DEGREE PROJECT

The Effect of Digital Marketing on SMEs

A case study of Swedish And Nigerian companies

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My primary motivation to this study was geared towards gaining crucial insights on the opportunities and impacts of digital marketing on SMEs and also provides a platform for future researchers to conduct similar investigations.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the value and influence of digital marketing on the competitive participation of small and medium-sized establishments in the business environment. The research would further envisage weather digital marketing can have a substantial effect on the consistent growth and success of SMEs, improve brand recognition, and strengthen customer relationships. This concept has not been previously researched in depth, although there's been related study on social media as it impacts innovation and creativity on SMEs, which indicates that social media can be a very positive strategy on the companies that operate within the context of small and medium-scale Enterprise.

This study applies a qualitative research approach which involved five (5) companies which operate as SMEs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, to help provide the primary data, where respondents to the best of their abilities, provided important information that help conduct this study. Secondary data/information relevant to the study was also gathered through peer-reviewed articles, journals and websites.

The study concludes with the view that digital marketing is identified as creative and efficient method of acquiring, growing and maintaining customer relationships. Online platforms such as websites, industry-specific outlets and forums, have been identified to be the most beneficial for SMEs. It further recommends that newly established and existing SMEs stand to hugely benefit by adopting digital marketing strategy in creating brand awareness, and building brand trust amongst customers. Ironically, some SMEs tend to undermine the value of implementing digital marketing strategies, especially at the infant stage of their business establishment. This further motivates the need to emphasise the relevance of various digital tools in this study.

The findings in this study would help SMEs business owners and management consider digital marketing strategies as an important platform to project their brands. Recommendations for further studies are related but perhaps more detailed within the context of Sweden and Nigeria.

Keyword: SMEs, digital marketing, brand awareness, building trust, consumer awareness etc.

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1. INTRODUCTION

.In recent times, firms of different classification in virtually all industrial sectors are constantly enriching their domain with digital tools (Bokša, Šaroch & Bokšová, 2020). Digitalization is perceived to be a major topic in all aspects of the society, with a key note on the effects it poses on political, economic and social elements (Isensee, Teuteberg, Griese & Topi, 2020). According to Li, Su, Zhang, and (Mao,2017). The introduction of the internet since the 1960s has propelled many firms to network via multiple computers, reaching out to each for sole purposes of expansion and growth. In this regard, virtually all management domains and employees in both large and medium firms, now access the computers via the internet to constantly create awareness.

A brand without an effective digital marketing strategy is like a car without tires. Its efficiency and essence is bound to be limited. The turn of the century experienced lots of business brands ditch the Analog medium of conducting business and embrace diverse digital tools, to solidify their presence in the business environment and project their brands with a view of increasing their customer base, making a significant impact on small and medium-sized companies and large companies Lee et al., (2011). The application of digital tools on business activities have been found to improve business competitiveness and opportunity base for SMEs to compete on closer terms with larger organisations (Chapman et al., 2000).Bearing special significance on the projection of business activities through effective digital marketing strategies with the most prevalent method of marketing in the Morden technological era (Kamal,2016). The purpose is not only to sell products and services, but also to build relationships with customers. A perquisite for SMEs to explore the digital space vial sustainable digital marketing practices which help access and communicate to a wider range of customers for a better productive output (Mazzarol., 2015)

Digital marketing is at the forefront of every marketing campaign in every business. Organizations have continued to priorities the need to boost their brand productivity, increase customer base and realise more turnover applying effective digital marketing strategies (Kamal, 2016). Research into SMEs and entrepreneurship has grown immensely at some point of the last decade and studies may have greatly increased focus in the various economy of the world. Digital platforms provide an excellent ability to grow a SMEs brand (Castells, 2010). A massive majority of corporations compete in various parts of the world as SMEs, even though the performance level of SMEs varies, they play a significant role in the overall performance of the whole economy, despite the challenge of sustained performance on the long term (Ates et al., 2013).

Digital marketing for SMEs need to align with the target audience marketing plans and strategies in adhering to evolving complexity customer behaviour. According to (Dwivedi et al.,2020). Development of corporate identity in modern times is an important strategic requirement for SMEs to grow their own brand marketing methods and processes (Mingione & Abrarr, 2020). Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises operate in a complex and unpredictable business environment, faced with the constant challenge of competing and providing value to customers, against established business organisations due to their size and economic capacity (Lee et al., 2011). SMEs Brand building and projection through digital channels involves the application of digital marketing strategies, ensuring a move from traditional marketing methods Eggers et al., (2020). There is a drastic need for SMEs to apply social networks, online advertising campaigns and different virtual approaches to boost their companies' developmental growth, which is in cognisance with adapting to new and innovative ways to improve and adapt to a rapid transformational growth Mohsen et al., (2020). Business has proven to be essential to economic growth and in the last two decades SMEs are becoming more important around the world (Mingione & Abratt., 2020). It becomes pertinent for governments and industry players around the world to encourage the growth of SMEs for a sustainable impact in the economy, in doing so maintain a competitive advantage. Glaser et al., (2010)

It is crucial for organisations to position their brand in a manner that ensures continued growth and maintain competitive advantage in the market, thus not creating an avenue for its competitors to grow more to gain a massive edge in the market. SMEs must increase or maintain a healthy sales and profit level to ensure their survival. Claver et al., (2006) management literature provides a platform for entrepreneurs to enhance their SMEs brand value and bolding through the digital space, as a guaranteed way of increasing sales, creating new customers and ensuring customer retention. Bianchi & Bivona, (2002). This is in line with governmental efforts, which aim at investing in solid internet infrastructure, as a way of encouraging SMEs' digital business operations Beckinsale & Levy, (2004). SMEs have been generally viewed as an integral part of significant economic growth and development both on a national and international pedestal (Smallbone & Wyer, 2000)

In this part, the author will present the research problem, the importance of the research on the topic as well as the research gap. Furthermore, a purpose statement is given as well as the research question

1.1 PROBLEM DISCUSSION

Over the years, numerous SMEs strive to achieve consistent digital growth with new innovative concepts and ideas with the intent of establishing their presence in the corporate world. Some have managed to make significant impact; unfortunately, most of them have had a hard time establishing themselves. Evidence shows that only 51% of newly established SMEs survive over the first 5 years window. (SAB Office of Advocacy, 2012, Ripsas, S., et. al., 2018). It becomes very challenging for SMEs to compete with well existing profitable companies marketing strategy. According to (Montgomery, 2018). 17% of failed SMEs companies link their failure to lack of comprehensive digital marketing strategy leading to poor marketing performance.

Small and medium Enterprises (SMEs) are important to maintaining a strong economy. However, maintaining a long-term presence and viability presents a big challenge (Ates et al.,2013) multi dimensional transformation brought about what was also known as the information network society (Castells, 2010). The digital economy impact on SMEs performance and the role they play in the economy. SMEs are not just a small, medium corporate vision, but depend on their operational model on certain characteristics which come within the context of economic, cultural and political support. They differ from larger firms by operational and market structure this has a direct impact on the capital and finance as well as the number of customers they can attract to their brand (Hausman, 2005).

Extensive literature on the significance and opportunities presented by digitalization, with specific attention on brand building and communication in the business environment, shows limited research on organisational evolution and strategy for digital marketing. Most publications, books and related journals on brand digitalization strategy deal with this issue largely on a tactical level. Hence, the need to grow SMEs brand digitally to attract patronage, through quality value offer and increase sales for better profit returns, becomes paramount. (Fridel,2004).

Research suggests that corporate digitalization and innovation with effective marketing practices are important in maintaining the long-term performance of SMEs. Innovation and transmission into the digital space, emphasised as a prerequisite to building a brand, as such experience improves brand awareness and business performance according to (Rogers, 2016). Digital platforms seek to consistently project brand business to heavily impact consumer buying behaviour and brand loyalty. (Acker et al., 2015). With proper execution of digital marketing strategies, consistent growth can be achieved. This process involves building effective interactions with their target customers by

regularly updating their activities and events, creating their own brand image through digital networking, stimulating quality partnerships with members from the online community. Hajili et al., (2017). SMEs have growth potential and opportunities to add value to customers through creative products and services with great value proposition, delivered on the digital network, making it the ultimate marketing platform in this scenario (Montgomery, 2018)

1.2 RESEARCH GAP

According to the survey, SME Annual Report 2016/2017 (International SMEs Development Council, 2018), adapting to digitalization in the marketing operations of their brand face different challenges than large or established companies (Schroder, 2015). However, few studies have examined their strategies in detail; this reveals a research gap in this regard. Understanding digital transformation of SMEs with the aid of effective digital marketing strategies in a competitive business environment, presents an opportunity for critical evaluation and analysis in this study. Existing literature on brand growth with respect to effective digital marketing strategies shows that previous research has focused primarily on adopted digital marketing strategies related to larger companies Matt et al., (2015). Therefore it would be beneficial to adopt recent research on digital media for brand projections and promotion, applying digitalized tools as a digital marketing and brand awareness strategy, practiced within the context of SMEs.

