It involves promoting and advertising products,

services, or brands to a target audience through various digital channels and platforms (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Smith, 2020; Banker and Roberts, 2020).

The use of these platforms make it possible for small businesses to get to more people locally and internationally. Dumitriu et al. (2019) opine that with the internet and social media, businesses can connect with people all over the world, expanding their customer base. So, it can give businesses the opportunity to grow and reach new markets that they might not have been able to reach before (Dumitriu et al., 2019). Phumpa et al. (2022) state that digital marketing can enable businesses to reach a wider audience and connect with potential customers in real-time, which ultimately drives more traffic and increases sales.

Digital marketing provides several benefits, such as cost-efficiency, increased client involvement, expanded market reach, and greater operational efficiency (Fuad, Natha, Siddiquea& Chowdhury, 2024). Although there are difficulties such as limited digital skills and inadequate infrastructure, the potential advantages are significantly greater than the barriers. (Fuad, Natha, Siddiquea& Chowdhury, 2024). A study conducted by Emon et al., (2024), emphasizes that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that employ digital marketing for managing relationships with suppliers observe enhanced operational efficiency and cost reductions Other benefits include reduction of marketing costs, ability to target various demographics simultaneously, an easy and effective approach for providing products and services, and an easy approach for consumers to interact, enabling them to make quick and effective purchasing decisions (Low, Ullah, Shirowzhan, Sepasgozar and Lee, 2020). DM offers numerous advantages, including the ability to target specific populations or a target audience, track the effectiveness of a campaign in real time, and consequently adjust strategies accordingly (Chaffey & Chadwick, 2019; Holliman et al., 2019).

2.2. Most Commonly Used Digital Marketing Tools

Recognizing the potential of DM, organizations are progressively implementing diverse online marketing technologies worldwide. A recent study (Öztamur&Karakadılar, 2014) valued the global DM software market at 43.8 billion in 2019, with a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17.4% from 2020 to 2027, indicating substantial potential for the digital marketing sector (Algumzi, 2022). Gao et al. (2023) define digital marketing as the technique of advertising items or services through digital technologies, including the Internet, social media, search engines, email, and mobile devices.

In this modern era, DM encompasses various strategies such as content marketing, social media, SEO, email marketing, and online advertising (Ohara, 2023). Content marketing is essential in digital marketing strategies for SMEs, providing an effective means to engage target audiences, enhance brand awareness, and increase website traffic (Nnaji et al., 2024). Content is fundamental to digital marketing, facilitating audience engagement, communicating brand messages, and delivering value to consumers. In the contemporary digital environment, when customers are inundated with information, content marketing enables SMEs to penetrate the clutter and provide pertinent, quality material that connects with their target audience (Ijomah, Idemudia, Eyo-Udo, & Anjorin, 2024). Through the development of engaging and useful content, SMEs may position themselves as industry leaders, foster trust with their audience, and ultimately enhance conversions and sales (Ijomah, Idemudia, Eyo-Udo, & Anjorin, 2024).

Another form of DM is social media. With billions of users actively participating on social media platforms, SMEs may access a worldwide audience and engage with prospective clients. Social media has emerged as a fundamental element of DM strategies for SMEs, providing a cost-efficient means to access a broad audience, enhance brand recognition, and stimulate participation (Nembe et al., 2024). By constantly disseminating valuable and interesting content, SMEs may enhance brand exposure, cultivate customer loyalty, and generate traffic to their website. Given the plethora of social media sites, SMEs must select those that correspond with their target demographic and marketing goals. Facebook, with more than 2 billion active users, provides a substantial audience for small and medium-sized enterprises to engage (Nembe, 2014; Oguanobi& Joel, 2024). It is appropriate for disseminating many content kinds, including posts, videos, and photographs. Social media marketing is utilizing social media platforms to advertise products, services, information, and concepts to consumers (Dahnil et al., 2014). Businesses may employ these technologies to create content and entice social media users to disseminate it (Dahnil et al., 2014). Online advertising, SEO and email marketing are very effective DM strategies. They are used for lead generation and conversion into sales. A study indicates that SMEs employing these approaches have a significant increase in sales and revenue (Bagale et al., 2021).

Table 1 Commonly Used Tools

| Digital Marketing Tool | Common Usage Examples |
|------------------------|--|
| Social Media | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter |
| Email Marketing | Newsletters, promotional emails |
| SEO | Website optimization, keyword research |
| Content Marketing | Blog posts, video content |
| PPC Advertising | Google Ads, social media ads |

Source: (Fuad, Natha, Siddiquea& Chowdhury, 2024)

2.3. Factors Affecting Digital Marketing Adoption

Numerous factors contribute to the rising adoption of digital marketing tactics. Firstly, over five billion individuals globally possess mobile phones (66% penetration rate); more than four billion are internet users (59% penetration rate); 3.96 billion engage with social media (51% penetration rate); and the daily time spent on digital media has increased: six hours online, two hours on social media, and three hours watching television in 2020 (Ainin, Parveen, Moghavvemi, and Jaafar, 2015). These factors have prompted companies to increasingly depend on digital marketing strategies to sustain consumer relationships. (Algunzi, 2022). The corporations' expenditure on global digital advertising amounts to \$355.7 billion, anticipated to rise to \$460.6 billion by 2024 (Iddris and Ibrahim, 2015).

Although there are advantages encouraging organizations to engage in DM, other variables may affect its implementation. Socio-technological factors, including insufficient knowledge and skills, stakeholder unpreparedness, technology misalignment with the target market or consumers (such as inadequate online skills and limited internet access), and technological disorientation, were identified as influencing the adoption of digital marketing (Kumar & Pandey, 2018; Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). Likewise, business and economic elements, including financial limitations, a shortage of proficient marketing specialists, and challenges in assessing return on investments (ROI) (digitaldot, 2021), along with political and legal considerations such as online communication regulations, data protection legislation, and privacy and security policies (Kumar & Pandey, 2018), are additional factors influencing the adoption of digital marketing.

3. Methodology

This study employed a survey research design, utilizing a questionnaire to gather data from sampled respondents, hence rendering this approach the most appropriate for the research. The study's population comprised 12,301 SMEs from the five South-Eastern states of Nigeria. The sample size calculation formula by Krejcie and Morgan from 1970 was utilized to get a sample size of 372. Bowley's allocation formula was utilized to guarantee a suitable proportional distribution of the questionnaire. A structured questionnaire was employed for data collection. To guarantee that the questionnaire assessed the intended constructs, it underwent evaluations for both content and face validity. To ensure consistency, the questionnaire underwent construct validity assessment by Cronbach Alpha, yielding a coefficient of .891, indicating strong reliability. The analysis utilized 320 copies, employing descriptive statistics (mean, frequencies, and percentages).

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1. Research Question One

Do SMEs use digital marketing tools in Southeast Nigeria?

Table 1 Responses on digital marketing tools usage

| S/N | DM usage by SMEs | SA | A | UD | D | SD | Mean | Decision |
|-----|---|----|-----|----|-----|-----|------|----------|
| 1 | I use Facebook to reach more customers | 13 | 69 | - | 178 | 60 | 2.37 | Reject |
| 2 | I respond to the enquiries of my customers through WhatsApp | 40 | 101 | - | 130 | 49 | 2.85 | Reject |
| 3 | Instagram helps me to get to people who are not close to me. | 23 | 38 | 10 | 100 | 149 | 2.02 | Reject |
| 4 | I ensure that I post about my business online on a daily basis for marketing purposes | 40 | 50 | - | 119 | 111 | 2.34 | Reject |
| 5 | I use content creation to market my product | 18 | 40 | - | 80 | 182 | 1.85 | Reject |
| 6 | I pay people to help me to run online adverts about my business. | - | 32 | - | 63 | 225 | 1.50 | Reject |
| 7 | My business has an online presence. | 14 | 77 | 21 | 89 | 119 | 2.31 | Reject |
| 8 | I use TikTok to tell people about what I do | 15 | 39 | - | 50 | 216 | 1.71 | Reject |
| 9 | My business makes use of email marketing to reach and attend to our customers | 3 | 9 | - | 128 | 180 | 1.53 | Reject |
| 10 | Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a key part of my online marketing strategy. | - | 8 | - | 57 | 255 | 1.25 | Reject |
| 11 | My business has a functional website that supports customer engagement and sales | 2 | 5 | - | 40 | 273 | 1.20 | Reject |
| 12 | My business tracks and analyzes our digital marketing performance using tools such as Google Analytics. | - | 2 | - | 10 | 302 | 1.06 | Reject |
| 13 | I have a budget for digital marketing for my business. | 12 | 15 | - | 120 | 173 | 1.67 | Reject |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The responses in Table 1 reveal a generally low level of digital marketing tool usage among the sampled SMEs. The mean scores across the 13 items range between 1.06 and 2.85, with all means falling below the neutral benchmark of 3.0 on a 5-point Likert scale. Specifically, the highest mean score was recorded for the item "I respond to the enquiries of my customers through WhatsApp" (mean = 2.85), suggesting that while WhatsApp is somewhat used for communication, its adoption is still not robust. Similarly, some moderate engagement is seen in the use of Facebook (mean = 2.37), daily online posting (mean = 2.34), and having an online business presence (mean = 2.31). However, most of the responses indicate a very limited use of key digital marketing techniques. For instance, content creation as a marketing tool (mean = 1.85), paid online adverts (mean = 1.50), use of TikTok (mean = 1.71), email marketing (mean = 1.53), and search engine optimization (SEO) (mean = 1.25) are barely utilized. The least adopted tools are website usage for engagement (mean = 1.20), digital marketing performance tracking (mean = 1.06), and budgeting for digital marketing (mean = 1.67). These findings reflect a substantial gap in digital marketing adoption among SMEs in the studied region, pointing to a critical need for awareness creation, capacity building, and digital skill enhancement.