Based on the above observation, it is clear that there is a substantial information gap in existing literature on digital marketing process for SMEs, in relation to strategic online marketing models for expanding the business activities of SMEs digitally (Downes & Nunes, 2013). Evidence shows numerous claims regarding the impact of digital media on brand marketing for SMEs is crucial as digital marketing is very significant to building the brand name and image for such level of business (Chaffey,2020). Empirical studies however, show the role played by the internet in establishing growth strategies for SMEs. Therefore, this study strives to contribute to research by exploring the dynamics of digital marketing for SMEs brand growth through effective media marketing, suited to the brand product and services.

1.3 PURPOSE/ AIM

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and analyse the role digitalization play in growing SMEs' companies by adopting digital marketing strategies. Creating the necessary brand awareness is significant to gaining more customers as well as ensuring customer retention, to gain a competitive edge in the market. This study also aims to investigate the relevance and impact of digital marketing tools; such as social media, emails viral marketing etc on successful establishment of SMEs business. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the relationship between SMEs Companies and digital marketing, by identifying important aspects in the digital marketing approach and ways to incorporate them in small and medium-scale enterprises from a marketing perspective.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ 1*what effect does digital marketing have on small and medium scale- enterprises, in respect to brand awareness, brand trust and customer engagement?*

RQ 2 how does digital marketing affect the growth of small and medium scale-enterprises?

The questions in this study cover three key factors: brand awareness, brand trust and customer engagement which are all significant to growing an SMEs. It also examines the impact of digital marketing on such factors

1.5 DELIMITATIONS

This study is limited to the effects of digital marketing in the context of brand awareness, brand trust and customer engagement, which are integral to a sustainable growth of SMEs. The study is restricted to digital online marketing and brand building, with special focus on Swedish and Nigerian companies.

1.6 OUTLINE OF THESIS

The report is divided into five chapters; firstly, theories related to literary studies would be discussed in a theoretical context. The second segment is the methodology which outlines the survey approach, survey design, and data acquisition process and data analysis. Furthermore, the study deals with the empirical evidence in the third part of the report and the data would be analyzed in the fourth chapter to compliment the literature theories that has been previously discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn from reviews and results embarked upon to complete the report, which includes further recommendations for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter emphasises the relevant literatures drawn from studies carried out previously. Articles, journals and books on SMEs, digital marketing strategies, brand digitization building etc are references considered for the literature analysis. This chapter aims to show light on the effects of digital marketing in growth of SMEs in context of brand awareness, building brand trust and consumer awareness.

2.1 SMEs:

The term SMEs is used more and more often, but is often quite unclear Savey, et al., (2020). Scholars interpret this term differently (Mazzarol, 2015). With varieties of companies ranging from local small business to medium tech companies now identify as small and medium scale-enterprises, therefore bringing more prominence to this term (COOK. S.,2020). Small and medium scale-enterprise by definition could be addressed as an entrepreneurial company established by one or more founders for the sole purpose of operating business activities that is designed to manufacture and sell innovative or valuable products and services to target customers, with employees less than 250, even as the figure differs across countries LaariSalmela, et al., (2017) SMEs could be classified as industries that have been in business operations for less than 10 years according to a comprehensive literature analysis by (Gruber, 2004). The first and most frequently attribute of SMEs could be referred to as novelty, as they more than often not need to evolve from a level of naivety of total awareness about the business environment they compete in. Secondly, the size of SMEs is often used in identifying them. And the third feature is the variability of the environment, which is reflected in the instability of gaining and retaining customers and as well realizing significant profit percentage (Ergeer & Sigfridsson, 2018). Therefore SMEs can be defined as small and medium-scaled enterprises created to provide valuable products and services with limited capital. Small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) are important for maintaining a strong economic growth Ates et al.,(2013). They are not just smaller version of large firms, but also have characteristics that they depend on within the context of specific economic, cultural and political construct (Castells, 2010). Their governance structure is largely defined by ownership, staff strength and finance which are usually dependent on a relatively small size of customer and limited market operations. Hudson et al., & Hausman. (2005)

Scholars are of the opinion that adopting relevant marketing digitalization models and innovations are key important elements in building and sustain a good SMEs performance on the long run. There is a pertinent need for SMEs to create value through innovation to improve their performance in real-life changing business environment. Adopting the right digital marketing strategy boosts business attraction especially to prospective customers and gives them a competing presence against established or larger firms (Davila, 2012).

Small and medium scale enterprises should ensure to strategically execute their brand marketing strategies. Using their limited resources in a creative and unorthodox manner to create value and achieve an impactful momentum (Haereid & Indregard,2015) it is crucial for SMEs to emphasize the economic aspect of marketing on online platforms such as social media marketing, email as well as visualizing their concepts and value proposition to aid customer attraction and patronage. (Stokes, 2000).

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF FEATURES: LARGE FIRMS VS. SMES

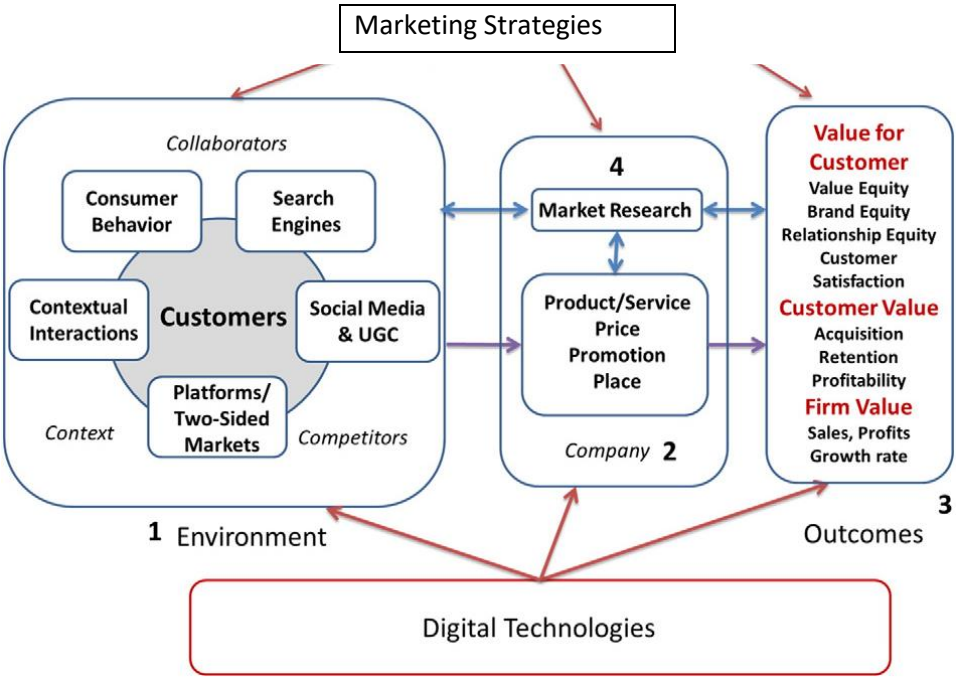
LARGE FIRMS	SMES
Large firm size	Small scale firms
Ample resources (capital, equity, credit)	Limited resources (internal findings)
Experience, portfolio and specialization Higher market share	Limited experience/no specialization. Small market share
Brand identify	No brand identity or very limited
Higher net income growth, lower cost/high efficiency	Lower net income and no economy of scale
Very complex in structure and management	Flexibility and agility due to no complex structures.
Slower decision making and bureaucratic	Faster decision making
Difficulty to respond to changing external environment	Flexibility and agility due to no complex structures
Resistance to change	Entrepreneurial drive, motivation, risks-seeking behaviour and perseverance
Complex process to manage customer relations	Proximity to customer relations
Liability of being too big	Liability of smallness and newness
Complicated production lines/processes	Non complicated production and absorption of demands
Deployment of advanced ICTs to manage business processes	Limited deployment of ICTs, but flexibility of adaption
Legitimacy, social ties and networks	No or limited legitimacy and acceptance, no social ties and limited net works.

2.2 DIGITAL MARKETING

With the passage of time, the term "Digital Marketing" was motivated by a specific term relating to marketing of products and services using digital platforms. In general terms, it could be explained or described s the process of integrating digital technology for business operations to attract customers interest, support brand maintenance and growth, ensure customer retention and significantly improve sales, in the opinion of (Kanan & Li, 2017). Hence it can be described as an agile Technology led framework by which organizations work together with consumer and other stakeholders to develop, generate and retain value of the brand product and services rendered.

Digital technologies in all manners have the potential to evolve above all manner of traditional media channels and marketing communication, in the process ensure the marketing mix. The use of digital media in the process of carrying out marketing practices has seen the application of digital tools such as emails, mobile marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per click (PPC), viral

marketing and social media (Scharl, Dickinger & Murphy, 2005). Technological tools help to improve interaction between customers and service providers. The consumer brand relationship enjoys a sustainable growth to creating brand awareness and generating customer interest Aaker, Benet-(Martinez & Garolera, 2001)



The framework for research in digital marketing

Source: Kannan and Li, 2017. Figure 1

The above structure describes a central communication perspective in the marketing process and techniques where new and improved digital technologies continue to impact the structure and mode of carrying out business operations. It involves not only identified components, but also clear configurations between the established components. The system also emphasised the focus on clarifying the role digital media plays that may affect the inside and outside of an organization, as they are set-up to improve customer growth and perceived value of the organization.

The use of digital media platforms in marketing helps in accelerating and enables more interaction with customers to get feedback that could be beneficial when making projections for expanding the target market. This analysis further gives an insight into the different types of digital marketing that could be practiced for effective brand performance:

Interactive marketing

Interactive marketing is a way to engage with customers through dynamic content like hierarchical information, personalized content, visual storytelling, bidirectional etc. a primary goal of interactive marketing is to make a brand content relevant and engaging with customers. Interactive marketing

relies on customers expressing their preferences so that marketers can create more relevant marketing messages. Unlike past out- band marketing, interactive marketing creates an interactive dialogue between a company and its customer Hajli et al., (2017). Advertising is a process that follows customers rather than directing them. Whenever customers are asked to provide feedback, express their personal preferences, or provide demographic information that serves as a guide for marketers when making brand adverts (Montgomery, 2018). Interactive marketing can take many forms, but search engine marketing is one of the most common. When a customer enters a search engine, the ad is served on the search term. For instance when you search for shampoo, you may see ads for hair care products.

Personalised content

Personalized content uses advanced technology to collect data about customers geographical, demographic and lifecycle information. The benefit of a personalised content includes applying a system that creates profiles for various customers and as well can be adopted in targeting certain individuals to create a personalised, relatable and meaningful experience, as it motivates customers to interact more with the brand content by sharing their experience or feeling about the brand with others which can be a massive factor in boosting a brands marketing strategy and increasing sales (Galetto, 2016)

Layered Information

Layered information is adopted when the purpose of the advertisement is to educate customer about the brand name, product or services. This method provides detailed information about certain business activities. It is crucial to deliver detailed information through this process viewed as small increments with the ability to tell the brand mission and vision applying small amount of information delivered in a quick easy to read snippets that subsequently reveals more information to customers who might be interested. Layered information could be structured along a two –way interactive process, using tools such as videos and puzzles which provide a more powerful experience to customers (Galetto, 2016)

Digital marketing and sales

Several research and reviews have shown a significant relationship between digital marketing and sales. Digital marketing ensures new customers are been reached and provided requisite personalized communication to the customers, therefore increasing awareness and sales Jain, (2014, Jagongo & Kinyua, 2016). Small and medium –Enterprises could adopt digital marketing platforms such as social media, emails and the very latest social technologies which are relatively cost effective and ensure an easy access to potential customers in creating product awareness (Kinyua, 2016). Marketing executives should make a conscious effort to engage target audience by visually portraying the brands product and services as the intent is to turn your audience or viewers into buyers. Digital selling plays a crucial role for driving revenue. A well designed digital selling process is structures around maximizing the opportunities and benefits provided by digital tools.

Measurement of digital marketing effectiveness

A significant observation on the increased measure digital marketing plays on the business landscape dynamics has increased recently . Digital marketing tools can be applied in measuring business success through various metrics that are obtained by entrepreneurs. (Gregorio, 2016). The method used to measure digital marketing effectiveness could be through analytics which is accustomed in most digital marketing devices (Fernaandez & Bharathi, 2015). Information derived from sourced data analytics assists businesses with making a precise driven future decision, by providing the required messages to customers at the right time, and for the right value. There has been an increase in intuition-driven marketing, indicating a significant relationship between big data analytics and digital marketing effectiveness.

Data presence and insights complements digital platforms, therefore offer markets a great opportunity to carry out inference on the applied data and make the right decisions (Jain, 2014). SMEs would continuously learn how to improve their performance through accurate measurement performance appraisal for each campaigns or advert done on brand product and services. (Gregorio, 2016). It is very helpful from a business perspective to connect with the target audience with the aid of touch point and message broadcast.

2.3 DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

Digital marketing strategies are geared towards providing the necessary support needed for businesses to achieve specific goals through carefully selected marketing channels such as paid media, earned media, and owned media respectively. Running a digital marketing campaign without a strategy is like exploring a new city without G.P.S. many wrong turns can lead to both frustration and unnecessarily long walks to reach a desired destination. This analogy could be applied in situations where marketers approach digital marketing without necessarily mapping out a well defined strategy to promote a brand on the digital space. Increased success in technology that integrates organizations into marketing strategies emphasizes the need for an in-depth analysis of digital marketing strategies (Gibson, 2018). Strategic changes to customer-oriented marketing campaigns provides an opportunity for companies to participate in a new era of marketing strategies, with the aid of relevant digital tools in order to meet key marketing expectations. (Gibson, 2018). It has become pertinent than ever for small and medium scale enterprises to patronize specific digital marketing tools for utmost performance and cost efficiency. (Partrutiu Baltes, 2016).

2.3.1 KEY FACTORS

Some of the applicable forms of digital marketing include:

Website

Internet usage and application has increased tremendously in the past decades as websites have become a dependable too for public communication, extensively serving both private and corporate needs. Websites are basically structured to intensify the business-to-customer interactions, as a way of engaging brand promotions which is quite synonymous to the objective of digital marketing.

(Guinaliu, & Gurrea, 2006). Simply put, websites are created by organizations to deliver information in form of advertisement and enlightenment to existing and prospective customers. It influences customer's perceptions of certain brands or products they might be interested in. (Kolesar & Galbraith, 200).

Pay-per-click

Pay-per-click (PPC) Advertising services

Source: marketingguru.io,2019 figure 2

As indicated in the diagram above, pay-per-click ads on the internet are provided by search engines and social media to help customers get access to certain brands as well as make reasonable payment in the process. This service is essential to calculating the number of people who can click on an ad and as well target specific persons based on demographics or locations. (Barone, 2020). Basically this is a way to ensure customers buy their way to visiting a company's site rather than trying to acquire the visit organically. This allows advertisers to bid on search engine sponsored link and ad placements when someone searches for keywords that are relevant to their business offering.

Content Marketing

(Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009), believes content form of digital marketing applies a format that includes engaging various customers by creating and sharing of content. These specific contents are usually disseminated on blogs, videos, E-Books and info graphics. Increase of traffic on the company's website to aid brand building is basically responsible for adopting this digital marketing strategy.

Email Marketing

Email marketing is a powerful marketing channel, a form of direct digital marketing that uses email to promote a company's product and services. Integrating with the marketing automation efforts, it helps customers aware of the latest items and offers. It can also play an important role in the adopted marketing strategy when it comes to lead generation, brand awareness; relationship

building or retaining customer across different types of marketing process (Adikesavan, 2014).Email marketing can improve the relationship between the organization and the customers and promote the reputation of the business and aid customer loyalty

Social Media Marketing

Social Media

Social media is an interactive technology that enables the generation or sharing of relevant information, opinions, career goals and other forms of personal expression through virtual networks and online communities. Social media marketing uses online social media tools to create products, services, information and ideas for consumers Dahnil, et al., (2014). These tools empower the organization create lots of information and foster collaboration between social media users who are already existing or prospective customers to a particular brand. It is estimated that there are about 3.6 billion social media users' worldwide (number of social media users' worldwide (statista, 2020)

A prime on social media marketing

Source: Heather Schmitt, July 17, 2021 figure 3

Affiliate Marketing

Affiliate marketing is a partnership programme that allows individuals to become affiliates and reward their successful referrals to the business. Affiliate marketing programs depend on what is considered a conversation. This may be in form of a visit, purchase, or registration to a website or page. Affiliate is typically provided with a commission system that includes performance levels based on conversations. Affiliate marketing is an inexpensive way for business to increase brand awareness and customer base (Brown, 2009). It becomes easy to attract customer's attention by engaging in

unique marketing activities. Affiliates in most cases take the risk of marketing brand products and in the process receive commission on each product (Duffy, 2005).

Viral Marketing

Marketing is considered viral when it comes to being shared by the general public, not just the target audience. Once this is done, the message will appear in almost every social media feed. (Adamic & Huberman, 2007). Viral marketing aims to get people to share their products using existing social networks with family and friends. Some products and services are easy to advertise via viral marketing as they could be observed or communicated as part of a fast digital marketing strategy (Jurvetson, 2000). There are numerous opportunities attached to viral marketing as it gives effectiveness and visibility to a brand product. Customers easily make recommendations for others to make patronage especially when the value proposition matches their expectations (Huberman, 2007).