4.2. Research Question Two

What are the most commonly used digital marketing tools and techniques by SMEs

Table 2 shows the distribution of responses on common digital marketing tools used by SMEs in the studied area. The responses further reinforce the limited adoption of digital marketing practices. All items recorded mean scores well below the acceptance threshold of 1.5, confirming low engagement across the board. Among the tools, WhatsApp had the highest mean (1.47), indicating it is the relatively most used tool by SMEs, followed by Instagram (mean = 1.32) and Facebook (mean = 1.25). Tools like TikTok (mean = 1.18), content marketing (mean = 1.11), and email marketing (mean = 1.03) are even less used. Search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing, affiliate marketing, influencer marketing, and web analytics all scored extremely low, with means ranging between 1.00 and 1.04, indicating near-zero usage. These results suggest that SMEs in the region have yet to fully explore or benefit from the diverse range of digital marketing tools available. The overall rejection across all items in both tables highlights the underutilization of digital

channels by SMEs, which may hinder their market reach, customer engagement, and long-term performance in a digitally driven economy.

Table 2 Responses on common digital marketing tools used

| S/N | Most commonly used digital marketing tools and techniques by SMEs | Yes (%) | No (%) | Mean | Decision |
|-----|---|----------|-----------|------|----------|
| 1 | Facebook | 80 (25) | 240 (75) | 1.25 | Reject |
| 2 | TikTok | 59 (18) | 261 (82) | 1.18 | Reject |
| 3 | Instagram | 102 (32) | 218 (68) | 1.32 | Reject |
| 4 | WhatsApp | 150 (47) | 170 (53) | 1.47 | Reject |
| 5 | X | 21(7) | 299 (93) | 1.07 | Reject |
| 6 | LinkedIn | 15 (5) | 305 (95) | 1.05 | Reject |
| 7 | Email Marketing | 10 (3) | 310 (97) | 1.03 | Reject |
| 8 | Content Marketing | 35 (11) | 285 (89) | 1.11 | Reject |
| 9 | Search Engine Optimization (SEO) | 5 (2) | 315 (98) | 1.02 | Reject |
| 10 | Search Engine Marketing | - | 320 (100) | 1.00 | Reject |
| 11 | Affiliate Marketing | 12 (4) | 308 (96) | 1.04 | Reject |
| 12 | Influencer Marketing | 10 (3) | 310 (97) | 1.03 | Reject |
| 13 | Web Analytics and Data-Driven Marketing | - | 320 (100) | 1.00 | Reject |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the degree of adoption of digital marketing tools and strategies by small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in South-Eastern Nigeria, as well as to identify the most prevalent among them. The results indicate a predominantly low degree of acceptance and use of digital marketing platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, SEO, email marketing, and web analytics. Despite the revolutionary potential of digital technology to enhance market reach, boost customer engagement, and promote sustainable business performance, SMEs in the region remain predominantly disengaged from these tools. This underutilization may be ascribed to variables including insufficient digital literacy, financial limitations, absence of strategic understanding, and infrastructural obstacles. The findings suggest that numerous SMEs have not completely capitalized on the potential presented by digital disruption in the marketing arena. As global markets become further digitized, neglecting digital marketing may render these enterprises competitively disadvantaged.

Recommendations

In light of the findings that indicate low adoption and usage of digital marketing tools among SMEs in South-Eastern Nigeria, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance their digital marketing engagement and improve sustainable performance:

- **Digital Literacy Training:** Government agencies, business support organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) ought to conduct regular training on digital literacy and marketing for SME proprietors. This will facilitate the closing of the knowledge gap and furnish them with the requisite skills to utilize tools such as SEO, email marketing, web analytics, and social media proficiently.
- **Access to Affordable Technology:** Relevant stakeholders must enhance access to cheap internet services, digital infrastructure, and smart devices, particularly in underdeveloped areas, to promote digital inclusion.
- **Financial Support and Incentives:** Financial institutions and development partners ought to formulate loan packages or grants explicitly aimed at facilitating digital transformation for SMEs, encompassing financing for website construction, online advertising, and digital tools.

- **Strategic Partnerships:** SMEs are urged to partner with digital marketing agencies or consultants to create and oversee tailored digital marketing strategies that correspond with their business objectives and target demographic.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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