Blogs

A blog is a website that contains written content about a topic. Most blogs allow readers the opportunity to comment on blog posts. Blogs offer many benefits to help build up an effective digital marketing strategy. With the presence of search engine marketing tools like goggle and yahoo, brand communication becomes easily structured along a direct two-way communication pattern, whereby a direct conversation between the brand representatives and customer can be achieved. (Wright, 2006). Blogging allows bloggers to tell many stories about your brand, which creates a competitive differentiation, therefore helping the company in setting up a competitive edge (Jain R., 2014)

Some other forms of digital marketing include:

- E-Commerce Marketing
- Mobile Commerce Marketing
- SMS Advertisement
- Video Marketing

2.3.2 IMPLEMENTATION

Online platforms and other digital media have transformed marketing. Implementing digital marketing strategies for organizations who are motivated to maximise the vast potentials availed by digital platforms seek the need to expand the business reach and consistently build capacity. (Chaffey D., 2006). Implementation of digital marketing is essential for SMEs , especially when the adopted strategies are in line with massive proportion of vulnerable internal business characteristic, such as constraint in financial capacity and limited human resources , naturally compels them to embrace digital platforms and explore how it adds value to their business operations Boyd, and (Ellison, N., 2007).it is recommended for SMEs to engage customers by communicating brand products and services in simple and transparent user friendly approach to aid attraction to their brand. Digital marketing exudes interaction and reaction, hence becomes pertinent for marketing managers to adopt marketing strategies that consistently promotes their brand in a positive light.

(Teixeira,2018). There are basic rules when properly applied ensure owners-managers can be assured of reaping positive benefits on investments. Otero et al., (2014) SMEs may struggle to implement Web 2.0 technology, as a result may lead to competitive disadvantage Kim et al., (2014) therefore becomes crucial to adopt and apply relevant digital marketing strategies for consistent organizational growth.

2.4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIGITAL MARKETING AND SMES

Further development and application of digital technologies presents a great incentive, yet typically challenging and tricky for Small and Medium Enterprises (Mazzarol, 2015). Certain potentials which indicate the commitment of SMEs leveraging on emerging digital technologies that by history have been dominated by larger firms proves a change in the dynamics, therefore embracing the prospect of testing their potential in the international market and other competitive business environment they compete in (Mele, 2013). SMEs obviously have constraint of limited resource, which requires them to be creative when investing in or applying marketing strategies with the sole intent of reaching out or projecting their brand to a wider consumer group. (Mazzarol, 2015). At this point the application of an effective digital marketing strategy, becomes inevitable to their continued business growth as its significantly cheaper than the conventional marketing. Marketing contents on digital platforms can be very effective and cost efficient for SMEs when properly applied (Brown, 2009). Established digital marketing platforms such as viral marketing, social media, blogs, etc are propelling tools when properly applied can connect with a wide range of audience., ensuring new target interest or audience as well as establishing viable relationships with customers and relevant stakeholders (Barone, 2020). Digital marketing ensures proper engagement with prospective customers and perceived investors using different platforms. Evidence which shows the benefit of SMEs adopting the digital marketing business strategy in respect to HMA (2018) is highlighted below:

- Develop brand awareness
- Boost their visibility
- Increase sales
- Increase online conversation rate
- Reduce their marketing budget
- Improve customer engagement
- Influence purchasing decisions
- Generate leads
- Track their return on investment

2.5 EFFECTS OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN SMES

2.5.1 Growth of company

Digital marketing provides companies who fall under the SMEs business category with a very strong growth outlook. (Insight success, 2020). Digital marketing strategies enable SMEs to powerfully

portrait and promote their brand products and services using relevant online medium, which helps in achieving a sustainable amount of success (Chaffey, 2020).Haven established as the most important way to access the wider audience by showcasing their brand products and services in an appropriate manner. (Insight success, 2020). Digital marketing is the essence and core of small and medium –sized enterprises growth and a realistic way to manage expenses without necessarily limiting product and service exposure (Chaffey, 2020)

The Strategic awareness generation and adequate integration of effective digital marketing strategies and patterns have the potential to guarantee the competitive, comprehensive and profitable accomplishments of SMEs companies. (Insight success, 2020). A lot of emphasis should be on the conversation rate between the company and customers. Such is critical to evaluating certain marketing performance, hence entrepreneurs implore digital marketing tools to achieve high conversation rate (Jain, 2014) digital marketing strategy ensures new customer acquisition, business knowledge expansion and improved sales, contributing to the overall outlook of the business objectives (Jangongo & Kinyua 2016)

2.5.2 Brand awareness

Brands are more than labels and icons. They reflect consumer expectations, feelings about the brand products and services. Consequently, the brand really lives in the minds of people (Kotler et al., 2013). Therefore, a good and profitable brand has a high market reliability, which indicates that consumers have a comparative influential impact on the brand (Keller, 2003).brand awareness depends on the power of the product links. A memory trace that represents the ability of a customer to remember and identify a brand under various circumstances is quite significant. The most important marketing goal is to create brand awareness (Bija & Balas, 2014)

Digital marketing is very important for rand awareness. Digital marketing enabled by digital technology raises awareness through innovation, consumer experience and consumer connections. (Kannan & Li 2007). Validating the significance for creating a strong online presence, through integrating the required network and marketing deployments by organizations. (Teixeira et al., 2018). Digital marketing is known for its revolutionary impact on business and subsequent significant impact on brand consumers. It becomes pertinent for organizations to facilitate consumer connections at all times. Makrides, A., et al., (2020). Digital marketing platforms like social media helps SMEs increase brand value through networking, interactions and community development. Karamian et al., (2015). Through this process, brand names can have significant impact on customers according to (Bhati & Verm, 2018). Branding attempts need to be balanced with developing a framework for designing and implementing technological and digital brand presence. SMEs can use digital marketing to build relationships with existing buyers, therefore influencing their personal view of the brand by sharing their own perceptions in communicating with potential customers. (Krishnapabha & Tatunika, 2020)

2.5.3 Building trust

It is essential that SMEs build trust among their customers to retain them with their brand Ruyter et al., (2001). When buying the brand, trust is an essential element, such is the case in practice consumption. It creates a long term impression in the minds of the customer. Liu et al., (2012) repeating buying behaviour can be achieved when consumer have trust in a brand, therefore building consumer trust is crucial to the sustainability of SMEs (Enehasse & Saglam, 2020).

Brand trust is strongly influenced by digitalized communication channels on purchase decisions. (Schivinski & Dabrowski 2016). Digital marketing ensures SMEs keep in regular contact with customers, in the process fostering good relationships Akhtar et al., (2016), is of the opinion that adoption of digital marketing strategies enables SMEs to realize significant benefits and promote competitiveness and increase their investment in visibility through web-based networking channels.

Consumers can now track business activities on new digital platforms and provide feedback. This two-way interaction process goes a long way in building consumer trust in a brand. SMEs must also respect security and privacy measures to strengthen consumer confidence in the brand. According to (Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2006) cited in (Kannan and Li, 2007), one of the key findings is that consumers trusted more in the nature of the web with the safety and security of privacy and personalization in their assumed personal value.

2.5.4 Customer engagement

Businesses and researchers continually show understanding on the value of providing quality customer service and committed customer network. Optimizing customer's satisfaction and engagement are top priorities of marketers Grewal et al., (2017). Customer commitment requires the strength of the individual's presence and concern for corporate services. Vivek et al., (2012) there are many topics related to consumer interaction, such as interpersonal links between the companies its customers, customer service and shared consumer perception relating to digital marketing practices Raeisi & Lingjie (2017).

Digital marketing is a transformative platform that enables a complete customer experience from product information to assisting consumers. Applying a wide range of knowledge, customer engagement, combined with structured resources, to evaluate consumer preference and behaviour, therefore enabling a means to identify new patterns, envision new possibilities and get predictions for the future. (Insight success, 2020). Digital marketing engages customers and encourages them to interact with the brand through digital channels Yasmin et al., (2015).

2.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of the concept discussed in the literature review is to validate the objective of carrying out the report, which is largely based on the possibilities of exploring digital marketing strategies and resources critical to a sustainable growth of SMEs and ensure health competition with larger companies in the market space. A well incorporated digital marketing strategies help grow business by creating the needed awareness to attract new customers and retain existing ones (Chaffey, 2020).numerous digital platforms are being set- out to ensure businesses (SMEs) are able to build

and keep contact with customers on a regular bases, receive feedback that helps in making required improvement in their product or service delivery to respective customers Teixeira et., al (2018) therefore creating a visible online brand with good value proposition and easily influence the customer buying behaviour (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). The researcher consulted a few theories that could be relevant to the study; however would emphasis the theory of consumer engagement as a connecting factor to justify the need for SMEs to engage in digital marketing of their brands, to create the needed awareness, for effective customer engagement and brand association.

2.6.1 THEORY OF CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

According to Van Doorn et al., (2010), consumer engagement is defined as the behavioural interaction of a customer with a particular brand or company, beyond purchase that motivates customers association and loyalty in their purchasing journey. The basis of consumer engagement is widely used in industry and businesses by managers and consultants around the world Gambetti, (Graffigina & Biraghi, 2012). When a company succeeds in adapting and facilitating an innovative approach while building long-term relationships with its customers, it is called consumer engagement (Sashi, 2012). Customer engagement is focused on being prioritised especially among competitors in order to gain brand loyalty. Faithful customers not only remain stakeholders, but also creating great value and high business equity to meet the needs and wants of customers, (Akhir, 2012). In today's business environment, social media is an important channel for online consumer engagement. Although the term engagement still lacks a clear definition and application, the concept consumer engagement has received the most attention among entrepreneurs. Digital media is popular and essential for business as it facilitates a two-way communication, as it reaches all ages and demographics (Divya & Regi, 2014). Discussion forums, chart rooms bulletin boards, emails and social media networks are example of networking platforms that create interactions and customer experiences Brodie et al., (2011). Dedicated customers can also play an important role in developing new products and services, and co-creating experience and value. (Wang, 2006) believes that consumers can be more sensitive to brands if they are deeply involved in the media vehicles. Digital media enable companies operating as SMEs to consistently grow their brand because of its low cost implication and minimal technical requirements Ferrer et al., (2012). SMEs owners are in position to maximise the potentials of digital marketing as it gives market access outside their immediate geographical area, without necessarily requiring a physical presence (Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidon, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

This part of the study is designed to show how data was obtained in an attempt to optimize the research, based on insight in the theories and constructs, which helps us understand the effects of digital marketing on SMEs. Data collection pattern further indicates the entire procedure of the interviews performed. Subject to the aim which is to identify the effect of digital marketing on SMEs, this research would be carried out adopting a qualitative interview approach Kallio er, al.,(2016) the need to identify, explore and capture rich data relevant to the study motivates the reason for adopting such a approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Effort would be made to have an in-depth grasp of knowledge on the digital platforms relevant to applying digital marketing strategies on SMEs and providing answers to the research questions using this design. It is hoped that significant recommendations would be offered to mitigate the Gap in theory and research that is fundamental to the study.

3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

3.11 Inductive Method

To conduct the research, an inductive research method was applied at the start of this study with the findings of previous research. Furthermore, the outcome of this study would be presented at the end of the research process. A qualitative research was also applied as an inductive research approach to explore its essence in qualitative analysis, allowing researchers to start their findings, assumptions and suggestions, at the end of the analysis process and the result they produce. (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Identifying an inductive analysis as a critical tool when exploring salient trends, via observation and creation of interpretation theories through a series of hypothesis becomes vital, (Benard, 2011). No ideas or assumptions contributes to the inductive experience at the initial stage and researchers may modify the research process after development of the research, phase (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

3.12 Qualitative Method

Qualitative research is an exploratory research in which researchers use terms to provide explanations, perspectives and motivations for review. Qualitative analysis aims to deepen the dilemma and refine theories and concepts (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Common qualitative data acquisition techniques used in business administration include: interviews, focus groups, ratings and behavioural analytics. By comparison, grounded theory dataset analysis can also be used as a data acquisition tool for a qualitative research.

This study implements a qualitative research method whereby response will be represented by relevant descriptions and a detailed evaluation result, and most significantly suits the identified respondents companies in both Sweden and Nigeria, as they play a crucial role to the primary data collection and further analysis in this study. This approach was selected due to additional questions during the interview process needed to achieve or improve the result of the analysis. A semi-

structured approach was also used, suggesting that the relevant article adheres to qualitative method.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Data collection is a method for collecting and evaluating analytical indicators, test variables in a structured way to help answer specific test questions, test theories and analysis results (Kabir, 2016)

3.2.1 Primary data collection (interview)

Interviews include answering questions and collecting answers from surveys. The interview pattern can be structured to involve individuals, face-to-face, as well a group face-to-face interviews. (Kabir, 2016). It can be done directly by email, phone or through various apps such as; Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp etc. It can take the format of a structured, semi-structured or unstructured interview. Interviews for this study were conducted using Zoom and Google meet, hence adopting the semi-structured method.

A thorough search of SMEs in Sweden and Nigeria was carried out, with the help of Google search engine to achieve relevant results prior to the conduct of the interviews. Through the displayed result, I identified the website with the top 50 SMEs in Sweden and Nigeria, making available the company's website link and information. I then applied the provided link as a search tool for companies contact email address. Subsequently an email was sent to approximately 20 companies requesting an interview for the sole purpose of this research. However, out of the contacted companies, 13 responded to their emails but only 5 companies made a participation commitment for the interviews.

On receiving the feedback from the companies, I proceeded to arrange a convenient time and date for the interview using Google meet as the interview could only be conducted online as a result of the complications and restrictions brought upon by the covid-19 pandemic. 5 companies were interviewed for this purpose.

The first company (company A), whose company name would not be disclosed in line with company's privacy policy, operates a gaming and data business. It is an internet SME outfit whose business centres around developing websites on video games for consumers and companies within the video game industry, haven been in existence since 2015. A small scaled company resident in Vastra Gotland's Ian, Sweden. Its mode of operations is similar to that of Wikipedia, providing gaming services on its website which includes user search, comment; add gaming details and user login account. The interviewed company had 10 employees. Two employees of the company who were the manager of product design and lead business manager were interviewed respectively. (For more information on the company and respondents, please see table 2 below)

The second company (company B) is in the business of selling customized maps and posters on a global scale. It provides technology which allows customers choose irrespective of place or region

they are resident in and as well design their own unique map prints. They have a huge cliental resource that is majorly based in America, Asia and Europe. Founded in the year 2014, is located in Stockholm, Sweden. it is an SME with 16 employees. I managed to interview the head of marketing. (For more information on the company and respondent, please see table 2 below).

The third company, (company C) operates in the education sector and is classified as a SME. Founded in 2017, the company is located in Stockholm, Sweden. The company's value proposition is recognised as a reference collecting and bibliography creation tool for people who value simplicity, and speed. The company's main business attraction is making it easy for students, academics and writers to use references at work. It only has 10 employees whose works are remote based and the founder was interviewed for this purpose. (For more information about the company and respondent, please see table 2 below)

The fourth company (company D) plead to remain anonymous for this study in line with company privacy policy, are an SME who are vested in the logistics operations business. It is located in Abuja, Nigeria founded in 2016. Their business services include flight and hotel bookings for exclusive customers. It has 14 employees. The researcher managed to get hold of the marketing manager who provided the needed information for this study. (For more information on the company and respondent, please see table 2 below).

The fifth company (company E), whose name cannot be disclosed due to company's privacy concern operates in the health care sector (Dental clinic). Founded in 2018, is located in Lagos, Nigeria .It has 12 employees and the CEO was interviewed for the purpose of this study. (For more information on the company and respondent, please see table 2 below).

3.2.2 Sampling

A semi-structured interview approach was adapted to this study. This approach was considered appropriate for the survey to encourage respondents to express their views without necessarily holding back any information relevant to the study. The questions in the analysis draft were created and addressed to respondents in a specific order to steer the flow of the interview. Interview questions were strictly related to the research questions. The interview design was made up of 18 open-ended questions, giving participants an opportunity to respond in depth. Information regarding the company was represented in the first part of the questionnaires. (General questions consisted of 6 salient questions). Questions bothering on digital marketing were exclusive to the second part in the questionnaires for this study. A few concerns relating to due diligence was recorded in the process of gaining precise answers as well as understanding the perspective of the participants. The time frame for the interview was 35min-1hr period. Some of the content of the interview especially from Sweden was transcribed with the permission of the respondents. (View interview questions in Appendix).

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is pertinent to consider the ethical implications when carrying out a research. Based on the recommendations of (Bryman & Bell, 2011), this study observed four ethical elements which relates to invasion of privacy of participants, weather there was lack of consent granted to the researcher to conduct interviews, weather the questions in any way or form caused harm to the participants and study company and if there was any form of deception involved in the process. Ethical practice also expects approval from respondents before recorded materials can be obtained and applied by the researcher and also ensures that respondents are given the avenue of withholding information should there be a clash of interest or conflict to privacy.

3.4 RESPONDENTS VALIDATION

Qualitative research demands respondent confirmation, which serves as a catalyst for guaranteeing a clear correlation among the results and perception of the researches perception. (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In simpler words, it refers to the manner at which researchers describe who the test subjects are by offering a summarized picture of them.

TABLE 2: OVERALL PICTURE OF THE RESPONDENTS OF THE INTERVIEW AND THEIR RESPECTIVE COMPANY ROLES.

S/N	COMPANY	SECTOR	POSITION	DURATION	INTERVIEW CONDUCTION
1	Company A	Gaming / Data	Business leader & Product manager	58 min	Via Google Meet
2	Company B	Product service	Marketing manager	60 min	Zoom
3	Company C	Educational	CEO/ Founder	60 min	Via Google Meet
4	Company D	Logistics services	CEO / Founder	60 min	Via zoom
5	Company E	Health care	CEO / Founder	60 min	Via zoom

The motivation for choosing the above employees and CEO of the company for the interview is related to the significant role they play in the daily business operations of these companies. Their job descriptions involved making vital decisions for their companies regarding its brand identity and growth, development of company with respect to brand projections and promotions, and direct involvement in the digital marketing process of their respective organizational brand products and services.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

This was carried out by the author, writing down the observations and themes (proficiency) according to the template analysis recommended by King and (Brooks, 2017). This was followed by further development templates through pre-coding, clustering, initial template creation, application and short interview analysis. As suggested by (Bryman & Bell, 2015), the author approached the data in content analysis settings to execute and code the data. This entails grouping participant reports into codes for problem solving. It is expected that the coding will be guided by the research questions for the purpose of recognising recurring patterns (Neuendorf K.A., 2016). Secondary data has been obtained as well as empiric data that correlates the theoretical results. With the aid of relatable literature, the study introduces and defined certain terms based on the perception of scholars.

Content analysis technique was used to analyze the primary data. This survey method is used to identify recorded communication by categorizing or coding the text and then analyze the findings. This survey method is used in both qualitative and quantitative analysis (Neuendorf, K.A., 2016). The transcribed interview was categorized by key word such as SMEs, digital marketing, digital marketing strategies etc.

3.6 RELIABILITY

The reliability of the study largely relies on the level of accuracy of the tested results (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This could be determined by testing the accuracy of different outcome related to the study over time, recognising different observers and salient parts of the analysis in question (Middleton, 2020).

Seminars were observed which an opportunity was for the supervisor and respective opposition colleagues to provide advice and make recommendations as to proceed better on the research. Relevant literature to the research topic were consulted and applied as they were integral to writing the literature review analysis, pivotal to establishing the formant adapted to the questions for the interviews. Data collected was subsequently transcribed with the intent to avoid errors and enhance accuracy. Hence, imploring a great deal of attention and caution, towards guaranteeing a significant level of accuracy and reliability.

3.7 VALIDITY

Validity is related to the reliability of the study results (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In order to arrive at a more relevant result, the need to make comparison with the theoretical framework by establishing the essential literature- based questionnaire becomes a perquisite (Sunders et al., 2009). This study applied several literature materials some of which includes; (Krishnaprabha and Tarunika 2020), (Mingione and Abratt 2020) (Enehasse and Saglam 2020), Akula, (2015), Savey et al (2020) (Teixeira et al., 2018) (Bala and Verma, 2018) etc.To create an interview survey. This paper was also validated by investigating issues using digital marketing, SMEs in relation to all five companies that were integral to this research.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section of the study reflects the data collected from the interview. The interviews were conducted with the support of few persons, whose professional experience includes practical knowledge in SMEs for a significant number of years.

4.1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SMES AND DIGITAL MARKETING.

Digital marketing plays a significant role in the growth and success of companies who operate as SMEs, in the opinion of the marketing manager of Company B. He further emphasises that;

"The business operations of his company has largely relied on the services of digital marketing ensuring never to patronize traditional marketing as digital marketing is cost effective and has a global reach"

Company A and C, who are in the business of providing gaming and educational services respectively, have always adopted digital marketing model in conducting their business operations and promotion activities. Finding out about new interests of target audience/customers on their gaming preferences, quality and pleasures, is basically carried out by company A with digital marketing tools. They have also accessed new business proposals, higher more qualified employees and increased network using the digital platforms. Company C gives students/readers access to its catalogues for specific references and bibliography due to the fact that it operates on digital platforms that are relatable and accessible, therefore providing them with loyal customers, integral to its business growth.

Company B suppliers distributes their products to numerous customers globally, hence digital marketing has ensured that they are able to reach a wide range of customers. The ability for them to reach out to a large range of customer within a very short period is one of the benefits gained in patronizing digital platforms, according to the respondents from this company. They are also able to identify and apply effective advertisement in promoting the brand on their website. This is also applicable to other companies, as communicating to respective global audience/customers can be crucial.

Company D has a strategy of using digital marketing tools to attract and make it easier for customers to patronize their services. Customers are able to obtain information relating to different packages and offer that that they may enjoy when they patronize the companies services as indicated on their website. Logistics services being offered by Company D are accessed using mobile phone app that could be downloaded on the customer's phone, thus ensures that the company has a cheap, direct and effective method of marketing their brand and services to existing and potential customers.

Company E has been able to attract new customers, by informing them about the benefits of patronizing their services through digital platforms. In conducting the digital marketing, certain information relating to the latest equipments and techniques applied in carrying out dental operations /services were advertised. This goes a long way in alleviating the fears of customers who may have concerns about dealing with post dental operations pains and inconveniences.

Table: 3

COMPANY	USE OF DIGITAL MARKETING TOOLS
Company A	Very High
Company B	Very High
Company C	High
Company D	Moderate
Company E	Moderate

4.2 DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES IN SMES

Company B emphasizes how the company monitors and carries out its digital marketing activities on a regular basis. The company also hired more marketing employees in the past 3 years. Company D channelled lots of focus on posting exciting contents as they relate to the business activities on social media, coming out as a very successful strategy for them. Company E strategy was designed towards creating the mobile app and markets the business through affiliates. Meanwhile, some respondents stated how their businesses do not necessarily have a digital marketing strategy in place as some company's activities have not been promoted by a specific digital medium. The continuous value of social media could usher in an opportunity for them to identify relevant connecting networks to help attract new customers and project the brand. Company A views the digital marketing approach as a daunting task due to time constraint and limited human resources. Shortage of working capital was also a factor to this perspective. Other respondents in this context identified the need for all organizations to apply an effective digital marketing approach. Company C took a similar view with Company A through its respondents, however went further to state that it would definitely consider a digital marketing strategy should they decide to setup a new company or sub-company.

Table: 4

COMPANY	USE OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY
Company A	NO
Company B	Yes
Company C	No
Company D	Yes
Company E	Yes

4.2.1 Key factors

All the respondents use different use different forms of digital marketing tools and platforms. Some of the most used marketing platforms by these respective companies include:

Pay per click

This marketing platform was adopted only by company A. the company adopted this marketing platform at the start of business, which generated some notable revenue however, failed to keep up

with it at some stage, as it became difficult to realize continuous benefits and incentives from the platform.

Content marketing

All the respondents applied this marketing platform at one stage or another in their business operations, especial with regards to brand or product promotions. Company B continually operates on the content marketing platform. It implores professional marketing to handle its content marketing. They are of the pinion that the benefits of using this platform are subject to the ability to produce the right and impactful content. Company E set-up health tips content on social media which helped them build an audience/customer base, integral to marketing the activities of the dental clinic. A respondent noticeable described this platform as time consuming.

Email marketing

This is a very popular marketing platform used by all the respective companies to connect with their numerous customers on a regular basis. Company A carry out marketing activities within a 3-6 day period with schedule email. This process allows an effective communication channel between the company and its customers.

Social media marketing

The social media marketing being a more trending and viable platform, make it a no brainer for all the companies to adopt it in their digital marketing strategy. Company B largely depends on social media and also identifies it as a problem. Therefore are considering other alternate strategic platforms in other not to be solely over reliant on social media. Company A also depends a lot on social media platform and notable one of its channel known as “discord”. Both companies A&B respectively, believes that some social media channels such as instagram, facebook, etc were not beneficial enough for their company and would only recommend them to customer-based products and educational products. Company E used social media platforms such as Tik-tok, instagram to promote their medical content and market the clinic which was quite successful.

Search engine marketing (SEM)

Search engine marketing was favourably recommended by four out of the five companies comprising of Company; A, B D and E respectively. The respondents agree that this avenue was a highly essential and significant marketing tool for companies to promote their brand and most importantly connect with customers and other relevant stakeholders. However, company C did not fancy this marketing platform very much compared to the other companies as the respondents stated that it wasn’t too beneficial in their line of work.

Websites

This is obviously the most significant and accessible tool for companies to conduct and promote business activities. All respondents in this case agree that this platform was highly essential and important marketing platform for their companies. They accorded it with the highest rate mark and came highly recommended for current and future business operations.

TABLE 5: SCORE FOR EACH FACTOR OUT OF 10

KEY FACTORS	COMPANY A	COMPANY B	COMPANY C	COMPANY D	COMPANY E
Pay-Per-Click	5	3	Never used	3	2
Content Marketing	4	7	5	6	6
Email Marketing	9	8	8	7	7
Socialmedia Marketing	8	9	7	9	8
SearchEngine Marketing	9	9	7	8.5	8
Websites	10	10	10	10	10

4.2.2 Implementation

The deployment of digital marketing is quite easy and anyone with basic technical knowledge. These are words of reflection from the marketing manager of company B. He further emphasises that his company has implemented such marketing techniques in various platforms which enjoyed a remarkable level of success. He observed the need to sustain the practice of making vital content of the company's brand as the main focus of consideration while implementing the marketing strategies and techniques. The right content is crucial to influencing customer's patronage and association with the brand. *"In the words of company's B marketing manager"* The CEO of company E said that they require learning how to adopt digital marketing in a practical context, which can be done by acquiring skills from online platforms. Company D required the services of a mobile App developer to create a functioning App that suit their business operations. The other two companies, A and c, have also implemented digital marketing techniques for their marketing operations, however find it time consuming and not cost effective with some marketing channels.

4.3 Effects of digital marketing on growth of SMEs

The values and attributes significant to establishing a successful SMEs business is been reflected upon within the context of the effects of digital marketing on the growth of SMEs, by all respondents

in this study. This goes on to justify the efficacy of having in place an effective digital marketing strategy for a fair opportunity to compete efficiently in the market and gradually grow a customer based brand that adds value.

4.3.1 Brand awareness

Branding is very significant for the marketing operations of SMEs, says company A. all respondents agree to the relevance of digital marketing towards building brand awareness from a buyer/customer perspective. Infarct, respondents believe that part of the motivation for using digital marketing platform, was borne out of the need to increase brand awareness to a larger customer prospective. Therefore validates an avenue for applying relevant digital tools in the light of brand recognition.

In attempting to raise or create brand visibility, various SMEs apply relevant social media platforms. For example, company A uses Discord and Google mostly for its marketing promotions, similarly company C uses Twitch and instagram. Company B is the only respondent that applies all digital platforms to create brand awareness of their products. Their activities include regular update and posting of contents on social media. The respondent further stated that they were very progressive on various digital platforms they applied and managed to attract a significant number of customers. Their business also plans to invest in online customer interest by sharing contents specific to their customer audiences in order to raise the needed awareness of their company. Company E respondents stated that they have achieved great success in building brand awareness through content posting on instagram and Tik-tok. Company D relied on affiliate marketing at the initial phase of its brand awareness building. It subsequently raised more awareness through the App download on the customers' phone.

We regularly post share contents on various social media platform to promote our brand. It is very effective and efficient to communicate with our audience says the marketing manager of company B.

Basically, building brand awareness is vital for SMEs with the aid of digital tools. Such platforms not only help companies be visible to customers but also help in recognising target audience for the company.

4.3.2 Building trust

With the right content in digital marketing, companies can build customers trust. Company E had great success in building customers credibility with the content they post on social media. Right content helps to connect emotionally with customers, says marketing manager of company B. They further emphasise that digital marketing is cost effective and is integral to building customers trust in a brand. Part of the measures put in place towards achieving this objective was the company's website content designs and improve security to attract and protect customers interest at all times. It is significant to state at this juncture that all respondents communicate on a regular basis with their customers getting reviews and feedback for their products, which plays a key role to building trust among customers. Company A states that customers retained the application of the Discord

tool for patronage, which played a significance effect in attracting new customers, building trust and most importantly gaining loyal customers. “Prioritizing customer’s privacy and providing quality services is an integral part of our business”. These are the words from the respondent of company B

Our company prides on values such as customer privacy, which has connected us very well and help build the seller and buyer trust relationship over the few years we’ve been in operation. Customers trust our company, knowing that we will not sell their personal data under any given circumstances. (Company B)

In summary, digital marketing platforms can go a long way in connecting with customers on an emotional level when applied properly. Companies must constantly update and upgrade their digital contents and security measures to ensure trust. This is vital to gain new customers and retain already existing ones.

4.3.3 Customer engagement

The impact and engagement on customers is also very much emphasised especial as it relates to the need for SMEs adopting digital marketing platforms been a catalyst for this study. All respondents indicate that the digital media marketing is applied to engage customers through a range of activities. They are of the opinion that it has enabled customer engagement in their respective organizations and enabled the company to communicate directly with the customers. Effective feedback mechanism is essential to building and engaging customers. This is the observation of Company B respondent, hence stating that the quality of their products improved significantly due to regular reviews and feedback from their customers, ensuring a significant growth of 80% in the past 3 years.

Company D managed to encourage customer engagement with the aid of an affiliate program and a feedback feature inside the mobile phone App. Company A has also enjoyed a significant level of growth by engaging customers, using digital tools such as Linkendln and Discord which came cost free and effective. They further emphasized that the company has received new business proposals, loyal customers and investors through these digital platforms.

We adopted Discord platform which is free to use as a primary source of our communication tool with customers. This platform not only helps us grow as a company but help in acquiring and retaining loyal customers. We are also using this platform to hire new employees for our company. Furthermore, we use the linkeldn channel, which is a little expensive, but significant to acquiring new business proposals and contacts.

It is paramount to state that respondent’s applyied digital marketing platforms, to influence, outline and engage customers. This only ensures that company keep track of customer’s opinion about their product and provide them with the relevant information to make adjustments or improvements on their brand products or services when necessary.

5. FINDINGS/DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the author addresses the relation between the empirical findings and the theoretical framework. The primary aim of this chapter is to improve the thesis by addressing the key concepts in order to address the research question.

5.1 ***RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SMES AND DIGITAL MARKETING***

According to (Ndubisi and Natarajian, 2006), building a consumer network is very important for SMEs performance and sustenance in a competitive business environment. This fact is in cognisance with the empirical data in this study, which validates the respondents' opinion on the significance of building and sustaining a network relationship with customers on a transparent level across all competing brands. (Hanninen & Karjaluoto, 2017) clearly express the benefits of exchange interaction viewed as a two-way transformed data communication process between the company and customers. Modern online networking platforms such as facebook, twitter and instagram are digital tools used for evaluating and measuring engagement network that enables business to attract and retain customers and build relationships with them in the process. (Killian & McManus, 2015). This statement is justified in the empirical data, as all respondents are actively engaged in various social media platforms as well as digital marketing platforms.

(Mazzarol, 2015), believes digital platforms offers SMEs the opportunity to access the global market and be creative with solutions relating to product/service quality delivery, affordable price and attractive value propositions to customers. This assertion is in line with the opinion of the marketing manager of Company B who states that digital marketing is crucial to the survival of the companies who compete as SMEs. The need to focus largely on digital tools and channels for better performance and cost efficiency must not be undermined.

5.2 DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES IN SMES

Only one of the respondent; Company B, implemented a digital marketing strategy haven identified its significance to help carrying out their marketing operations and compete more in the industry. Company A and C respondents gave a view of not necessarily adopting a digital marketing strategy. Their reason for this was related to capital constraint and time consumption also identifying the marketing platforms as expensive. The further stated that most of the popular SEO, SEM and social media ads were quite expensive, therefore explored the free and effective platforms such as Discord and Twitch available at their disposal. Digital marketing processes are mostly cost effective as they can be implemented in a number of low-cost ways such as Search Engine Optimization, social media, and email marketing and digital networks. (Foroudi et al., 2017; Budac, 2016; Karjaluoto, 2015). Company A and B had some restraint regarding investing in digital marketing strategy. This is in contrast with the view of (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013), which states that companies must be willing to invest in technologies and build robust digital marketing strategy that is incorporated into their pre-sales and post-sales marketing activities. Such process could complement a well corporate and effective application of Web 20 and social media, creating two-way and three –way connections with consumers and companies that can help create powerful CRM channels and improve customers'

satisfaction. (Mazzarol T, 2015). A very significant effect of digital media platform is the fact that it supports SMEs to acquire and retain customers, thereby ensuring customer loyalty and brand association. (Smith, 2012)

5.2.1 Implementation of digital marketing strategies

(Laherta Otero et al., 2014) has demonstrated that there are easy policies that, if appropriately carried out, business owners/managers can be in position to reap the full benefits of their investment. All our respondents in this study have carried out virtual advertising strategies in their respective companies. Company B believes that the primary focus should be on content when executing digital marketing and techniques. The use of proper content material is viewed as a game changer to influencing customer's attention and subsequent patronage. (Sedera et al., 2016). It additionally emphasises on benefits of virtual advertising for SMEs and implies it is devoid of any complications, as anyone with basic or fundamental knowledge should be able to put them into the right effect. Similarly, Kim et al., (2014) imply that any SMEs that struggle to put into effect some digital tools for its online brand marketing, such as Web 2.zero generation is probable to place itself at a critical aggressive disadvantage. Commercial studies achieved with the aid of using Accenture (2014) mentioned in Savey et al., (2020), a global survey of 6000 people, highlights a rising transition of customers towards Smartphone and tablets. Small and medium enterprises need to fully utilize the emerging digital technologies, to improve their business operations and boost brand image while competing in a very challenging business environment.(Mazzarol T., 2015)

5.3 EFFECTS OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN GROWTH OF SMES

Digital marketing has an immeasurable impact on SMEs. It has the capacity to attract potential customers and enable quality conversations among customers and the business representatives regarding their opinion and expectations about brands. This helps to increase knowledge, sales and contribute generally to business development (Jain, 2014; Jagongo & Kinyua, 2016). Digital marketing policies and procedures lead to acquiring new customers, brand development, brand awareness, improved customer experience and engagement. It also ensures cost-effectiveness essential for the growth of the company. (Insight success, 2020)

5.3.1 Brand Awareness

Several literature researchers such as (Makrides, et al., 2020, Karamian et al., 2015, Kannan and Li, 2017) etc have on several occasions expressed opinions that correlates to the significance and efficiency of digital marketing, with respect to improved and visible brand awareness of a company's products or services. The application of digital media in digital marketing processes generates awareness through creative customer experience and customer interactions (Kannan & Li, 2017). There is a general perspective on marketing through digital technologies, being recognized for its beneficial effects on companies and vital fundamental impact on brand-consumer relationships, which promotes a healthy interaction between stakeholders involved in a buying and selling process

Makrides, et al., (2020). Developing brand awareness through networking, engagement and community growth is fundamental to the digital marketing process. This role becomes achievable with the influence of social media marketing, which ensures a wide range of connectivity with numerous customers at the same time Karamian et al., (2015).

An attractable online brand can be created by integrating the network and marketing placement to suite customers expectations Teixeira et al., (2018). Business organizations don't just try to create a media presence around a brand but ensure that its visibility projections capture customer's interest that leads to consistent patronage (Bhati & Verma 2018). Social media marketing activities helps increase brand awareness and favourable brand equity by raising brand value through networking interactions and effective feedback mechanism (Karamian et al., 2015). Several research have been conducted on matters relating to online brand building with the application of digital marketing, shows the effects of evolving technologies and the impacts it has on brands who compete as a SMEs in various industries. A strong digital image goes a long way in growing the business within ever influential online community Yuvaraji % Indumathi (2018). Further research contributes to the understanding of digital marketing on the branding of specific brand.

This study tries to justify the significance of relevant digital marketing channels, which includes; blogging, affiliate marketing mobile marketing, social media marketing, etc on the sustainable growth of brands through an established customer relationship in the digital space. All respondents who participated in the interview process agrees to the important role digital marketing plays in building a brand image, therefore it becomes imperative for SMEs companies to venture into this online process without any form of reservations, further justifies Company B affirmation to the fact that it frequently monitor and share content on social media to increase consumer awareness of their brand.

5.3.2 Building Trust

According to (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016) brand trust is largely influenced by effective and efficient digitalized communication channels which convey the brand information and quality of respective businesses to their numerous customers in their buying decision journey. There are lots of positive association involving digital marketing and the consumer buying intentions Akhatar et al., (2016). It is crucial to reiterate that that as companies consistently invest in web-based exhibitions networking channels as it has proven to help in increasing turnover leading to greater profits. Evidence also shows that companies become more appreciated and competitive among their peers when they are able to build credible brands that attracts high level of patronage (Bhati & Verma 2018). A crucial outcome on digitally marketing a brand shows customers yield higher trust to the company's website with privacy/security of their personal data or information and customization in their presumed personal value.

Respondent from company B suggests that customers trust can be structured with the right information in the digital marketing process. The right content must be put up on the company's website in a way that it emotionally connects with the minds of its audience or customers. He further stated that they are actively connected with their customers using digital platforms to get feedback reviews and suggestions on the quality and delivery of their brand. Company B and C

consistently upgrade their company's websites design and security policy, being their primary source of marketing channel in building trust among customers.

5.3.3 Customer Engagement

Digital marketing plays a pivotal role on attracting and engaging customers on their association with a particular brand. Insight success (2020). The customer engagement pattern, integrated with organized resources is designed to assess consumer's behaviour and their attitude towards a brand. Therefore helps generate potential styles, to perceive new opportunities and make possible predictions for the future Teixeira et al., (2018). Effective digital marketing attracts customers and encourages brand engagement through digital channels Yasmin et al., (2015). This report reflects on the value of digital media for companies and customers as well as its effects. A successful customer engagement process must ensure that the digital communication mechanism must encourage an honest feedback process from customers, as it gives marketing managers and company executives the right opportunity to appraise the brands performance and acceptance from a customer's perspective (Krishnaprabha & Tarunika, 2020).

All respondents in this study agree to the significance of digital marketing towards achieving an effective customer engagement process. Company B relies much on the feedback mechanism standard, as information gotten from customers help them improve the quality of their product, ensuring a sustainable 80% growth of their company due to consistent customer engagement. Company A also emphasized that their company has grown tremendously using relevant digital tools in their business operations related to digital customer engagement.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to investigate the value and impact of digital marketing on the competitive establishment and growth of business organizations, operating within the context of SMEs. This study is motivated to examine the relationship between SMEs and digital marketing. Paying significant attention on the benefits that can be achieved relating to sustainable brand projection, brand growth and establishing healthy customer relationship towards attaining customer retention and brand association, with the aid of requisite digital tools.

This study demonstrates that some SMEs organizations do not reckon with certain digital marketing strategies when implementing their business plan. This is due to their often reluctance in making the required investments in such marketing strategies. These marketing strategies may have significant effects on the business growth and general performance, therefore it becomes pertinent for SMEs to integrate digital media marketing such as; Blogs content articles and videos, to easily project their brand to a wide range of audience/customers.

In reference to the research question on the effect of digital marketing on the growth of small and medium scale-enterprises, digital marketing can have a crucial impact on SMEs companies. By nature or manner of operations, most SMEs have a challenge of limited resources, hence implores a lot of creativity and objectivity in the conduct of their business activities, with particular reference to marketing and brand projections. SMEs can adopt digital marketing platforms to advertise their products effectively and efficiently with very moderate cost involved in the process.

A vital attribute towards achieving business success is establishing and strengthen health relationships between company owners and customers. Therefore, issues on trust, customer satisfaction through relatable value proposition and product/service quality, must never be undermined by players within the SMEs spectrum. This process becomes achievable with digital marketing, by providing a two-way communication stream for SMEs to use the right content with their customers and attain a global reach in the process.

There should be a conscious effort for SMEs management to implement the right content about their brand as it helps customers to connect with them emotionally. Digital marketing helps promote brand building and trust, giving it a recognisable visibility among customers and industry stakeholders which is significant to the success of an organization. It helps build a feedback mechanism relevant to getting reviews and opinions of their brand directly from customers. This helps to improve the quality of the product or services when required and ensures brand awareness among the customers.

Gaining customers trust on a brand is key to customer retention and acquisition. This is very significant to the growth ad sustainability of the business. SMEs can acquire new investors, business partners, skilled employees, with the aid of digital marketing platforms such as; facebook, LinkedIn, Discord, Instagram contents etc.

6.1 FINDINGS

The finding on this study shows that most SMEs do not have a clear digital marketing strategy in their brand marketing approach. Some believe it is time consuming and a bit tricky to implement, despite the huge importance it can bring in growing a sustainable and successful brand. The study also reflects the importance of brand recognition; customer awareness and involvement were the most identified reasons for the use of digital marketing by SMEs. Finally the researcher found out in this study, that digital marketing has the capacity to attract and retain customers, playing a vital impact on customer loyalty and brand association.

6.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

This study shows management ramifications based on the results that could be of relevance to SMEs companies, hence providing an overview on the importance of digital marketing to companies, needed for sustainable growth and development. Marketing managers or executives of SMEs can incorporate several suggestions made in this body of work to their marking strategies, especially within the digital space. This could be achieved by putting up interesting contents on the company's website. Such digital contents help attract new customers and keeps existing customers aware of the activities and offers of the company's brand products or services.

A salient finding of this study shows that business organizations should engage employees with the application of digital tools which helps them grow and perfect their digital skills, for a more effective performance. This process can also involve the identification of target market and channels. SMEs must ensure to use the right digital channels to generate interactions and brand awareness in the marketing process, as their limited resources only gives room for few errors. Brand marketing contents can also be communicated and illustrated by expertise and promotional outlets for a further and wider brand outreach.

6.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

This study influences thoughts bordering on relevant information related to the impact and relevance of digital marketing on SMEs, by growing a brand through relevant awareness, brand trust and consumer engagement. The essence of digital marketing amidst its relevance has been well researched. However, research into the effects of digital marketing on the growth of SMEs is still limited. This study is consistent with the findings of previous work done in this field that have demonstrated the value of digital marketing in today's business. Mine while, the cost efficacy of digital marketing as reported in earlier finding, is not necessarily confirmed by the results of this study.

Finally, this research tries to contribute to research by providing an insight on the impact of digital marketing on growing SMES, through brand loyalty, brand awareness and effective customer engagement.

6.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary results of this study were based on SMEs companies in Sweden and Nigeria, with limited number of respondents, which may therefore produce different outcome or results. Only five interviews have been conducted which implies a limitation in accessing a wider representation or respondents validation before drawing any conclusion. This challenge makes it unfair to make a generalized opinion or conclusion that would apply to all SMEs, however the study shows tendencies of the SMEs that have been interviewed and involved in the research endeavour.

Future research in this area is recommended. Information can be collected from SMEs operating in both small and large scale by future researchers. Companies chief executives and marketing managers are abreast with helpful information's and a usually ready to help researchers with relevant information to their research. Finally, future researchers can carry out similar analysis in more countries with similar industry. This could help provide more accurate results and broader perspective for such research.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions:

General Questions

- How long has the company been established for?
- What is the company specialized in? (Sector/Activity)?
- What is the company's target market?
- How many employees are there in the company?
- What is your occupation in the company?
- In which sectors are the customers operating in?

Digital Marketing:

- Are there digital marketing strategies being adopted by your company? (e.g. social media marketing, content marketing etc)
- In what manner has digital marketing affected the company?
- What benefits and challenges do you think confronts SMEs in digital marketing?
- Why do you think digital marketing is important for SMEs? What kind of role has digital marketing played in the establishment and success of your company based on; networking, reach and exposure.
- What kind of digital media channels are used in your company?
- How have the platforms utilized to interact and engaged with customers worked?
- Which media tools are most applicable for SMEs companies and how would you implement them?
- What manner of digital platforms is currently used for your company? (linkeldin, instagram, tiktok etc)
- Which are the critical factors of digital marketing effectiveness on acquiring and retaining business customers?
- How can digital marketing help companies to grow in terms of creating brand awareness, building trust and engaging customers?
- What is the relationship between SMEs and digital marketing?
- How do you rate digital marketing on a scale of 1-10?